

# Asymmetries and Potentialities in the International Engagement of Brazilian Subnational Governments: A Comparison Between São Paulo (SP) and Mangaratiba (RJ) and the Role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Strengthening Decentralized International Cooperation

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## Executive Summary

This research analyzes the asymmetries and potentialities in the international activities of Brazilian subnational governments, in a comparative study between São Paulo (SP) and Mangaratiba (RJ), as well as the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE) in strengthening decentralized international cooperation. The study identifies that, although the Brazilian constitutional framework concentrates foreign policy at the federal level, municipalities are increasingly expanding their international activities, with the support of MRE, thus exploring opportunities for technical cooperation, cultural exchange, tourism, attracting investment, among other territorialized needs. A comparison between these subnational entities reveals strong structural and institutional asymmetries between the two municipalities, with São Paulo having a consolidated apparatus and specialized technical staff, while Mangaratiba is just beginning its journey toward international integration, with limited human and institutional resources, but with a vocation in

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strategic areas, especially tourism. Based on the evidence gathered, the study recommends institutionalizing international policy in the municipalities by creating or strengthening specific departments focused on the topic; expanding technical cooperation with the MRE in order to better develop local internationalization; the establishment of permanent mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating municipal actions for international integration; and the integration of local internationalization policies with national development and economic diplomacy strategies, aligning municipal objectives with Brazilian foreign policy guidelines. The potential impact of these measures would be reflected in the strengthening of the institutional capacity and international governance of cities, in addition to consolidating the MRE as the central coordinator of decentralized international cooperation, promoting greater effectiveness in the external actions of subnational entities, and maintaining consistency with the State's international policy. At the same time, this set of actions creates a replicable model of municipal internationalization that can inspire other Brazilian cities, expanding Brazil's global presence through its local governments.

## Introduction

The growing dependence of local decisions on global agendas, especially on issues such as climate change and combating hunger, among others, which also reflects the thinking behind the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of local action and global impact, has led subnational governments to expand their activities on the international stage.

In Brazil, even with the constitutional centralization of foreign relations in the federal government, there has been significant progress in decentralized international cooperation, driven by the need to find solutions to increasingly complex urban challenges. Since the 1980s, Brazilian cities and states have progressively incorporated the international dimension into their public policies, participating in multilateral networks, establishing bilateral partnerships, and raising external funds for local development. However, this process is marked by profound institutional, technical, and financial asymmetries among Brazilian subnational actors, which directly impacts their ability to plan, implement, and sustain international actions in a continuous and strategic manner.

In this context, this research examines the asymmetries and potentialities in the international activities of Brazilian subnational governments, based on a comparison between the municipalities of São Paulo (SP) and Mangaratiba (RJ).

The analysis aims to understand how the Brazilian Chancery can contribute to decentralized international cooperation, as well as promote greater integration between levels of government, thus ensuring the alignment of cities and states with Brazilian foreign policy.

## Analysis

The international activities of Brazilian subnational governments have expanded significantly in recent decades, accompanying the country's growing involvement in global agendas, particularly those related to sustainable development and international cooperation. However, the absence of a consolidated regulatory framework, despite the institutional support of the MRE, has created a scenario of great heterogeneity among local entities, intensified by discrepancies in the power and influence of each actor.

While large municipalities such as São Paulo have robust institutional structures, specialized technical teams, and the capacity for direct engagement in multilateral forums, small and medium-sized cities such as Mangaratiba face administrative, financial, and personnel constraints that limit their international projection. This disparity reflects both the level of institutionalization of local foreign policies and the availability of internal resources and skills to manage international relations in a strategic and continuous manner.

In the case of São Paulo, the existence of a Municipal Secretariat for International Relations (SMRI), with technical staff, intersectoral coordination, and a consolidated history, has enabled active involvement in global initiatives, such as participation in G20 engagement groups during the Brazilian presidency, with the city also hosting the G20 Central Bank Governors and Finance Ministers Meeting. This performance reflects not only institutional capacity, but also international recognition of the municipality as a relevant actor in urban and climate issues, considerably expanding its opportunities for cooperation and access to international financing.

On the other hand, the municipality of Mangaratiba, although located in a strategic region with significant tourism and environmental potential, still lacks an institutional structure dedicated to international cooperation, medium- and long-term planning, and integration with international city networks, despite important, albeit embryonic, internationalization initiatives, notably its attendance at G20 Social agendas and engagement groups in 2024. The lack of technical units or specific positions for the management

of international relations hinders the continuity of actions, making them sporadic and dependent on specific political administrations.

The contrast between the two cases analyzed illustrates a structural challenge for Brazilian paradiplomacy: the lack of knowledge among subnational entities about international opportunities and the support provided by the MRE, which enable cities with less institutional capacity to develop their own internationalization strategies. Because the MRE's regional offices are located in state capitals and the foreign ministry's headquarters are in Brasília, mayors and their teams are often unable to reach them on a regular basis. The same is true for the strengthening of bilateral relations, with consular representations and official events restricted to major cities, which hinders the full exploitation of the potential of subnational action as an instrument of development and territorialized diplomacy.

As a result, the international activities of Brazilian municipalities tend to reproduce existing regional and institutional inequalities, concentrating opportunities and visibility in large urban centers. In addition, the lack of coordination with national foreign policy in specific municipal actions can result in overlapping agendas, dilution of diplomatic efforts, and loss of strategic coherence in the country's international projection.

## Recommendations

In order to better address institutional asymmetries and strategically take advantage of international opportunities, it would be advisable to adopt structural and coordinated measures, both by subnational entities and by MRE, in two main areas:

1. Institutional strengthening of municipal paradiplomacy
  - Establishment of municipal international relations centers, even in a scaled down format, responsible for prospecting opportunities, interinstitutional coordination, and management of international partnerships;
  - Technical training of municipal officials in international relations, with support from the MRE and partner institutions, such as the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA), which already conducts research on the subject;
  - Development of municipal internationalization plans, integrating local priorities with national foreign policy guidelines, so that

- together, the MRE and subnational actors can design and execute an assertive strategy;
- Encouraging the integration of municipal international agendas into local planning instruments, such as the Multi-Year Plan (PPA) and the master plan, ensuring continuity between administrations.
2. Expanding municipal participation in international forums and networks
- Encourage municipalities to join international networks and coalitions, expanding technical exchange and access to cooperation opportunities;
  - Encourage the creation of intermunicipal consortia for international cooperation, enabling neighboring cities to join forces to develop joint projects and access bilateral and multilateral opportunities;
  - Facilitate the participation of smaller cities in relevant international events and agendas through regional internationalization consortia, taking advantage of local capacities and vocations.

### Proposals for policy implementation

In order to strengthen municipal paradiplomacy institutionally, it is necessary to raise awareness among the executive, legislative, and local sectors about the benefits and opportunities of internationalization. To this end, a strategic approach is to promote seminars with authorities and experts in the field, in addition to initiating smaller-scale projects with international partners, in order to display results and provide a positive first experience, thereby eliminating the stigma surrounding investments in international actions. From the first international contacts onward, it becomes possible to advance in the establishment of municipal internationalization centers and in the technical training of civil servants, paving the way for the deepening of the policies described above, such as expanding municipal participation in international forums and networks and leadership for the creation of intermunicipal consortia for international cooperation.

### Conclusion

Subnational diplomacy emerges as a strategic tool for local development and for expanding Brazil's international presence. The comparative study between São Paulo and Mangaratiba highlights the institutional and technical

asymmetries that still characterize the international activities of municipalities, while revealing the transformative potential of decentralized cooperation when coordinated jointly with the MRE and technical partners.

Institutional strengthening, technical training, and the integration of international agendas into municipal planning are fundamental steps toward consolidating a coherent and sustainable subnational internationalization policy with solid impacts for states and municipalities, advancing toward a more inclusive and cooperative foreign policy aligned with territorial-demands.

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