

From Isolation to Integration: Assessing the Impact of City Diplomacy on Small-City Development in Iran

Niloufar Eisalou M.A.,

Department of Human Geography & Spatial Planning, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

Email: niloufar.eisalou@gmail.com ORCID: 0009-0009-0223-6758

Prof. Dr. Zohreh Fanni (Corresponding Author),

Department of Human Geography & Spatial Planning , Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

Email: z-fanni@sbu.ac.ir ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8282-4887>

Prof. Dr. Kamran Jafarpour Ghalehtemouri

1 Department of Geographical Sciences, Faculty of Geography and Urban planning, Kharazmi University, Human Sciences building 4th floor, Tehran, Iran postcode: 14911 – 15719.

2 Environmental Resilience and sustainability, Malaysia-Japan International Institute of Technology, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Kuala Lumpur, Jalan Sultan Yahya Petra, Kuala Lumpur.

3 Disaster Preparedness & Prevention Centre, Malaysia-Japan International of Technology, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Kuala Lumpur, Jalan Sultan Yahya Petra, Kuala Lumpur.

Email: space.kamran@gmail.com , ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2699-4456>

Prof. Dr. Asma Mehan

Professor and Director of Architectural Humanities and Urbanism (AHU_Lab), Huckabee College of Architecture, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, USA

Abstract.

The growth of larger cities has marginalized small cities in urban planning. Small cities have capacities and abilities and put less pressure on the environment. However, such cities often are not able to foster international connections and use their potential. City diplomacy can be a useful tool for such cities to conduct international connections and improve their development, enabling them to establish partnerships with larger urban centers, thus gaining access to valuable resources, knowledge, and financial support. The purpose of this study is to find a rational relationship between urban diplomacy and the development of small towns. Specifically, disregarding their specific needs would lead to various challenges, including missed chances, hindered development, and deteriorated disparities, impacting society. A descriptive-analytical method is used in addition to direct scientific observation, imaging, and analysis of raw data to do the research. The author has conducted interviews and taken pictures of the case study area, and to reach a result, has compared the evidence of a region with potential with the results of other studies. Nour city has scattered stores and old urban contexts, indicating a lack of preparation for diplomatic and transnational relations. Based on field observations and statistical data, it can be deduced that in the city of Nour, due to the lack of related infrastructure and lack of diplomatic relations, the city does not have national or transnational relations, and this weakness has made the city underdeveloped in as the mentioned deficiencies are leading factors to failure.

Keywords: City Diplomacy, Parallel Diplomacy, Development, Small Towns, Small Cities, Nour.

1 - Introduction

Urban diplomacy, also known as city diplomacy, complements the relations between states and governments by providing a crucial platform for dialogue and exchange (Kosovac and Pejic, 2021; Manfredi-Sánchez et al., 2022). This becomes especially valuable during times of strained bilateral diplomatic relations or impending turbulence (Çolakoğlu, 2025). Cities have emerged as influential players in international cooperation, being directly impacted by issues like climate change, environmental disasters, and social tensions, and facing complex challenges in these areas (Mani and Goniewicz, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023). However, cities are also adept at finding innovative solutions to these problems. Recognizing the diverse potential of cities to engage in international policy at the municipal level and collaborate across borders, urban diplomacy enables cities to play a significant role in fostering international cooperation (Leffel, 2021; Szpak et al., 2022; Martinez and Bunnell, T. (2024). As superstar cities continue to grow, there is a risk that other cities may miss out on opportunities to thrive in a globalized world where urban entities can engage in diplomacy amidst evolving border dynamics (Marchetti, 2021). City diplomacy is essential for maintaining open markets and global supply chains, which have expanded to even the most remote urban and rural areas in developing countries due to global demand (Milovanović et al., 2017; Balbim, 2021; Cattaneo et al., 2022). Various governmental and non-governmental entities are involved in urban diplomacy to promote city development. Local governments and municipalities engage in city diplomacy for a range of purposes and benefits, empowering them as independent entities to take greater responsibility for managing their affairs (Saeed et al., 2022; Amiri et al., 2023; Hosseinpour et al., 2025). Cities can utilize soft power through initiatives like sister city programs, hosting international events, organizing festivals, and promotional activities to enhance their global presence and influence.

Small cities, however, often fail to leverage their potential opportunities and available resources to take on diplomatic roles, which significantly limits

their ability to develop. This impedes their capacity to join international networks, which often require a level of economic, technological, and infrastructural development to participate effectively. By not capitalizing on their strengths or investing in areas that could foster growth, small cities might find it challenging to meet the requirements or attract the attention necessary for integration into broader international networks (Rahimzadeh and Jafarpour Ghalehtemouri, 2024; Jafarpour Ghalehtemouri et al., 2025). Large cities have been the central point of interest for a long time, presenting and reflecting the politics, economy, and culture of a country and dominating both nationally and internationally (Norman, n.d.), whereas small and medium-sized cities face a significant obstacle in gaining global recognition for their asserted identity (Bátora, 2005). This, in the long run, resulted in large cities being more powerful and smaller cities remaining small, mostly in terms of development. Moreover, this trend was affected by the war, in which population movements resulted in several urban changes, such as local people moving from war-stricken regions to other regions, especially to cities; young men moved from rural areas to towns and then to cities; foreign migrants moved from countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq to Iran.

Whereas small cities benefit from the advantage that ideas can more easily encompass the entire city because of the size of the city (Richards, 2018; Shamai and Jafarpour Ghalehtemouri, 2024). In previous times, megacities or global cities had established international connections; however, nowadays, there is a broader range of cities that have moved beyond solely being part of a national urban system and now actively engage in global governance (Tavares, 2016). Furthermore, small and medium-sized cities put less pressure on the environment and resources due to their smaller population (Arsenteva et al., 2020). They often provide conditions for sustainability in terms of resource utilization and adaptation to natural conditions while creating the least environmental pollution in themselves and their surrounding environments (Ghalehtemouri et al., 2021; Kojouri et al., 2023; Khattak et al., 2024).

Despite their capabilities, small cities are often neglected in comprehensive national planning, gradually marginalizing them. This is due to various factors such as distance, lack of infrastructure, and limited economic opportunities (Bunnell et al., 2018; Singh and Walker, 2024; Franklin and MacDonald, 2024). Additionally, in the current socio-economic context, urban centers are competing intensely to attract tourists, investors, and skilled individuals, while also increasing their overall competitiveness (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2021). As a result, many small cities have experienced a decline in their growth prospects and are struggling with a shortage of financial resources for urban infrastructure improvement (Arsenteva et al., 2020; Sikuzani et al., 2024). There has been a lack of attention in Iran towards recognizing the significance of strengthening smaller cities in the urban system and implementing solutions to do so. By giving importance to these cities and their role in development strategies, decentralization, redistributing resources and income, and reducing pressure on major urban areas' environments can be achieved. Mindful of their economic potential and challenges, and in response to the stalling of decision-making in national capitals, city mayors and regional governors have taken significant strides to bridge the gap in effective decision-making and action, which is achievable by exerting political and economic influence within their spheres of governance (Tavares, 2016; Khaliji and Jafarpour Ghalehtemouri, 2024). Cities are assumed to have a more significant role in meeting their infrastructure requirements and stimulating their economic growth by enticing investors, welcoming new residents, and attracting tourists (Walmsley & Kading, 1980; Movahed and Ghalehtemouri, 2020).

City diplomacy, which generally is the often-unseen endeavor of fostering alliances, resolving conflicts, and dedicating resources to nurturing relationships and improving society over the long run (Klaus, 2022), can play a vital role in addressing the challenges and fostering the growth of smaller cities and, this subject is increasingly gaining importance and is a subject of discussion in urban studies and international relations (Kosovac & Pejic, 2021; Naruetharadhol et al., 2024). Overtime, the development of regional awareness among

various entities such as federated units, municipalities, and non-state actors led to their incorporation into the global sphere (Nayak, 2023). In the evolving landscape of global dynamics, diplomatic interactions between nations and cities have transformed. In the current interconnected world, traditional diplomacy has proven inadequate, causing urban relationships and diplomacy to gradually diminish the role of governments as intermediaries among city inhabitants (Torrance, 2008; Gzik et al., 2025). Instead, cities themselves have assumed a significant role on the international stage and are generating political influence both in domestic and foreign affairs (Kutz & Wolff, 2022). Consequently, diplomacy, to a certain extent, has expanded beyond government-to-government relations in the era of globalization. Unlike conventional diplomacy, which centers on governmental authorities and is executed at the international level by high-ranking officials, parallel diplomacy involves the use of policy instruments to facilitate effective communication within and between cities (Cotton and Sebastião, 2021; Lo, 2025).

In today's world, the influence a city wields within the newly established global networks isn't solely determined by its demographic and economic status, or that of its nation-state. Instead, it's frequently shaped by innovative policies, hands-on experience, and effective leadership, which are the key factors determining a city's level of influence (Klaus, 2022). The results of the survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs reveal that a significant portion of cities (88%) have established dedicated international offices or departments within their local governments. This indicates a deliberate and organized effort by cities to position themselves globally (Kosovac & Pejic, 2021; Danaeefard and Golverdi, 2024). City diplomacy strategies can vary widely depending on the goals and priorities of individual cities. These strategies often evolve to adapt to changing global dynamics and the specific needs and opportunities of each city on the international stage (Amini et al., 2024). However, current trends in city diplomacy show that this concept is becoming more formalized and structured, with a focus on establishing dedicated offices, engaging with various stakeholders, and actively participating in city networks, as cities are recognizing the importance

of their global presence and the role they play in international affairs (Akbari et al., 2024; Kilinçarslan and Altıok, 2025). Generally, city diplomacy strategies can be employed in different forms such as networking and global cooperation, social initiatives, tourism promotion, educational partnerships, sister city agreements, and cultural promotions (Balbim, 2021). The dynamics of international urban politics promise to catalyze progress across diverse facets of urban life. These encompass enhancing economic competitiveness, advancing policies for clean energy, facilitating human mobility, refining tourism management, addressing data-related concerns, promoting sustainable development, and a host of other areas critical to the evolving landscape of urban centers. As cities engage more actively on the global stage, their influence and innovative solutions hold the potential to reshape urban environments for the better (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2022). The COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the central role of local authorities and their partners in addressing global challenges as well (Kosovac & Pejic, 2021).

Through city diplomacy, smaller municipalities can establish partnerships with larger urban centers, thus gaining access to valuable resources, knowledge, and financial support. In other words, Cities dedicated to learning globally prioritize the intentional and organized pursuit of knowledge and actively forge international collaborations to adopt innovative policies from other regions (Campbell, 2012). For instance, a smaller city can form a sister city relationship with a larger metropolitan area, which can facilitate the exchange of expertise, resources, and knowledge. This, in turn, can aid smaller cities in enhancing their infrastructure, attracting investments, and cultivating a developed landscape. Despite the unique needs of small cities that have often been overlooked in urban studies (Bell, 2009), considering small cities in urban planning procedures is vital, as such cities entail multifaceted advantages for development. Primarily, prioritizing smaller cities catalyzes the vital process of decentralization, thereby fostering a more equitable distribution of resources and development initiatives within urban areas. Secondly, it is imperative to recognize that smaller cities collectively constitute a substantial proportion of our social fabric.

Disregarding their specific needs and developmental requirements would cause many potential challenges and repercussions.

The initial rationale underlying the imperative to emphasize smaller cities is the promotion of decentralization within urban landscapes. Decentralization, as a strategic objective, involves the devolution of administrative and developmental powers from central authorities to localized entities, such as smaller cities in different dimensions such as economic development (Tang, 2021). By doing so, it mitigates the concentration of resources and opportunities in larger metropolitan areas, which can result in socioeconomic disparities and regional imbalances. The cultivation of smaller cities as urban hubs and generally, their development promotes a more inclusive and sustainable urban ecosystem, where resources and investment are distributed more equitably (Mingaleva, 2017). Furthermore, recent studies by Ocejo in 2020 and Kumar in 2021 highlight the need for a shift in focus towards smaller cities in urban sociology, particularly because they represent a substantial portion of our societal composition. Neglecting these urban centers and their unique needs could give rise to a range of predicaments. These cities often serve as crucial economic, cultural, and social nodes, contributing significantly to the overall vitality of a nation or region. Failure to support their growth and development may lead to a loss of potential opportunities, hindered economic progress, and an exacerbation of urban-rural disparities.

The neglect of smaller cities can have far-reaching consequences, impacting not only the immediate residents but also the broader social, economic, and political landscape (Lam, 2018). A relational approach that considers power dynamics and specific political and planning dynamics is crucial for understanding the development of these cities (Williams, 2021). In summary, directing attention toward smaller cities holds profound importance within academic discourse. This emphasis not only facilitates decentralization and equitable urban development but also acknowledges the pivotal role those smaller cities play in shaping our society. Embracing a 'region of cities' conception of

regional development can further advance a vision for more equitable and inclusive futures for these urban centers (Williams, 2021). Neglecting these urban centers can engender a multitude of interconnected predicaments, underscoring the necessity of a holistic and inclusive urban policy framework that considers the diverse needs and potential of smaller cities.

The central objective of this research lies in the exploration and nurturing of a systematic correlation between the application of city diplomacy strategies and the enhancement of urban development. In contemporary urban contexts, city diplomacy has emerged as an intricate and dynamic mechanism that extends beyond conventional governmental interactions, embracing a multifaceted network of relationships and partnerships among cities worldwide. The study seeks to unravel the details of this evolving urban diplomacy paradigm and discern its direct and indirect impacts on the process of urban development. As urbanization continues to shape the global landscape, recognizing the profound implications of city diplomacy in this context becomes increasingly imperative. By examining the interplay between city diplomacy strategies and urban development, this research aims to clarify how diplomatic engagements among cities can catalyze economic growth, infrastructure improvement, and overall urban sustainability. Through rigorous empirical analysis and theoretical inquiry, this study aspires to contribute to the academic discourse surrounding urban studies and diplomacy, shedding light on a crucial facet of contemporary urban governance.

2 - Context and Background

2.1 - Literature review

The evolution of research pivoting the effects of city diplomacy has been constructed upon where such strategies are adopted, and has missed the importance of diplomatic flow in the development of small towns. Numerous scholarly publications have delved into the topic of development within small cities, while a separate body of academic literature has explored the effects of city diplomacy concerning small urban centers. However, there is a research gap concerning

the impact of city diplomacy strategies within small municipalities. There is an absence of academic literature that comprehensively examines the consequences and outcomes of employing such diplomatic strategies in the context of smaller urban areas. This research gap underscores the need for further investigation and empirical inquiry into the dynamics and efficacy of city diplomacy initiatives within the context of small cities. The exploration of city diplomacy's impact on urban development has been an evolving focal point within research. Over time, investigations into this field have yielded insights that underscore the pivotal role of city diplomacy in fostering developmental courses. In a recent study in 2023, Koelemaij and colleagues argue that city diplomacy can enhance socio-spatial differences, potentially leading to economic growth in certain areas. The economic dimension of city diplomacy is also a key factor, with cities increasingly engaging in economic activities and multilateral networks (Koelemaij et al., 2023). In another study by Harakan about the case of Indonesia, results highlight that urban networks and city diplomacy have played a crucial role in promoting sustainable initiatives and advancing urban development strategies (Harakan, 2023). In 2022, Kurz also emphasized the need for knowledge exchange and municipal development cooperation in city diplomacy (Kurz, 2022). In a study on the political economy of city diplomacy in 2022, Manfredi-Sánchez concluded that city diplomacy, as a form of soft power, has the potential to significantly impact the development of urban landscapes and infrastructure. He also underscores the role of cities in influencing international legal development and practice, which might have economic implications. However, the potential for inter-urban inequality and the risk of populism are important considerations in this context (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2022). In a 2021 study by the Mayor of Quito, Rodas, it was revealed that expanding international relationships through city diplomacy will increase the income of the municipality and the income of the people (Rodas, 2021). Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi determined that expanding international relationships through city diplomacy will lead to the city's development (Kihlgren Grandi, 2020). Earlier academic work has reached a similar conclusion, for instance, in "City Diplomacy, and "glocal"

Governance", Chan argues that cities are our best hope to transcend nationality for the common well-being of humanity (Chan, 2016). Seyed Hadi Zarghani and his colleagues highlighted the influence and reliability of cities in diplomatic activities, and the research suggests that city diplomacy can indeed lead to economic benefits (Zarghani et al., 2014).

The existing research about city diplomacy's impact in smaller urban centers is limited or inadequate. According to Clerc, city diplomacy, specifically in small cities, is a crucial aspect of international relations that would significantly impact the development of these cities (Clerc 2021). His view is supported by his prior research in 2020, the case study of Turku, Finland, that demonstrates the evolution of city diplomacy and its implications for small urban centers (Clerc 2020). Previous academic findings have supported this viewpoint as well; for example, a 2017 study by Mingaleva, it is resulted that networking among small cities can enhance regional sustainability and contribute

to their socioeconomic development (Mingaleva 2017). Another study in Jinghong, Southwest China in 2015, revealed that the development of this small city is closely linked to various urban entrepreneurial objectives, including urban reimagining, interference, and acting as a crucial node mediating between urban and rural economies while promoting rural growth, and highlighted the importance of recognizing the unique roles and contributions of such cities (Neo & Pow, 2015). However, Manfredi-Sánchez states that the rise of global cities and the potential for inter-urban inequality pose challenges to the development of small cities (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2022).

2.2 - Materials and Methods

Study area

The city is located along the coastal expanse of the Caspian Sea, and based on the demographic census conducted in the year 2016, the population of this urban center amounted to a total of 26,947 individuals (Iran Census, 2016).

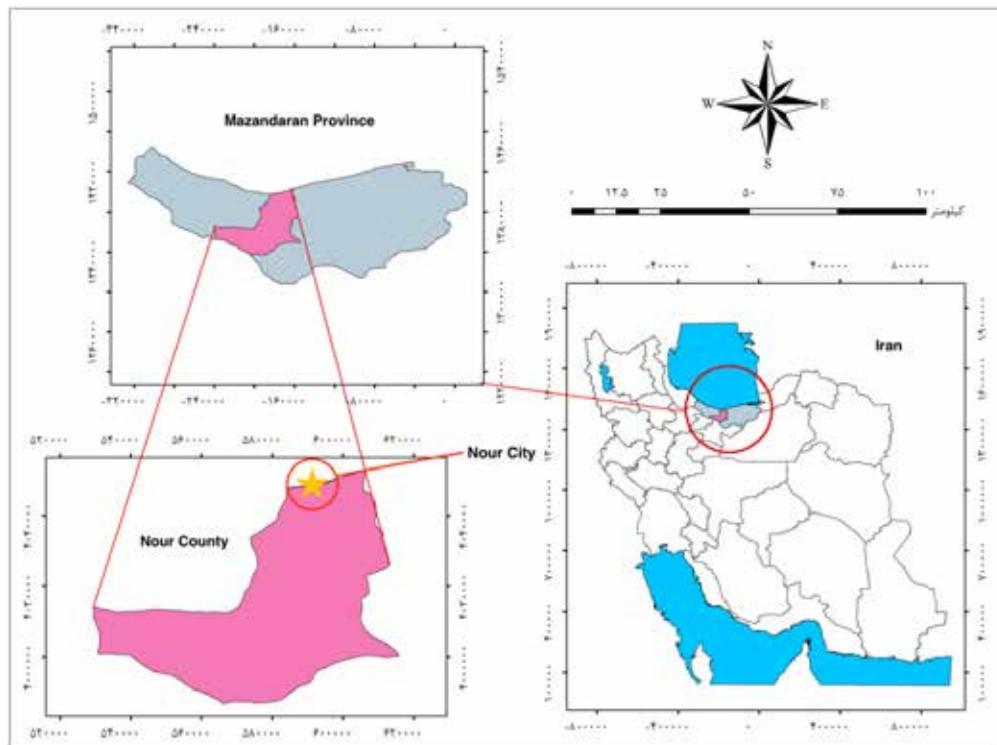


Fig. 1 Geographical Location, Nour, Mazandaran, Iran. Source: Authors

Methodology

In this study, a mixed-methods research design was adopted to comprehensively examine the influence of city diplomacy on the urban development trajectory of Nour City, a small urban center selected as the case study. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods enabled the researcher to capture a holistic and multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon. Data collection involved both primary and secondary sources.

All procedures involving human participants adhered to ethical standards. *Informed consent was obtained from all participants, satisfying Springer Nature's ethical policy requiring acknowledgment of voluntary participation. Additionally, all participants provided consent for the publication of anonymized data, aligning with Springer's guidelines for studies involving individual-level yet non-identifiable information.*

Data Collection Procedures

A combination of qualitative and quantitative data sources was utilized to triangulate findings:

Secondary Data from Official Statistics

Economic and demographic indicators were obtained from the Statistical Center of Iran. These raw datasets provided objective insights into the economic structure, development status, and socio-economic profile of Nour City. Such quantitative data helped contextualize the city's developmental conditions and supported the interpretation of qualitative findings.

Field Observations and Visual Documentation

The researcher conducted on-site observations throughout Nour City to assess the quality of urban infrastructure, public service provision, and spatial conditions. Photographs were taken to document the physical environment, revealing the performance and capacity of municipal institutions responsible for infrastructure and urban management. These visual records served as an important supplementary source for validating interview data and secondary statistics.

Interviews with Municipal Authorities and Experts

Given the limited availability of formal documentation on international relations in small Iranian cities, qualitative interviews formed a critical component of the methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the mayor, senior municipal managers, and experts in city diplomacy and urban development. These interviews provided in-depth insights into the city's diplomatic engagements, institutional capacities, challenges, and strategic priorities. In small cities such as Nour, high-level municipal officials are often the most reliable and direct source of information regarding international relations and external affairs.

Quantitative Indicators

The quantitative component included variables such as: frequency, scale, and thematic focus of city diplomacy initiatives; public investment levels and development indicators; selected urban development metrics relevant to economic performance and service provision. These indicators supported the empirical assessment of how city diplomacy correlates with development patterns.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data—derived from interviews, field observations, and document review—were analyzed thematically. This approach enabled the identification of patterns related to the processes, motivations, challenges, and outcomes of city diplomacy in Nour City.

Methodological Limitations

The study acknowledges several methodological limitations. As a single-case analysis, the findings may not be generalizable to all small cities in Iran. The reliance on self-reported information from municipal officials introduces the possibility of response bias. Additionally, limited public documentation on international relations in small cities constrained the depth of secondary data analysis. Nevertheless, triangulation across multiple data sources—official statistics, field observations, and interviews—helped mitigate these limitations and strengthened the reliability of the findings.

Future Research Directions

Future research should further explore city diplomacy

in small urban settlements by examining specific diplomatic strategies and their measurable impacts on development outcomes. Comparative or longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how the sustained implementation of city diplomacy influences economic growth, infrastructure quality, and international positioning over time.

Discussion

This article's main objective is to expound on the establishment of a logical connection between the strategic implementation of city diplomacy and the consequential development in small cities. It's crucial to prioritize small cities in urban planning as they offer multifaceted advantages for development, which would foster a more inclusive urban ecosystem, crucial for equitable resource allocation. Giving importance to these cities facilitates decentralization, ensuring a fairer distribution of resources within urban areas. Disregarding their specific needs would lead to various challenges. Neglecting smaller cities risks missing opportunities, hinders progress, and worsens urban-rural disparities, impacting society.

The pivotal findings stemming from this study show that the lack of diplomatic relationships in the small city of Nour has resulted in weak economic flows and finally an underdeveloped urban landscape. Specifically, changes in mayoral leadership within Nour and the subsequent alteration of urban development strategies. All in all, the current situation has culminated in the city's current state of isolation, wherein it stands largely disconnected from broader regional and global networks. This state of isolation has, regrettably, had a cascading effect on Nour's urban landscape, resulting in a visible lag in terms of development and progress. The underdevelopment that Nour currently grapples with can, therefore, be traced back, at least in part, to this shift in leadership and the subsequent absence of proactive city diplomacy efforts.

Moreover, Nour has a set of inherent capabilities that position it as a prime candidate for attracting significant investments. The key to unlocking this potential lies in the city's capacity to engage in strategic partnerships

and establish robust networks. Urban tourism is affected by the socio-economic nature of the city. The reason for this is the effect of the multiplier when the chain of "expenses - incomes" through tourism stimulates the development of the economy and other related industries associated with it. Nour's geographical advantage, with its proximity to the Caspian Sea, offers an opportunity for the city to pursue development in the tourism industry. Through well-crafted collaborations with local and international stakeholders, Nour can effectively leverage its cultural heritage and tourism-related assets to become a destination for travelers and investors. By strategically aligning itself with partners and stakeholders, Nour can not only boost its tourism industry but also stimulate economic growth, generate employment opportunities, and enhance the overall quality of life for its residents.

The findings of this study substantiate and align with prior research endeavors that have explored the impact of city diplomacy on urban development and highlight the importance of such approaches within smaller city contexts. The evidence gathered underscores the crucial role of networking and the consistent utilization of city diplomacy as a cyclical process—one that engenders reciprocal benefits and sustains urban development. In other words, cities need a minimum foundation to be able to utilize the city diplomacy approach. The infrastructure they invest in at first grows and develops as cities maintain their position in international networks and expand their engagement. The case study conducted in Nour City sheds light on significant hurdles that impede effective engagement in city diplomacy and subsequently hinder urban development.

Weak infrastructure, compounded by frequent alterations in mayoral leadership, emerges as a pivotal factor constraining Nour City's active participation in city diplomacy and its engagement at the international level.

The transition in municipality leadership within Nour has been discerned as a pivotal factor contributing to a significant departure from the city's established international connections. This shift is exemplified

by instances, such as the termination of a project involving Chinese collaboration on recreational facilities within the coastal areas. The abrupt withdrawal of the Chinese partners coincided with the change in mayoral leadership, reflecting a tangible disruption in the city's international engagements.

Notably, this data has been meticulously gathered through interviews conducted by the author with key representatives from the municipality of Nour and its administrative staff. These firsthand accounts underscore the direct correlation between the transition in mayoral leadership, their approaches in local government, and the consequential impact on Nour's previously cultivated international partnerships, exemplifying the intricate connection between administrative shifts and alterations

in the city's global interactions. Consequences highlight a need for cohesive and integrated governance.

The research indicates a conspicuous lack of substantial economic and commercial interlinkages within the city and barely with global markets. The commercial activities mostly revolve around local markets (Image 1), signifying a stagnant state of commercial complexes (Fig. 2). Earlier scholarly work has substantiated that the expansion of international relationships through city diplomacy has the potential to increase the income of municipalities and their residents, leading to overall city development (Azami, 2013). The city landscape and inadequate infrastructure in Nour clearly reflect the city's underdevelopment.



Fig. 1: A square within the main Boulevard of Nour, Mazandaran, Iran. Source: Authors



Fig. 2: A commercial Complex located on the main road of Nour, Mazandaran, Iran. Source: Authors

Access to urban centers has been noted to foster services and catalyze the emergence of new economic and social activities. For instance, public transit infrastructure is increasingly deployed to attract global capital and enhance affluent residents' and tourists' rights to the city (Farmer, 2011). Regrettably, in the city of Nour, the transportation infrastructure, particularly concerning public transportation, suffers from notable deficiencies, lacking substantial improvements or renovations over an extended period (Image 3). This dearth of enhancements assumes significance owing to its profound implications for a city's accessibility and internal connectivity.



Fig. 3: Nour city public transport, bus station, Source: Authors

In a world where cities are being subjected to further competition on an international scale (Berry-Chikhaoui, 2007), the city's landscape expresses a form of abandonment. The built environment, the conditions of the public sphere, and the extent of positive social networks in the city are critical for understanding residents' connections to each other and to their cities (Leyden, 2011). The stream that is separated from the Caspian Sea, despite the construction of residential houses around it, is not organized and has a lot of garbage on its sides (Fig. 4). This stream passes under the main boulevard of the city and gives a primitive view of the urban landscape.



Fig. 4, A Stream of the Caspian Sea, Source: Authors

The cityscape serves as a canvas, articulating a narrative of urbanity and societal engagement. A portrayal of abandonment is notably evident along the main boulevard within the city of Nour. The main boulevard, which is supposed to be a vibrant vein of Nour alive with life and activity, reflects a sense of neglect and disuse (Fig. 5).

This boulevard unveils an array of uncontrolled structures and unused spaces. Abandoned storefronts, shuttered businesses, and vacant plots underscore a narrative of disinvestment and disinterest. However, within this picture of abandonment, there is potential for resilience and hidden possibilities. Community initiatives, urban renewal projects, and pockets of revitalization efforts would be solutions to the current condition. Reimagining the abandoned landscape of the main

boulevard in Nour requires efforts aimed at revitalizing infrastructure, and as is highlighted by Bhattacharya, new economic activities, which not only revitalize the physical environment but also create opportunities for job creation and economic development (Bhattacharya, 2021).



Fig. 5: Main Boulevard landscape, Nour, Mazandaran, Iran. Source: Authors

The small health center on the main boulevard within Nour (Fig. 6) serves as one of the essential hubs for healthcare services, catering to people's immediate medical needs. Its location along the main boulevard signifies its importance and accessibility, ensuring that healthcare remains within reach for residents and passersby alike. Considering that the population of the city is around 27,000 to 30,000 individuals, health centers must be capable of serving more people.

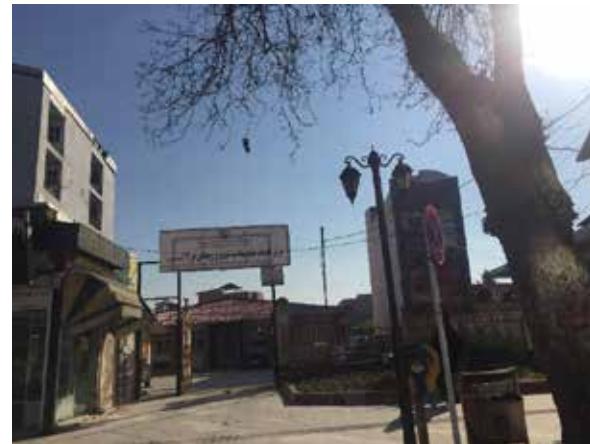


Fig. 6: Health Center, Nour, Mazandaran, Iran. Source: Authors

Within the context of international relations, hotels hold a critical role, often serving as focal points for cross-cultural exchanges. Notably, significant capital investments are directed towards locations offering considerable returns within this sector (Chakravorty, 2003). However, the city of Nour presents a concerning scenario marked by the presence of aging and substandard hotel facilities, denoting a lack of contemporary accommodations. Notably, the principal lodging establishment, the "Narenjestan Hotel," constructed approximately two decades ago, stands as the city's flagship but outdated hospitality option (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Narenjestan Hotel, Nour, Mazandaran, Iran. Source: Authors

An intriguing aspect of the city's hospitality landscape is the prevalent preference among travelers, predominantly Iranians, to avoid available hotel amenities in favor of staying in indigenous villas and residences during their visit. This inclination towards alternative accommodation modes reflects a notable divergence from traditional hotel stays.

Moreover, the suburban reserve known as "Dasht-e Nour" emerges as a noteworthy alternative setting, characterized by its preserved environment. This area boasts diverse attractions, including a river conducive to fishing activities, cottages tailored for accommodation purposes, and designated spaces catering to horseback riding enthusiasts. This alternative locale underscores a shift in traveler preferences, indicating an inclination towards unconventional lodging experiences beyond the confines of conventional urban accommodations.

The absence of contemporary hotel infrastructures in Nour not only presents a challenge but also highlights a missed opportunity for fostering tourism and facilitating international communication within the city. In recent years, the private sector has made efforts to construct a hotel in this area, though the project is said to have been abandoned for a while (Image 8).

The reliance on indigenous dwellings and the appeal of the suburban enclave underscores the need for a rejuvenated hospitality sector capable of meeting growing traveler expectations. Addressing the shortage of contemporary accommodation options within Nour holds significant implications for the city's prospects in attracting and accommodating diverse international tourists. Establishing modernized accommodations in line with contemporary traveler preferences not only enhances the city's appeal but also strengthens its position as a hospitable and engaging destination.



Fig. 8: Hotel Construction, Nour, Mazandaran, Iran. Source: Authors

conducive to fostering international exchanges and tourism growth. The development of accommodation facilities is crucial in meeting the diverse needs of tourists (Suranova, 2019). This is particularly important in the context of sustainable tourism planning, where urban zoning can play a significant role in enhancing city resilience (Yiu, 2021). In this regard, the identification of modern amenities in accommodation services is essential (Zontek, 2018). Furthermore, customer-focused adaptation, such as providing culturally relevant services, can significantly enhance the experience of international travelers (Heo, 2004).

Conclusions

As indicated in earlier research, enhancing international relations and improving infrastructure can lead to

increased revenue, urban development, and greater financial independence for the city. The spatial development of small cities like Nour can benefit from global connectivity, as seen in larger urban centers. Future efforts should focus on strengthening diplomatic ties to promote economic growth and development in Nour.

According to the previous section, Weak infrastructure, compounded by frequent alterations in mayoral leadership, emerges as a pivotal factor constraining Nour City's active participation in city diplomacy and its engagement at the international level. This situation restricts the city's capacity to initiate diplomatic networks and limits international partnerships' abilities to strengthen urban infrastructure, increase

economic growth, and advance urban spaces. In other words, this is like a circular situation wherein deficient infrastructure, and delicate economic streams persist because infrastructure and city diplomacy depend on each other directly and indirectly. The interplay of these factors forms a stagnant loop that hinders the city from capitalizing on its inherent capacities and available potential.

In conclusion, the study suggests that fundamental steps are necessary to correct the systemic challenges that are hindering the effective establishment of city diplomacy. Nour City could focus on a few strategic steps to advance its urban amenities and infrastructure and establish international connections through city diplomacy methods. To improve urban infrastructure, Nour city might implement smart technologies for energy, transportation, waste management, and water systems; develop a comprehensive public transportation system, including buses, and more green transportation networks such as bicycles; create more green areas, parks, and recreational spaces and regenerate vacant spaces.

Moreover, to capitalize on its potential, it is suggested that the city launch international connections through city diplomacy. For instance, Nour municipality could introduce partnerships with cities in other countries through sister city contracts, promoting cultural exchanges and collaborations in various sectors such as education and business; hold international events and conferences; originate economic collaborations with other cities to encourage international investment; stimulate cultural exchange programs, such as art exhibitions, festivals, and culinary events. By focusing on these strategies, Nour City can not only enhance its infrastructure and facilities but also establish itself as an internationally connected and influential city, fostering growth and development on both local and global scales.

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