

City of Bandung's Paradiplomacy in Efforts to Fulfill Society's Needs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: This study explores how the City of Bandung employed paradiplomacy, particularly through sister city cooperation with Suwon (South Korea) and Liuzhou (China), to respond to urgent healthcare shortages during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using qualitative documentary analysis of government archives, official communications, media coverage, and academic sources, the study shows how Bandung mobilized long-standing international networks to secure 30,000 donated masks, directly alleviating local scarcity at a critical moment. More than symbolic engagement, this cooperation demonstrated that institutionalized paradiplomacy can function as an operational mechanism for crisis response, complementing national strategies and strengthening multilevel governance. The findings highlight Bandung's proactive international outreach as a practical contribution with tangible health benefits, while also underscoring the broader theoretical relevance of paradiplomacy as part of global governance frameworks. Ultimately, the case illustrates the value of sister city diplomacy not only for emergency relief but also as a replicable model for enhancing resilience and adaptive local governance in wider development contexts.

Keywords: Paradiplomacy, Bandung, COVID-19, Society Needs, Sister City Cooperation.



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed urgent local needs in Bandung that national measures alone could not fully resolve. Bandung's economy, heavily reliant on tourism, trade, and transportation, was among the hardest hit, with its growth rate falling sharply from 6.79% in 2019 to -2.28% in 2020 ([Miftah et al., 2023](#)). This decline revealed the limits of centralized responses and highlighted the importance of subnational actors in crisis management. Bandung's longstanding sister city networks, once largely symbolic ([Bachtiar et al., 2024](#); [Isna Pauziah Parihah & Wahyu Nugroho, 2024](#); [Riadi, 2021](#)), became vital channels for assistance, supplying medical resources and social support. By analyzing this case, the study not only fills a gap in paradiplomacy research but also extends debates in international relations by showing how paradiplomacy can serve as a functional and adaptive strategy in times of global emergency ([Darmastuti et al., 2022](#)).

Such phenomena necessitated appropriate strategies for effective implementation. Hence, this research explores paradiplomacy as an alternative approach to crisis and pandemic management, with the City of Bandung as the case study due to its strategic role as the capital of West Java Province and a regional economic hub. This research is significant as it offers a framework of Bandung's paradiplomatic practices that align with national policies and involve both governmental actors. The central research question posed is: "How did paradiplomacy function as Bandung's strategy to fulfill society's needs during the COVID-19 pandemic?"

During the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023), the Bandung City Government implemented paradiplomacy as a strategic approach to crisis management. By fostering international relationships with partner cities such as Suwon and Liuzhou, Bandung successfully obtained tangible support in the form of medical masks as part of its virus mitigation efforts (kerjasama.bandung.go.id, 2020). This form of parallel diplomacy resulted in concrete outcomes, including the donation of 30,000 face masks by the City of Liuzhou ([Darmastuti et al., 2022](#)), and similar aid from Suwon (kerjasama.bandung.go.id, 2020), demonstrating the vital role of international municipal networks in supporting local public health needs.

During the pandemic, Bandung's residents required not only medical supplies such as oxygen, access to healthcare workers ([BBC, 2021](#)), and face masks ([W. Putra, 2020](#)), but also broader support to address fundamental societal needs. This research focuses on how Bandung's paradiplomacy addressed these society's needs during the pandemic. Due to considerations of data accessibility, the study narrows its scope to Bandung's paradiplomatic engagements specifically with the cities of Suwon (South Korea) and Liuzhou (China).

In the evolution of modern international relations, diplomatic actors have shifted from being solely state-centric to becoming more inclusive of non-state and subnational entities such as cities and provinces. This transformation has been driven by global developments following the 1961 Vienna Convention, which opened diplomatic participation to international organizations, NGOs, and local governments ([Cornago, 2000; McGlinchey, 2017; Seely, 2011](#)).

One manifestation of this development is micro-diplomacy, a concept introduced by Duchacek (1984), which later evolved into the broader term "paradiplomacy" by Soldatos in the 1980s to describe international activities by subnational governments ([Paquin, 2020](#)). Paradiplomacy can complement or even substitute for central diplomacy, depending on the nature of the central-subnational relationship ([Soldatos, 1990](#)). Brian Hocking criticized the notion of "parallel diplomacy," arguing that it may fuel separatist sentiments or conflict by emphasizing the distinction between central and subnational governments ([Paquin, 2020](#)). His rejection of terms like "multi-level diplomacy" or "micro-diplomacy" stems from concerns that such terms either obscure actor distinctions or limit local autonomy ([Paquin, 2020; Piper, 1994](#)).

In essence, meeting society's needs during the pandemic could not be achieved solely by the central or Bandung city governments. Regional and international actors had to collaborate to address these demands ([Hartati et al., 2021](#)). The emergence of panic buying in Bandung significantly affected market sentiment, causing price spikes due to product shortages and incentivizing vendors to maximize profits. This situation increased public demand for stable-priced goods and reliable information ([Aprilia, 2021](#)).

Given the emergence of new virus variants in recent years, such as the HMPV virus in China in 2024, the threat of future pandemics remains (Aji Muhawarman, ST, 2025; Karami et al., 2024; Salazar et al., 2022; Zhao, 2025). In such conditions, relying solely on the central or provincial governments presents challenges in fulfilling local needs. This study contributes to ongoing debates in International Relations by highlighting the growing agency of non-state actors, demonstrating how Bandung's paradiplomacy aligns with evolving disciplinary norms that emphasize decentralization and adaptive governance.

To support this inquiry, the study reviews prior literature categorized into two main typologies: (1) Basic Societal Needs During the Pandemic, and (2) Bandung's Paradiplomacy. The first typology indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic affected various dimensions of basic human needs based on Maslow's hierarchy. However, specific studies examining this in Bandung and its impact on regional development remain scarce (Achmad et al., 2021; Avancha, 2024; Bleser et al., 2022; Budiarto, 2021; El Korchi, 2020; Fauzi et al., 2022; Nikmah, 2023; Radissa et al., 2020; Supriatna, 2020; Sutarsih & Nurrohmi, 2022; Ventriglio et al., 2021).

The second typology discusses Bandung's diplomatic practices, which typically focus on sister city cooperation in creative economy, culture, environment, and Smart City development (Alam & Sudirman, 2020; Bustomi et al., 2022; Dede Rohman et al., 2024; Delanova et al., 2018; Dermawan et al., 2020; Kurniawati et al., 2022; Primawanti et al., 2023; Puspitarini et al., 2021; R. M. Putra et al., 2022; Utomo, 2022). However, these studies have not explored paradiplomacy as an adaptive and functional strategy in times of crisis, and this research contributes by both filling that gap and extending international relations and development studies paradigms, demonstrating that subnational diplomacy can operate as a proactive, crisis-responsive mechanism rather than merely a supplementary or symbolic practice. Therefore, this research addresses that gap by integrating both typologies in a case study of Bandung, offering one of the first empirical analyses of paradiplomacy during a global health emergency in Indonesia and showing how such practices can serve as an effective instrument for meeting society's needs in times of crisis.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with documentary analysis as the primary method, which is appropriate for examining paradiplomacy during crises (Lamont, 2015). The focus was on Bandung's international cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023), particularly in relation to society's needs and crisis response.

Data were collected from multiple sources, including government archives, municipal reports, international organization publications, peer-reviewed academic literature, and reputable media outlets. Inclusion criteria required that documents explicitly addressed Bandung's international cooperation or paradiplomatic activities and were produced by authoritative or verifiable sources. Materials were identified through government portals, official municipal communication channels, and academic databases.

Documents were then sorted by thematic relevance to public health, social welfare, and international cooperation. Thematic coding was applied to extract recurring patterns, with coding

conducted independently by multiple researchers and compared to ensure consistency. To strengthen validity and reliability, triangulation was used by cross-checking data across government, academic, and media sources. Peer debriefing was also undertaken by sharing preliminary findings with academic colleagues, while reflexive notes were maintained to track assumptions and decision-making throughout the analysis.

Potential bias was minimized by employing independent coding, systematically documenting coding decisions, and incorporating diverse document types to avoid overreliance on official narratives. Nonetheless, the study has limitations: reliance on secondary documents means that findings may reflect selective reporting or political framing, and the case-specific focus on Bandung restricts generalizability. Acknowledging these constraints enhances transparency and supports the credibility of the study's contribution.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Healthcare Pressures as Bandung's Urgent Societal Needs

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to the fulfillment of public medical needs, particularly in densely populated urban areas such as the City of Bandung ([Setiawan et al., 2025](#); [Vasquez et al., 2025](#)). Three key aspects that reflect the pressure on the healthcare sector include the availability of face masks, access to medical oxygen, and accessibility to healthcare services and personnel. These three indicators are critical in assessing the readiness and responsiveness of local health systems during a global crisis ([Ippolito et al., 2020](#); [Mehrotra et al., 2020](#); [Rebmann et al., 2021](#)).

At the onset of the pandemic, Bandung faced a severe mask shortage as demand spiked dramatically. Prices for medical masks jumped from IDR 25,000 to IDR 375,000 per box, while 3M disposable masks rose more than tenfold, and stocks quickly vanished due to panic buying ([Andriyawan, 2020](#); [CNBC Indonesia, 2022](#); [W. Putra, 2020](#)). The municipal Department of Trade admitted it could not stabilize supply, forcing rationing measures and prompting law enforcement to act against hoarding ([Sugiharti, 2020](#); [Zulhairil, 2020](#)). Although availability improved by April 2020, the early crisis revealed the fragility of Bandung's essential supply chains ([Saubani, 2020](#)).

This vulnerability made clear that local authorities could not rely solely on domestic distribution channels in times of global disruption. The mask crisis became a turning point, pushing Bandung to mobilize paradiplomacy through its sister city partnerships. By engaging Suwon and Liuzhou, the city accessed alternative flows of protective equipment, bypassing national bottlenecks and proving that local governments can act as meaningful international actors in emergencies. Thus, what began as a shortage of basic medical supplies became the catalyst for Bandung to operationalize paradiplomacy not as a symbolic extension of foreign relations, but as a practical strategy to protect its citizens. This case demonstrates that paradiplomacy can transform systemic fragility into an opportunity for innovation in crisis governance, complementing national responses while enhancing local resilience.

Second, the medical oxygen supply crisis emerged prominently in mid-2021, during a surge in COVID-19 cases that strained hospital capacity in Bandung. Oxygen demand tripled from the

normal daily requirement of around 200 to 1,100 cylinders ([AyoBandung, 2021](#)). Referral hospitals such as Hasan Sadikin Hospital (RSHS) faced difficulties securing stable oxygen supplies, with many patients waiting for respiratory support ([BandungBergerak, 2021](#)). Both local and national oxygen production, initially prioritized for industrial use, had to be redirected to the healthcare sector, yet still fell short of demand. To help fix the situation, the city government worked with oxygen suppliers like Aneka Gas. By 2022, it said that 13 hospitals in Bandung had their oxygen tanks ([jabarprov.go.id, 2022](#)). Nevertheless, the initial crisis phase revealed significant weaknesses in emergency medical logistics reserves.

Third, accessibility to healthcare workers was another critical concern. During the second wave of the pandemic, hundreds of medical personnel in Bandung were reported to have contracted COVID-19. At least 319 confirmed infections among health workers were recorded within a short period, directly disrupting hospital operations and primary care centers ([Budianto, 2021](#)). Although the city government maintained that service capacity remained adequate ([Bachri, 2021](#); [Sutrisno, 2021](#)), warnings about a potential collapse of healthcare facilities were raised. Hasan Sadikin Hospital, as one of the region's leading referral centers, had to prepare contingency plans, including personnel increases, additional isolation facilities, and surveillance laboratories ([Prudensi, 2025](#)). This situation underscores the critical importance of safeguarding healthcare workers, who serve as the frontline defense in public health crises.

Overall, Bandung's experience during the pandemic illustrates that the resilience of a local medical system is highly dependent on the availability of protective equipment, the stability of essential medical supply chains such as oxygen, and the capacity and continuity of healthcare personnel. These three elements must be prioritized in the design of long-term public health policies and disaster preparedness systems.

Paradiplomacy and Sister City Networks in Pandemic Response

Subnational actors on the global stage implement paradiplomacy through various schemes, with the dominant model, accounting for 39.2%, being the strengthening of relationships via sister city cooperation ([Kurniawati et al., 2022](#)). The implementation of paradiplomacy often focuses on addressing a range of public needs, particularly in the health sector. This includes the provision of medical equipment (7%), access to medical experts (1%), treatment support (1%), and most significantly, the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE), which accounts for 38% of such efforts ([Kurniawati et al., 2022](#)).

The City of Bandung employed paradiplomacy, particularly its sister city ties, as a strategic channel for urgent PPE during the early pandemic. Through this collaboration, the city secured a donation of 20,000 KF94/KF80 masks, valued at approximately IDR 296,712,000, from Suwon, and an additional 10,000 non-medical masks from PT SGMW Motor Indonesia, headquartered in Liuzhou, another of Bandung's sister cities ([Kurniawan, 2020](#); [Nugraha, 2020](#)). These donations reflected concrete outcomes of paradiplomatic engagement, demonstrating that Bandung's sister city cooperation was more than ceremonial and could be activated to address pressing local needs in real time.

However, the actual impact of this aid must be critically assessed. According to WHO, in contexts of community transmission, health workers are expected to wear a medical mask continuously throughout their shift, meaning baseline consumption is at least one mask per day ([World Health Organization, 2020](#)). This supply was far from sufficient, covering less than 2% of Bandung's population for even a single day. Moreover, the assistance targeted only one aspect of Bandung's needs. The city also faced a severe oxygen crisis in mid-2021 and significant strain on healthcare workers as hundreds contracted COVID-19, both of which disrupted service delivery despite later stabilization measures ([AyoBandung, 2021](#); [BandungBergerak, 2021](#); [Budianto, 2021](#); [jabarprov.go.id, 2022](#)).

In this light, paradiplomatic aid was impactful when targeted and timely, yet limited in scope. It functioned less as a comprehensive solution than as a bridging mechanism, helping Bandung navigate immediate bottlenecks while underscoring the necessity of broader, multi-level coordination. This demonstrates that paradiplomacy, when effectively mobilized, can complement national responses and enhance local resilience, but it cannot substitute for systemic capacity in the face of global disruptions.

Bandung's sister-city cooperation operates through formal diplomatic procedures: Suwon's intent was conveyed via the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Seoul (KBRI) and forwarded to the Directorate General of Foreign Economic Relations (HELN) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; cooperation was then institutionalized through a Letter of Intent and a cross-sector MoU, consistent with Minister of Home Affairs Regulation No. 25/2020 on foreign cooperation by regional governments. This pathway underscores administrative legitimacy, legal clarity, and predefined cooperation scopes that can be rapidly activated in emergencies.

Other cities employed distinctly operational set-ups. In San Antonio–Kaohsiung, the city's International Relations office coordinated directly with the Taipei Economic & Cultural Office (consular channel), received donations at City Hall, then centralized storage at the Alamodome, while partnering with the Alamo Asian American Chamber to mobilize supplies, showing a consulate-plus-city-office model with predefined storage and community liaison roles ([Garza, 2020](#)). Montgomery County–Xi'an, the Department of General Services acted as the intake hub, warehousing and cataloguing PPE before distribution, with facilitation by the Office of Community Partnerships, Montgomery Sister Cities, Inc., and civic groups, illustrating a logistics-first model that embeds inventory control and distribution governance inside county operations ([Montgomery County, 2020](#)). Taken together, Bandung's legally codified pathway and these ops-driven models yield practical guidance: designate a lead municipal unit and consular/customs channel in advance; pre-assign intake, storage, and catalogue steps; formalize the role of sister-city committees and community partners; and align every step with national regulations to minimize approvals and speed deployment.

Table 1. Comparison of City-to-City Paradiplomacy Strategies During COVID-19

Case	Lead Unit	Channel Used	Strenght	Limitation
Bandung–Suwon (law-first model)	Mayor's Office & International Cooperation Unit	Embassy of Indonesia (KBRI) → Ministry of Foreign Affairs → LoI & MoU	Strong legality, aligned with national rules, ensures legitimacy	Can be slower, depends on inter-government approvals
San Antonio–Kaohsiung (ops-first, consulate model)	City International Relations Office	Taipei Economic & Cultural Office (TECO)	Fast intake, predefined processes, strong city–community link	Relies on donor and consulate, weaker legal grounding
Montgomery County–Xi'an (ops-first, logistics model)	Department of General Services	Sister city liaison & county offices	Good inventory control, traceability, and clear logistics	Slower process, requires strong logistics capacity

Source: Researcher, 2025

The Bandung–Suwon partnership was not an ad-hoc initiative but the product of a long institutional process. Beginning with Suwon's diplomatic overture in the 1990s and formalized through a Letter of Intent (1996) and a Memorandum of Understanding (1997), the cooperation was embedded in Indonesia's regulatory framework for subnational foreign relations. Rather than restating procedures, it is sufficient to note that these agreements created a legally secure and multi-sectoral platform that Bandung could later activate in times of crisis. This institutional foundation explains why Bandung's paradiplomatic actions during COVID-19 were not improvised but built upon decades of established governance.

Viewed through a comparative lens, Bandung's model demonstrates how long-term sister-city arrangements can be repurposed in emergencies to provide both legitimacy and practical channels for aid. Unlike purely symbolic twinning programs, Bandung's cooperation with Suwon illustrates the value of codified agreements, administrative alignment, and continuity of engagement. As [Kurniawati et al. \(2022\)](#) note, many subnational actors globally adopted similar approaches during COVID-19, but Bandung's case highlights how early investments in formal agreements can strengthen institutional capacity, foster innovation in service delivery, and expand international networks. The key lesson for other cities is that paradiplomacy, when legally anchored and continuously nurtured, offers not only routine exchanges but also resilience mechanisms during global crises.

Therefore, Bandung's international partnerships through the sister city scheme illustrate how paradiplomatic initiatives can function as strategic instruments for local governments. Rather than proving a universal model, the Bandung case shows that institutionalized cooperation can be mobilized to complement national efforts when bureaucratic mechanisms prove slow or insufficient. Such initiatives allow cities to extend their diplomatic roles within a multilevel governance framework, contributing to inclusive development and society welfare. Consequently, the sister city model holds strong potential as a practical solution for addressing urgent local needs

during times of crisis, while its effectiveness ultimately depends on context, available resources, and the maturity of international partnerships.

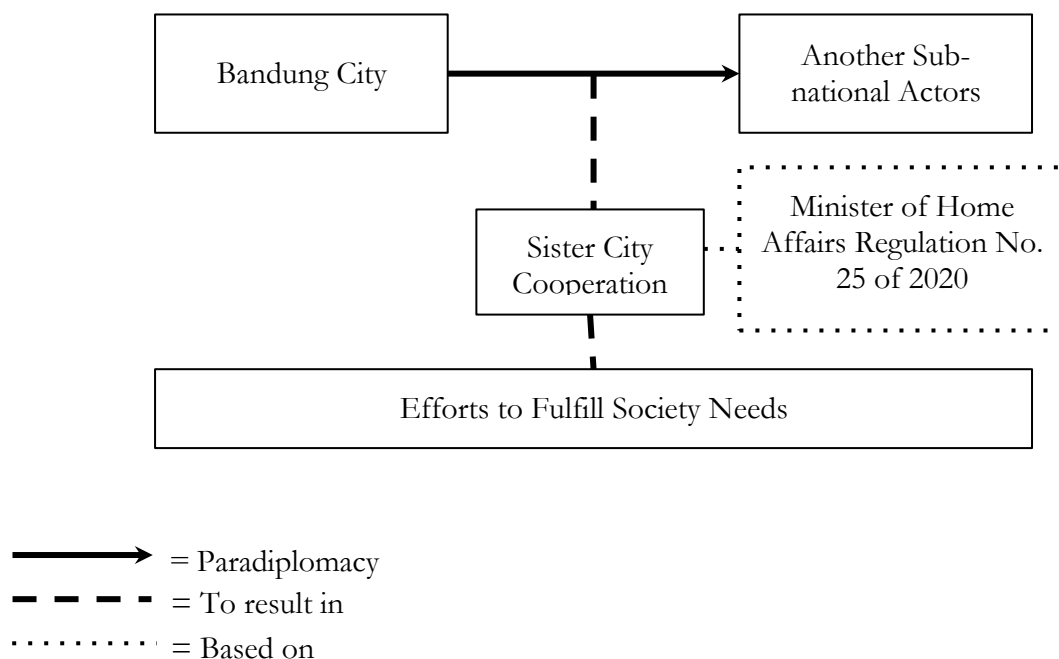


Figure 1. Paradiplomacy as a Strategic Tool: The Case of Bandung City

Source: Researcher (2025)

Local–Central Policy Alignment During the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bandung City Government, the Government of West Java Province, and the Central Government of Indonesia demonstrated policy alignment in addressing both local needs and national interests. National interests were reflected in the fulfillment of protective equipment such as masks, oxygen availability, and access to medical personnel, highlighting the importance of equitable health services as part of a national security strategy (Soebakgijo et al., 2022). These national priorities paralleled the needs of Bandung City and West Java Province, as discussed previously in Healthcare Pressures as Bandung's Urgent Societal Needs.

In terms of policy, both the City of Bandung and the West Java Provincial Government revised their respective Regional Medium-Term Development Plans (RPJMDs) in response to the evolving pandemic situation. These adjustments were made with reference to the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2020–2024, as stipulated in Presidential Regulation No. 18 of 2020 (Peraturan Presiden (PERPRES) Nomor 18 Tahun 2020, 2020), which served as the overarching national development guideline. This demonstrates that while regional governments possess autonomy, their policy directions are developed within a framework that aligns with national priorities and strategies.

Furthermore, parallelism between national priorities and regional needs (West Java and Bandung) was also evident in budgeting policies. Through Law No. 2 of 2020 (Undang-Undang Nomor 2

[Tahun 2020, 2020](#)), the Central Government mandated that national spending should prioritize the health sector, social protection, and economic recovery. Both the Bandung City Government and the West Java Provincial Government followed this directive by reallocating and refocusing their local budgets (APBD) to support these three priority sectors. This approach reflects a coordinated fiscal alignment between the central and regional governments, where national policy served not only as a normative guide but was also translated into concrete budgetary and technical strategies at the local level ([Perubahan Atas Peraturan Daerah Nomor 3 Tahun 2019 Tentang Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Daerah Tahun 2018-2023, 2021](#); [Perubahan Keempat Atas Peraturan Gubernur Jawa Barat Nomor 79 Tahun 2019 Tentang Penjabaran Anggaran Pendapatan Dan Belanja Daerah Tahun Anggaran 2020, 2020](#)).

In implementation, this parallelism was also evident in the rollout of pandemic response programs such as social assistance distribution, vaccination campaigns, and support for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). These programs were generally designed by the central government through technical ministries and related agencies, coordinated by provincial governments, and executed directly by municipal governments, including the Bandung City Government. For example, in the national COVID-19 vaccination program, Bandung was responsible for field implementation, West Java Province facilitated coordination and reporting, and the central government supplied the vaccines and issued technical guidelines ([Petunjuk Teknis Pelaksanaan Vaksinasi Dalam Rangka Penanggulangan Pandemi Corona Virus Disease 2019 \(Covid-19\), 2021](#)).

A similar workflow was applied to the Cash Social Assistance (BST) program, where the central government, through the Ministry of Social Affairs, managed the Integrated Social Welfare Data (DTKS) and distributed funds via state-owned banks (Himbara). However, data verification, physical distribution, and supervision were the responsibilities of municipal or district-level social service agencies. This mechanism highlights an integrated coordination structure across government levels, embodying the principle of parallelism in effective social policy implementation during the pandemic.

Overall, the coordination structure during the pandemic revealed substantial parallelism between national interests and regional needs. The Bandung City Government was able to craft local policies in alignment with national strategies, supported by central directives and provincial facilitation. Even Bandung's paradiplomatic engagements gained administrative legitimacy as they aligned with national agendas, reflecting a real-world application of multilevel governance principles. This alignment served as a critical foundation for effective and coordinated policy responses during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Bandung's pandemic experience demonstrates that sister-city cooperation can deliver concrete, time-sensitive relief and reinforce national efforts within a multilevel governance framework. This shows that paradiplomacy is not merely symbolic or ceremonial, but an emergent governance instrument that translates pre-institutionalized relationships into operational capacity under pressure. The city's ability to secure PPE supplies highlighted both the value and the limitations

of such engagements, as broader needs in oxygen logistics, workforce continuity, and healthcare access remained unmet. Theoretically, these findings position paradiplomacy as a mechanism of global solidarity that strengthens local resilience while extending debates on subnational roles in international relations.

For policy and practice, Bandung and comparable municipalities should broaden their paradiplomatic agendas beyond emergency health interventions toward strategic sectors such as education continuity, digital infrastructure, and urban logistics. Operationalization could include pre-positioning contingency mechanisms (e.g., joint development funds, standardized intake/distribution SOPs, and regularly updated MoUs aligned with national regulations). Equally important is the institutionalization of local coalitions by integrating hospitals, universities, MSMEs, and civic groups into formal paradiplomatic frameworks. Evaluation should be embedded through routine dashboards that connect incoming international assistance to measurable outcomes.

Future research should build on this foundation by pairing procurement and shipment data with hospital utilization, vaccination coverage, and budget records to assess paradiplomacy's marginal effects. Scholars could also examine the bridging roles of consulates, diaspora networks, chambers of commerce, and state-owned enterprises in sustaining paradiplomatic ties. Finally, comparative studies across bilateral sister-city partnerships and multilateral city networks are needed to determine which architectures yield the greatest effectiveness across different phases of crisis response.

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