

Leveraging Asymmetric Relations in Sister City Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the Sister City collaboration model that influences the success of economic cooperation between local governments. Sister City Relationship (SCR) is a form of subnational diplomacy that connects cities across countries through formal agreements, aiming to promote economic, cultural, and social cooperation. However, many SCR initiatives remain symbolic and fail to generate tangible benefits. This study proposes a more strategic approach by examining how asymmetry between cities can enhance economic cooperation. The theoretical framework adopts an asymmetric approach, arguing that mutual compatibility can emerge from unequal relationships. Compatibility is operationalized through indicators such as: (1) Area, (2) Gross Domestic Products (GDP) and (3) Human Development Index (HDI), which reflect the economic and developmental capacity of a city or region. A coupling model is used to categorize relationships into Big-Small and Small-Big pairings, referring respectively to partnerships where a big Local Cities collaborates with a smaller Foreign Cities, and vice versa. These asymmetric configurations are found to be more effective than symmetrical pairings, which often struggle with overlapping interests and lack of reciprocity. Empirical findings based on selected SCR cases in Indonesia such as Bandung, Surabaya and Medan, shows that coupling cities with complementary resources, rather than equal status, enables more dynamic and outcome-driven engagements. The study offers both theoretical and practical contribution for designing more strategic and resource-based asymmetric relations.

INTRODUCTION

Sister city relationships are a program started by US President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The program was designed to initiate people-to-people diplomacy (Chatterji & Saha, 2017; Cohen, 2020; Zelinsky, 1991). Sister City Relationships (SCR), which aims to build partnerships between cities in different countries, has become an increasingly popular global phenomenon in recent decades. SCR is a ‘modern’ concept combining different studies, namely social and economic (Mpanza et al., 2022). The idea of SCR is implemented to collaborate with other cities in different regions worldwide. This collaboration allows cities to expand networks and relationships to promote cultural promotion, social interaction, and economic development of the cities and countries involved in the SCR program. The program also encourages cooperation and friendship between communities to realize peaceful coexistence worldwide (McLarty et al., 2014). The context in which SCR collaborates is diverse, not only in the educational, social, and cultural fields but also in economic benefits.

Various countries and cities have established sister cities to enhance collaboration. The purpose of the SCR program began to minimize conflicts in border areas after World War II, which created tensions between member states from different blocs (Pruitt, 2015). This was an attempt to achieve peace between countries. In addition, border relations were improved, thus creating space to initiate other forms of relations between Governments and communities (Pred, 2017). Today, no country is completely self-sufficient and therefore does not need natural resources or other products from other countries (McLarty et al., 2014). Based on the availability and distribution of natural resources, countries specialize in production according to the potential of each region, thereby creating economic activities. However, countries also need other resources to support efficient production (Tim, 2012) in these economic activities. Furthermore, in terms of marketing, a country can earn additional income by trading with other countries (McLarty et al., 2014).

This, in turn, expands the effectiveness of SCR partnerships in promoting local economic growth. This is an interesting topic for further study, especially as SCR partnerships attract foreign investment, multinational corporations, and new export markets (Han et al., 2022; Putri, 2022; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998), shorten the distance between institutions to develop mutual benefits (Zhai, 2018), and facilitate international trade and investment (Li et al., 2020; Yao & Zhang, 2015). China has successfully utilized SCR as an important factor in the success of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in SCR partner countries and cities (Han et al., 2021).

SCR aims to help develop sustainable communication networks between cities worldwide to shorten distance and reduce polarization between countries. To achieve this goal, Indonesia has created a set of regulations and policies to accommodate SCR. Indonesia's active role in SCR is outlined in the Regional Autonomy policy, which is then outlined in Law Number 23/2014 provisions concerning Regional Government, Article 367 and Article 7 (Bramastya & Septiarika, 2020). Various cities in Indonesia have established SCR cooperation with partner cities abroad. SCR has been built to include cultural exchange, education, technology transfer, business opportunities, and trade. This research aims to identify collaboration opportunities for business and economic development, entrepreneurship, global market expansion, and tourism in cities in Indonesia that meet the research criteria.

Asymmetric relationships are partnerships between two parties with unequal power, resources, or influence, where cooperation still occurs based on mutual or complementary interest (Brzica, 2018; Long, 2017; Pu, 2022; Womack, 2016). SCR collaboration between Indonesian cities and foreign partners is inseparable from asymmetric relationships. There are gaps between the two, such as population, Human Development Index, GDP per capita, and area (Cohen, 2020). These four elements influence the inequality of potential resources and economic capabilities that can create reciprocity between SCR cities.

However, despite the growing implementation of SCR in Indonesia, there remains a critical gap in understanding how such partnerships can be strategically designed to yield concrete economic benefits. The majority of studies on SCR tend to emphasize socio-cultural exchange (Aprilian & Azizah, 2023; Assegaft et al., 2015; Mahyuni & Syahrin, 2021) and transfer knowledge through technology (Rudiany et al., 2021), leaving a gap in understanding the mechanisms through which SCRs can generate tangible economic outcomes, especially in the Indonesian context. This gap raises the need for a systematic investigation that goes beyond normative assumptions and evaluates the actual performance and structure of SCRs in promoting economic growth. In particular, the phenomenon of asymmetric relationships, characterized by differences in population, GDP per capita, Human Development Index, and area of the city, has not been sufficiently examined to the reciprocity

and sustainability of cooperation. To address this gap, a research question is posed *How the collaboration model within Sister City Relationships contributes to the success of international cooperation, particularly in promoting local economic development in Indonesia*, is to be examined. This study focuses on three major Cities in Indonesia, which is Surabaya, Bandung, and Medan, that have established Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) as legal and formal SCR agreements with foreign cities.

RESEARCH METHOD

Over the years, many SCRs have been based on cultural and social exchange, which has led to extensive collaboration in various fields. Some cities, however, also look forward to economic collaboration that will ultimately lead to positive economic development in different regions. Economic development continues through personal connections, in addition to initiatives that local governments have started by local governments. For example, local communities use SCR collaboration to expand businesses and increase growth in various industry sectors. Ultimately leading to increased communication between individuals for trade purposes and increased income in various cities. Continuing economic development through SCR connections does not mean removing the existing cultural and social exchange infrastructure within the communities involved but instead expanding collaboration. The economic development achieved through these SCRs would not be possible without the conversations facilitated by the leading SCR actor, the local government.

In regional economic development, SCR collaboration can be utilized for tourism promotion and advancing long-term economic and cultural collaboration between cities and countries (Cohen, 2020). However, not all SCR collaborations are effective in the same way. Asymmetric collaboration is inevitable in SCR collaboration. This concept refers to the imbalance of capacity, resources, and influence between cities in an SCR partnership. Differences in distance and political systems also present opportunities and challenges (Sinambela, 2020). Among other considerations that affect the effectiveness of SCR asymmetric collaboration are population size and area and some factors that affect economic development, such as the Human Development Index and GDP Per Capita (Sajith & Malathi, 2020).

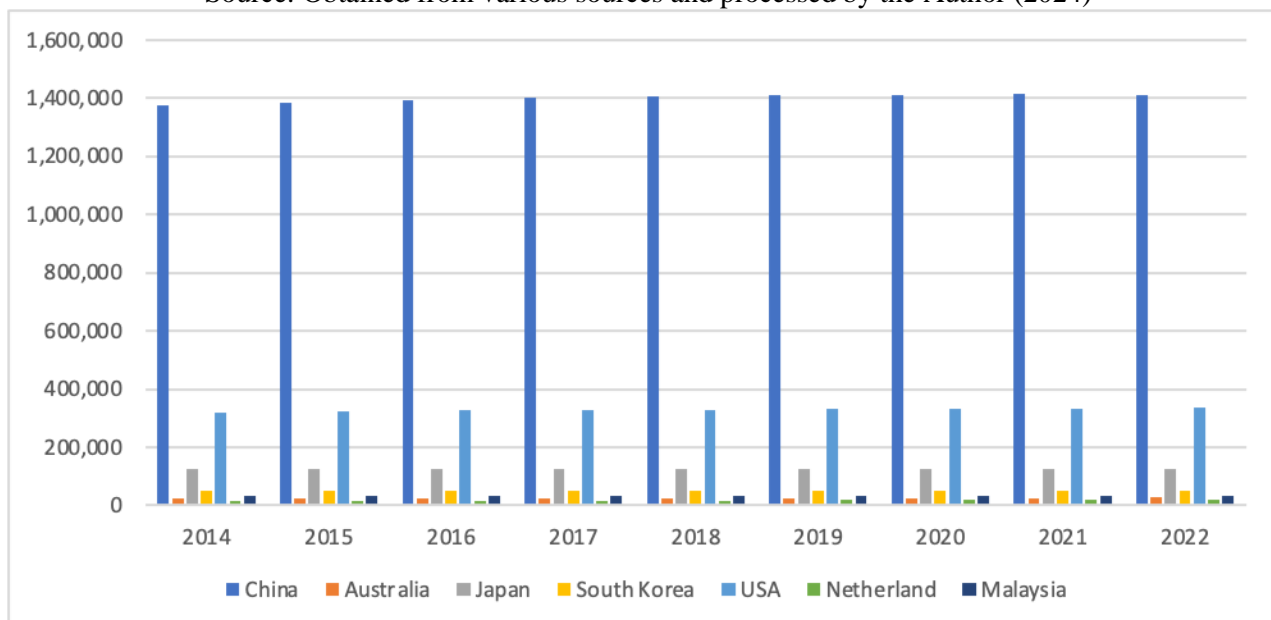
This research utilizes the SCR coupling approach developed by Gil Cohen to address the challenge of asymmetric collaboration in SCR. There are four coupling scenarios that can be adopted, such as (1) Big-Big (BB), (2) Big-Small (BS), (3) Small-Big (SB), and Small-Small (SS) Relationships (Cohen, 2020). In his research, Cohen used population size to categorize cities into scenarios. The development carried out in this study is in categorizing SCR cities, namely by adding GDP per Capita and the Human Development Index. The addition of this indicator is in line with the principles of Power Theory. This study also uses the asymmetric theory developed by Brantly Womack, which explains that there are always asymmetrical bilateral relations in international relations. This asymmetrical bilateral relationship illustrates that a country has greater power than other countries in terms of military, economic, political, and territorial. However, this bilateral relationship can still run well and be mutually beneficial (Womack, 2016). This is then adopted to describe the bilateral collaboration in the SCR of cities in Indonesia by analyzing asymmetrical and symmetrical relationships in the SCR collaboration. Then, we will be able to conclude which joint city scenarios can develop the local economy in Indonesia.

Although, in principle, SCR collaboration is built based on similar characteristics (Isnaeni, 2012; Mukti et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2022), in reality, asymmetric power between the SCR cities cannot be avoided. This becomes an opportunity for actors of Sister City Relationships in regional economic development by utilizing asymmetrical power on the resources owned. This will allow the principle of reciprocity in SCR collaboration to be fulfilled and mutual compatibility to be met to create sustainable and mutually beneficial cooperation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research uses an economic approach to measure the asymmetric power of collaborating cities. These include GDP Per Capita and Human Development Index, but the population of the city is also an important factor (Cohen, 2021). With a large population, the potential market and economic opportunities are also large, so economic and trade cooperation can be more developed. A country's large population also means a broader availability of human resources, which can facilitate more diverse cultural, academic, and technological exchanges. Researchers have found the countries that partner with Indonesian cities the most. There are seven countries, such as China with 20 partner cities in Indonesia, Australia with nine SCR partner cities, Japan with nine SCR partner cities, South Korea with seven partner cities, the United States with five SCR partner cities, the Netherlands with four SCR partner cities, and Malaysia with three SCR partner cities. Using this data, the researchers compared the population numbers between countries from 2014 to 2022. As can be seen in Figure 1, the country with the highest population is China, and the lowest is the Netherlands. Since a country's population is an important factor in the success of SCR collaboration, we eliminated the SCR partner cities from the Netherlands and Australia to be analyzed, following Cohen's four coupling scenarios. Both countries have the lowest population of the others.

Figure 1. Comparison of Indonesia's Population and SCR Partner Countries
Source: Obtained from various sources and processed by the Author (2024)



Sister City relationship is divided into three layers: (1) Economic; (2) Socio-Cultural and Technology; and (3) Political (diplomatic) (Clarke, 2011; Cross, 2010; Kuznetsov, 2014). Based on these three layers, the author conducted observations using various official city government websites in Indonesia and previous studies to identify the layers of SCR in the Indonesian context. The presented data on the forms of Sister City Relationships (SCRs) in Table 1 are held by various Indonesian municipalities. These relationships are categorized by the type of formal agreement, Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), Letter of Intent (LoI), and Preliminary Exploration, as well as by the substantive focus of the collaboration, classified into three main layers. The cities of Jakarta, Bandung and Surabaya emerge as the most active in forming SCRs. Jakarta leads with 21 MoUs, showing strong engagement in socio-cultural collaborations (10 cases) and 7 in political/historical ties. Bandung follows with 13 MoUs and 6 economic-oriented collaborations, while Surabaya demonstrates a relatively balanced distribution across economic, socio-cultural, and political aspects. Most other cities remain in the initial phases of establishing SCRs, indicated by the presence of LoIs or ongoing exploratory discussions.

Substantively, socio-cultural cooperation dominates over economic or political initiatives. This suggests that many Indonesian cities still prioritize cultural exchange, education, and community relations in their international engagements, rather than strategic economic partnerships. However, larger cities are beginning to balance these priorities, indicating a more structured and goal-oriented form of para-diplomacy. Overall, the table illustrates that while many cities in Indonesia have begun to engage in international city diplomacy, the depth, focus, and institutionalization of these partnerships remain uneven, often shaped by each city's capacity, leadership, and long-term vision in international cooperation.

To understand the impact of Sister City Relationships (SCRs) on local economic development, this study analyzes the SCR collaborations of three cities in Indonesia: Medan, Bandung, and Surabaya. These cities were selected because they are among those with the highest number of SCR agreements, as shown in Table 1. While Jakarta formally has the most collaborations, with 21 partner cities, this study excludes Jakarta due to its status as the national capital, which often engages in diplomatic relations with other municipalities. As such, Jakarta's SCR activities are less relevant to the study's focus on subnational agency. In Indonesia, for an SCR program to be formally implemented, a Memorandum of Understanding is required. This procedural standard is mandated by Government Regulation No. 28/2018 on Regional Cooperation; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Regulation No. 3/2019 on General Guidelines for Foreign Relations by Regional Governments; and the Ministry of Home Affairs Regulation No. 25/2020 on Procedures for Regional Cooperation with Foreign Local Governments and Institutions.

The use of data from all provincial capital cities in Indonesia is essential to provide a comprehensive picture of the national landscape of Sister City Relationships (SCR). Although the in-depth analysis in this study focuses on three major cities, such as Medan, Bandung, and Surabaya, the table includes data from all cities. This broader scope highlights the variation in the number, SCR stage agreements and focus of SCR across different regions. The data reveals that most cities have limited partnerships, with a predominant emphasis on social, cultural, or symbolic relationships. Only a few cities position economic cooperation as the core objective of their SCR initiatives. Moreover, the data also indicates that many cities in Indonesia have yet to engage in or fully leverage the potential of SCR as a tool for international cooperation and local development. Therefore, the inclusion of national-level data not only strengthens the validity of the proposed asymmetric model

but also exposes the disparity in growth and limited implementation of SCR strategies across the country. This makes the findings more reliable, representative, and relevant for designing more strategic, result-oriented, and inclusive SCR policies.

Table 1. Type of Relationships in Sister City in Indonesia
Source: Obtained from various sources and processed by the Author (2024)

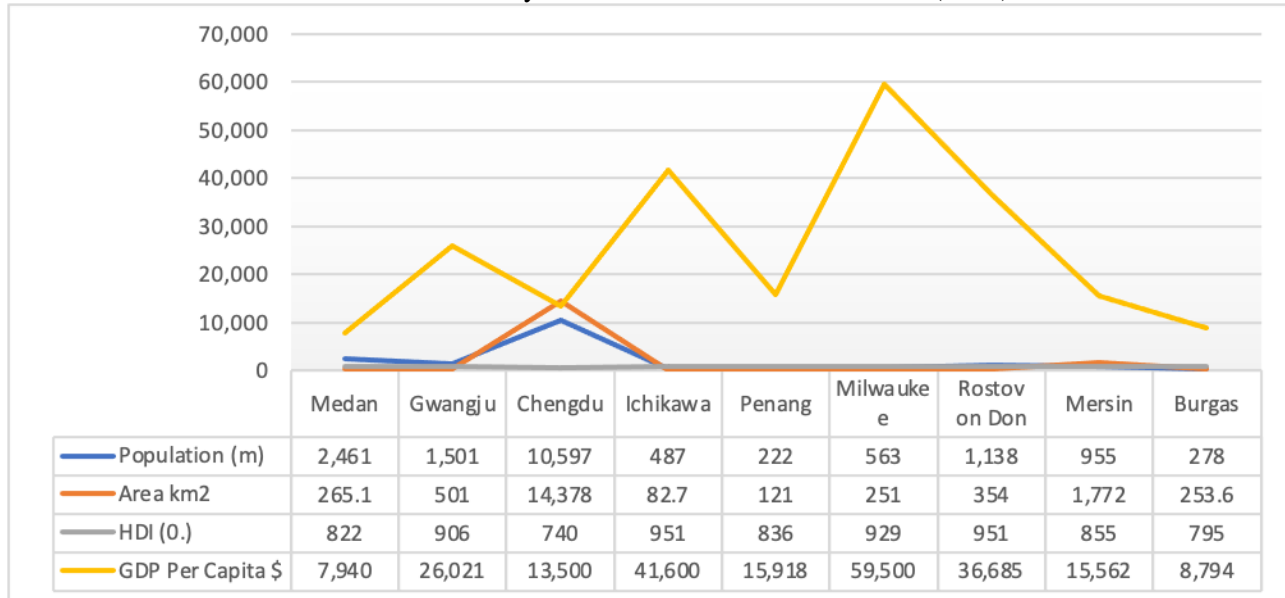
City	SCR Agreement Stage				Types of Relationships	
	MoU	LoI	Preliminary	Economy	Social/Cultural	Politic/Historical
Banda Aceh	3	-	1	-	2	1
Medan	4	4	-	2	2	-
Padang	3	2	-	-	3	-
Pekanbaru	3	-	-	-	3	-
Palembang	1	1	-	-	1	-
Bengkulu	-	-	3	-	-	-
Jambi	1	-	-	-	1	-
Pangkal Pinang	-	1	-	-	-	-
Bandar Lampung	1	1	-	-	1	-
Tanjung Pinang	-	-	1	-	-	-
Jakarta	21	-	-	4	10	7
Bandung	13	-	-	6	4	3
Serang	-	-	1	-	-	-
Yogyakarta	3	2	-	-	2	1
Semarang	4	1	-	-	2	2
Surabaya	10	1	-	4	3	3
Denpasar	3	4	-	1	2	-
Kupang	-	1	-	-	-	-
Mataram	2	-	-	-	1	1
Banjarbaru (Banjarmasin)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pontianak	-	-	-	-	-	-
Palangkaraya	-	-	-	-	-	-
Samarinda	-	1	-	-	-	-
Tanjung Selor	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ambon	1	3	-	-	-	1
Gorontalo	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kendari	1	-	-	-	1	-
Makassar	3	-	-	-	2	1
Manado	3	-	-	-	2	1
Palu	1	-	-	-	1	-
Sofifi	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jayapura	2	1	-	-	1	1
Jayawijaya	-	-	-	-	-	-
Merauke	-	-	-	-	-	-
Manokwari	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	83	23	6	17	44	22

A Case Study of Medan

Medan has been a metropolitan city since 2011 and has experienced many developments over the years through social and cultural collaborations with other countries and cities. Medan's geographical advantage has made it a port city and a stopover for foreign ships from Europe since 1887. With its international Port facilities, Medan is now known as Sumatra's export-import center. Currently, Medan is one of the three cities in Indonesia that are included in the World Smart City list at 112th (IMD, 2020). In the SCR collaboration, Medan has established formal and legal collaboration

with four foreign partner cities from four different countries, as shown in Figure 2. There is an asymmetric power comparison between Medan and its partner cities in the SCR collaboration.

Figure 2. Asymmetric Power Comparison Between Medan and SCR's City Partner
Source: Processed by the Author from various sources (2024)



Chengdu has the largest population and area compared to Medan and other SCR partner cities, with a population of 10.597 million and 14.378 km² (Chengdu.gov, 2020). The city with the highest Human Development Index and GDP per capita is Ichikawa, Japan, with 0.951 and 41.600 USD (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2021). Meanwhile, Medan has a bigger population than Gwangju (South Korea), Ichikawa (Japan), and Penang (Malaysia). Medan has a bigger area than Ichikawa and Penang, has a bigger HDI compared to Chengdu, and has the weakest GDP per capita compared to others. However, Medan's export growth rate continues to grow yearly, although not as much as Bandung and Surabaya, as shown in Figure 5.

A Case Study of Bandung

Bandung has been a metropolitan city in Indonesia since 2006. In recent years, it has experienced rapid progress in the development of technology and creative products, as seen from the many start-up companies that have sprung up in Bandung. So, Bandung is known as the city of creative industries (Delanova, 2019). The Sister City of Bandung has formally and legally collaborated with 13 foreign city partners from 10 countries, as shown in Figure 3. There is an asymmetric power comparison between Bandung and its partner cities in the SCR collaboration.

Figure 3. Asymmetric Power Comparison Between Bandung and SCR's City Partner
Source: Processed by the Author from various sources (2024)

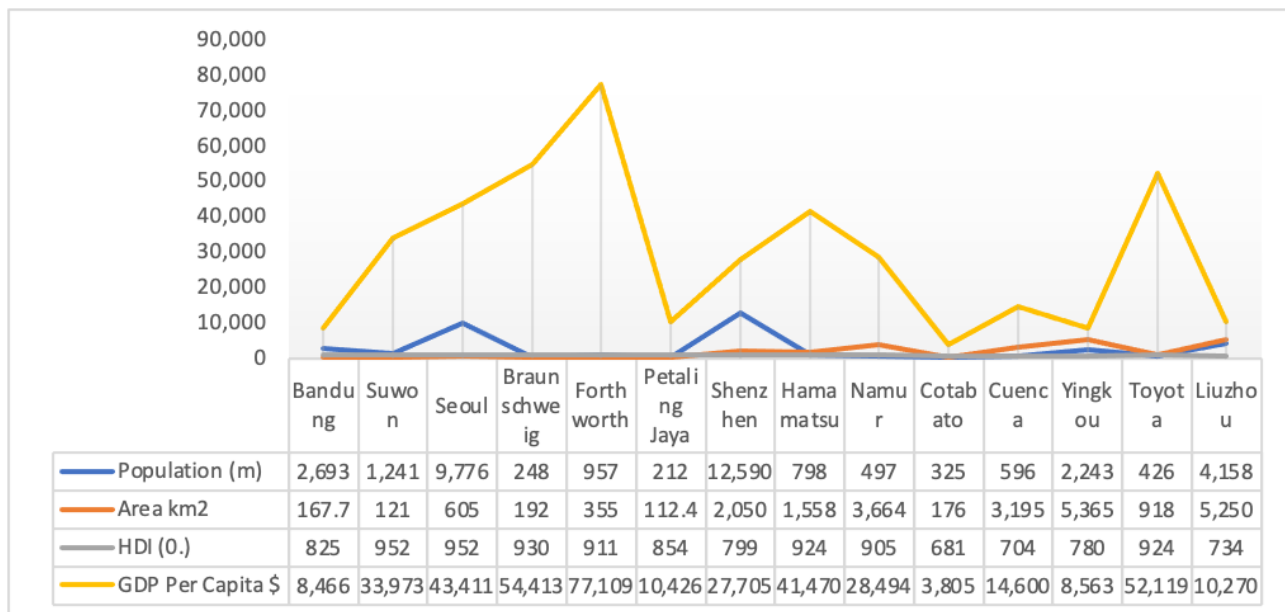


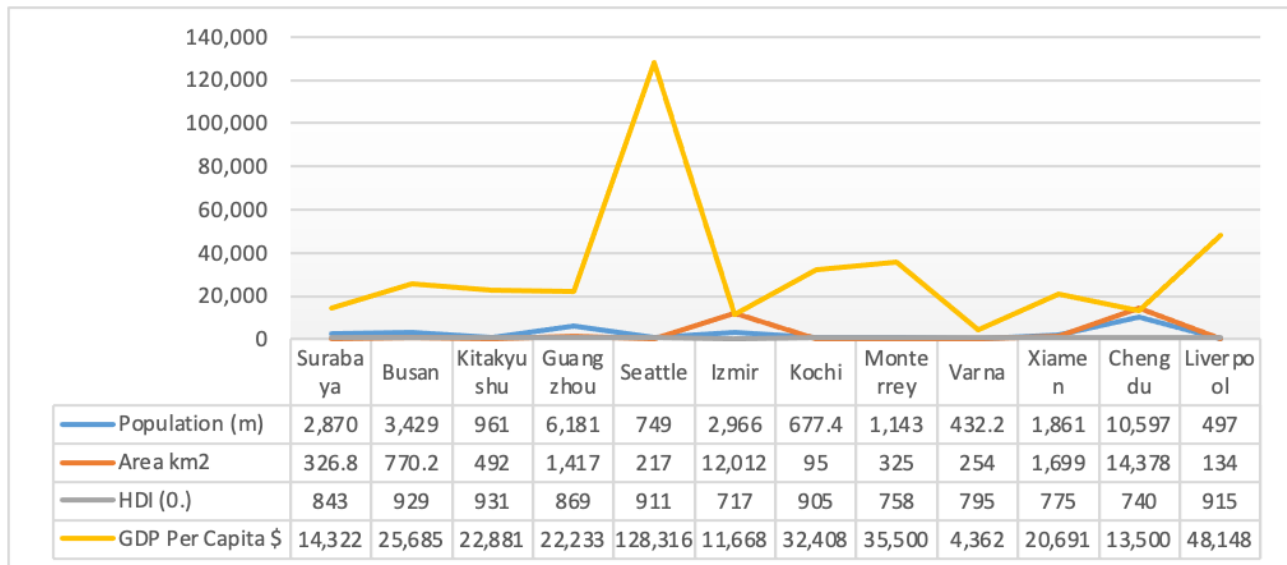
Figure 3. shows that Shenzhen has the largest population compared to Bandung and its city partners. Shenzhen has a 12.590 million population (Shenzhen Daily, 2021). Yingkou has the largest area than others, with 5.365 km² (Yingkou.gov, 2022). Both cities are from China. Meanwhile, the towns of South Korea, namely Suwon, and Seoul, have the highest Human Development Index scores compared to Bandung and other SCR city partners. The highest GDP per capita is owned by Forth Worth, which is 77.109 USD. Bandung has a smaller population than Seoul, Shenzhen, and Liuzhou.

Furthermore, Bandung has the area's power; it has a bigger area than Suwon and Petaling Jaya. Meanwhile, Cotabato, Shenzhen, Cuanca, Yingkou, and Lizhou have smaller HDI scores than Bandung. Bandung can still build productive collaboration with its SCR partners despite this size and economic power disparity. This can be seen from the relatively increasing export value yearly, as shown in Figure 5.

A Case Study of Surabaya

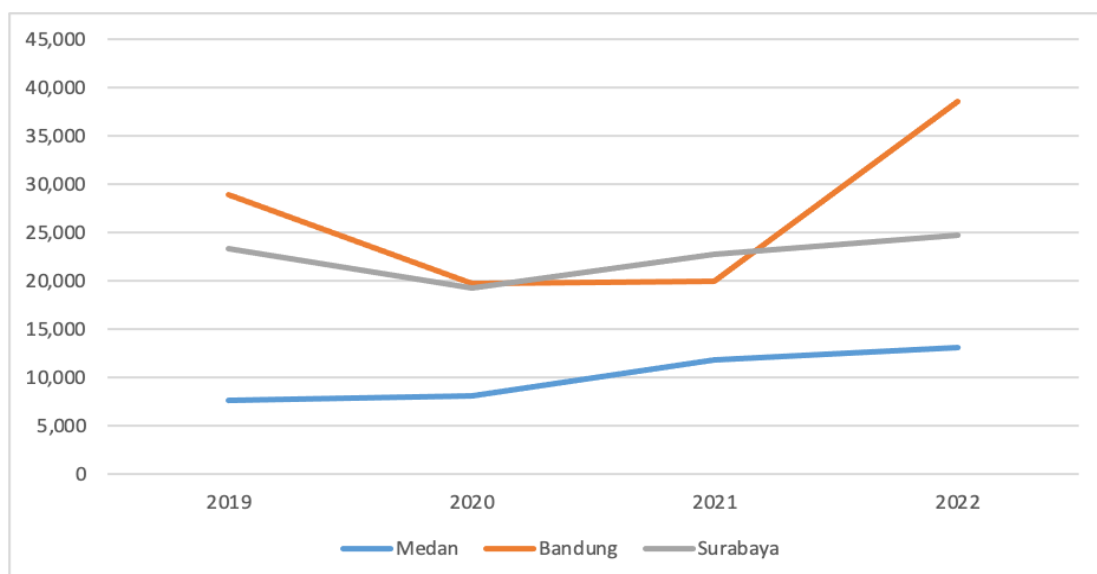
Surabaya is Indonesia's second-largest metropolitan city after Jakarta since the late 20th century. Surabaya transformed from a shanty town into the fastest-growing modern city in Southeast Asia (Badiah, 2016). One of the rapid advancements led Surabaya to be recognized worldwide as a Global Green City at the Sustainable City and Human Settlements Awards (SCAHSAs) by the United Nations (Panrb, 2017). Legally and formally, Surabaya collaborated with 10 foreign partner cities from eight different countries, as shown in Figure 4. There is an asymmetric power comparison between Surabaya and its SCR city partners.

Figure 4. Asymmetric Power Comparison between Surabaya and SCR's City Partner
Source: Processed by the Author from various sources (2024)



Chengdu has a greater population and area than Surabaya and other SCR partner cities, with 10.597 million population and 14.378 km². Meanwhile, Kitakyushu has a greater Human Development Index than Surabaya and other SCR partner cities. Seattle has the highest GDP per capita, 128.316 USD. Surabaya has a greater population than Kitakyushu, Seattle, Izmir, Kochi, Monterrey, Varna, Xiamen, and Liverpool. Furthermore, Surabaya has a larger area than Izmir, Chengdu, Varna and Liverpool. However, Surabaya's GDP per capita score is only greater than Izmir, Varna and Chengdu. Even though there is an asymmetric power in terms of size and economy, Surabaya is still able to build productive collaboration with SCR partners. This can be seen from the value of exports that tend to increase yearly, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Non-Oil and Gas Data Export
Source: Processed by the Author from various sources (2024)



These findings are further supported by the export-import data from three major cities, Bandung, Surabaya, and Medan, which demonstrate significant differences in each city's international economic performance. Figure 5 shows a sharp increase in Bandung in 2022, indicating a positive impact of strategically oriented SCRs focused on economic cooperation. Surabaya exhibits stable growth from 2019 to 2022, reflecting relatively consistent partnerships that are yet to be fully optimized. In contrast, Medan shows growth and relatively lower trade figures, suggesting that its SCR potential remains not fully leveraged. These results indicate that cities engaging in asymmetric Sister City Relationships (SCRs), particularly through the Small-Big coupling cities model, demonstrate higher economic outcomes compared to those with more symmetric partnerships. In this model, the "Small" refers to the local city, while the "Big" refers to a foreign partner city with a larger GDP per Capita. This pattern highlights that asymmetric relationships, when strategically oriented, offer greater opportunities for economic transfer, technology diffusion, and knowledge sharing. The Small-Big configuration enables local cities to leverage the comparative advantages of their more developed partners, thereby enhancing global connectivity and competitiveness. These findings support the proposition that asymmetric SCRs, rather than being a weakness, can serve as a strategic asset in subnational economic diplomacy.

This study uses official trade data from three major Indonesian cities, such as Medan, Bandung, and Surabaya, to prove a theoretical model designed to establish a successful international program. Researchers in the past have argued that the process of merging two Sister Cities is based on similarities (Cohen, 2021) in cultural context and social and environmental issues (Asmono & Prasetyo, 2023; Nadya et al., 2023; Primawanti et al., 2019; Ristadina, 2023). However, they have not set up an organized model of collaboration that can help policymakers design a successful SCR collaboration, ensuring sustainability and long-term economic benefits for both parties. This research proposes a model that states the conditions and requirements for such success. The main requirements for a successful SCR collaboration process depend on the size of the cities involved, the number of cities engaged at the same time, the necessary resources that have been invested in the program, and the enabling environment that is well established. In addition, this research offers a model that can help SCR actors select the right foreign partner, sign favorable cooperation agreements, and the necessary means to establish new contracts.

Table 2. The Sister Cities and Local
Source: Processed by the Author from various sources (2023)

Foreign	China	Australia	Japan	South Korea	Total
Total	20	9	9	7	45
Foreign	USA	Netherland	Malaysia	Others	
Total	5	4	3	58	70
Local	Medan	Bandung	Surabaya	Total	115
Big	4	8	8	20	
Small	0	3	0	3	
Symmetry	3	2	3	8	
Total	7	13	11	31	

Notes: Big = the number of big foreign SCRs (more than Local City), Small = the number of small foreign SCRs (less than Local City), Symmetry = same size as Local City.

Table 2 presents the distribution of Sister City Relationships (SCRs) between Indonesian Cities, Medan, Bandung, and Surabaya, and their foreign partner cities. A total of 115 SCRs are recorded, comprising 45 partnerships with cities from China, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, and 70 from countries such as the United States, the Netherlands, Malaysia, and others. The table further classifies these partnerships based on the relative size of the foreign city in comparison to the local city, using three categories (1) Big, refers to the number of SCRs with foreign cities larger local city (in terms of population, economic capacity, HDI, and area); (2) Small, refers to SCRs with foreign cities smaller than the local counterpart; (3) Symmetry, refers to relationships with cities of same size to the local city. The data reveal a predominance of partnerships with larger foreign cities, with a total of 20 “Big” SCRs out of 31 categorized cases, indicating a pattern of asymmetric para-diplomacy. For instance, both Bandung and Surabaya have 8 partnerships with larger foreign cities, while Medan has four. Only three partnerships involve smaller foreign cities, all of which are linked to Bandung, suggesting that local governments in Indonesia are highly selective and tend to prioritize relationships with more influential partners. Additionally, 8 SCRs are classified as symmetric, with an even distribution across the three local cities. This pattern supports the argument that Indonesian cities tend to pursue Sister City partnerships with foreign cities that offer greater strategic advantages, particularly in areas such as economic cooperation, technological exchange, and international recognition. The absence of partnerships with smaller cities in Medan and Surabaya also highlights a pragmatic orientation in the para-diplomatic strategies employed by Indonesian local governments.

The theoretical model presented in this study argues that the size of partner cities should be compatible for both countries to benefit from SCR collaboration. The econometric model has proven that the most beneficial collaboration method for economic cooperation in Indonesia is the asymmetric relationship model, Big-Small (BS) Relationships, and Small-Big (SB) Relationships. The least successful collaboration model is Small-Small (SS) Relationships, which means that collaboration between a small foreign city and a small local city has an insignificant impact on economic cooperation, and this collaboration tends to stagnate. This shows different results between the SCR collaboration model in Indonesia and Israel. Cohen states that asymmetric (equal size) relationship models such as the Big-Big (BB) Relationship and Small-Small (SS) Relationship, are more favorable to the collaboration of cities in Israel, with an emphasis on the BB Relationship model (Cohen, 2020).

The empirical results with the theoretical model presented are expected to help local authorities increase the chances that SCR collaboration will provide benefits in terms of economic cooperation, whose purpose is to advance the regional economy. The results show that the best collaboration model is asymmetric (Mukti, 2020; Sinambela et al., 2024; Womack, 2015); in other words, asymmetric relationships allow smaller entities to develop more (Long, 2017; Yermekbayev et al., 2020). It is expected that local governments, as key actors in SCR in Indonesia, can first concentrate on that collaboration model and invest the necessary resources in some potential agreements before moving to other collaboration model formations.

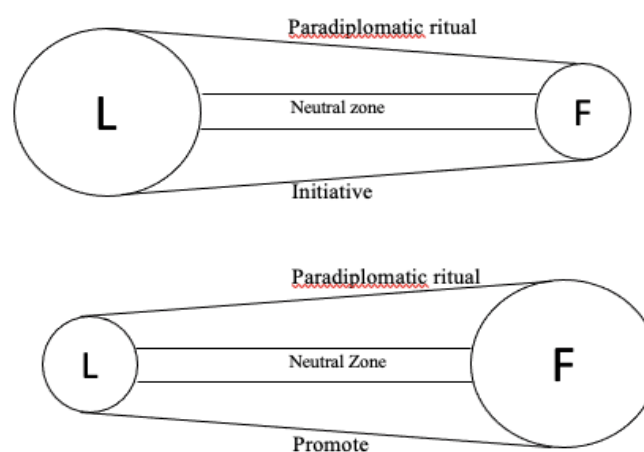
However, compatibility requirements alone are insufficient for successful collaboration between cities. Investment in multiple sources will also sustainably enrich collaboration with SCR partners. Investment in human capital is a fundamental area of improvement for SCR actors at the state, sub-state, and non-state levels. Coordination relationships at the central level and relational relationships at the local level are essential factors in the success of SCR collaboration in Indonesia. Another influential factor is time. At every relational and coordination level, whether personal or public, it takes time to build tradition and trust. The next factor required is the allocation of funds invested in the SCR collaboration process and initiation. This is not only to build trust but also to

ensure that the collaboration will be successful and sustainable. Equally important is a marketing or promotion strategy for the region's potential. The strategy is based on understanding cultural differences and building mutual motivation to seek benefits and solve problems together. At this stage, it requires a considerable contribution from a regional head, who is required to be both a manager and a customer. However, in some regions in Indonesia, it is not possible for the Mayor or Governor to be both a supervisor and an actor in this collaboration. Therefore, we offer local governments the opportunity to form an epistemic community consisting of academics, business people, relevant local officials, and members of local organizations to participate in designing and maintaining the sustainability of the SCR collaboration to have an impact on strengthening the local economy. Businesses are also expected to continue to innovate their superior products to meet the criteria for export-worthy products under international standards. It takes the investment of resources and time from every aspect.

The Process of Engaging Optimal Sister Cities: A Proposed Model

The process through which optimal Sister City partnerships are engaged has often been characterized by strategic misalignment and symbolic agreements that yield limited outcomes. In order to address this gap, a conceptual model has been developed from field research findings, with the aim of illustrating how para-diplomacy interactions unfold asymmetrically between local and foreign actors. Rather than assuming that Sister City partnerships evolve through symmetrical relations, the proposed model emphasizes the staged and asymmetrical diplomacy of sub-states. Two primary stages are initiative and promotion, have been identified to represent the shifting roles of local and foreign actors over time. These stages are visually represented in Figure 6, where the symbolic and functional dynamics of Para-diplomacy Ritual are mapped alongside the creation of a Neutral Zone as a shared but contested space of cooperation. The model is intended to serve as an explanatory framework that captures the asymmetric trajectory of collaboration.

Figure 6. Proposed the Optimal Sister Cities Engaging Process



Notes: F stands for Foreign Cities, and L stands for Local Cities

The conceptual model of Asymmetric Para-diplomacy, which was developed as a theoretical contribution to explain the dynamics of Sister City relations (SCRs), particularly within the context of developing countries such as Indonesia. Two primary actors are represented, L (Local Actor) and F (Foreign Actor), alongside a shared interactional space referred to as the Para-diplomatic Ritual.

Within this space, what is termed a Neutral Zone is performed as a site for negotiation, compromise, and mutual meaning-making.

Stage 1: Initiative Taken by the Local Actor

The first diagram, the local actor (L) is represented with a larger circle, symbolizing that the initiative was taken dominantly by the local government in the early phase of the para-diplomacy process. This reflects a context in which a city or subnational unit from a developing country engages actively to initiate a Sister City relationship with a foreign city partner (F), in pursuit of strategic goals such as investment promotion, technological exchange, or cultural visibility. Meanwhile, the foreign actor is illustrated with a smaller circle, indicating a passive or limited response. The neutral zone is envisioned as the space where ideas are first exchanged, yet the interaction is not marked by symmetry.

Stage 2: Promotion Conducted by the Foreign Actor

The second diagram illustrates a shift in the dynamics of interaction. The bigger size of circle F represents the dominance of the foreign actor in the structure of the relationship, in terms of resources, influence, and institutional capacity. Meanwhile, L is represented with a smaller size, reflecting the relative limitations of the local actor. However, such asymmetry does not necessarily make L a passive actor. On the contrary, when positioned as the smaller actor, a strategic role that can be assumed by L is to promote and initiate engagement with the more dominant foreign partner, by submitting cooperation proposals, establishing informal communication channels, or aligning local agendas with the global interest of the partner. The Neutral Zone remains a shared space for interaction, although it is now more heavily shaped by the narrative, preferences, and leadership of the foreign actor. Thus, para-diplomacy continues to take place, despite conditions of asymmetry that require strategic adaptation from local actors.

This study has attempted to isolate the impact of successful SCR collaboration from other factors that may influence the macro perspective. However, further research is needed, and it is recommended to conduct micro perspective case study research that follows the SCR collaboration over time using questionnaires that can reveal directly the extent to which the program has impacted the community.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the Sister City Relationship (SCR) collaboration model and its impact on economic cooperation. Using an asymmetric approach, the research argues that partnerships between cities of different sizes, economic capacities, and development levels can lead to successful cooperation. The study identifies key factors such as population, Gross Domestic Bruto (GDP), and the Human Development Index (HDI) as determinants of economic compatibility in SCR partnerships. Empirical findings suggest that asymmetric models, such as Big-Small (BS) and Small-Big (BS) relationships, are the most effective for economic collaboration. Conversely, partnerships between cities with similar characteristics (symmetrical models) often fail to establish reciprocity, leading to stagnation. The study examines SCR collaborations in three Indonesia cities -Medan, Bandung, and Surabaya- highlighting their international partnerships and economic engagements. It finds that successful SCRs enhance local economies by attracting foreign investment, fostering trade, and creating business opportunities. Additionally, the research presents a theoretical framework that helps policymakers design effective SCR collaborations. The model emphasizes selecting compatible

partner cities, establishing favorable agreements, and investing in necessary resources to ensure long-term sustainability. It also underscores the importance of institutional support, funding allocation, and strategic marketing for regional economic growth. The study concludes that asymmetric SCR collaborations allow smaller cities to benefit from partnerships with larger economic centers. It recommends that Indonesian local governments prioritize asymmetric relationships, invest in human capital, and create multi-stakeholder collaboration networks to maximize the benefits of SCR partnerships. Future research should explore micro-level case studies to assess the direct impact of SCR programs on local communities.

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