Cape Peninsula
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AN ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES USED BY A SOUTH AFRICAN MUNICIPALITY TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN RELATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL SISTER CITIES

by

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DECLARATION

I, **Clayton Basil Barnes**, declare that the contents of this thesis represent my unaided work, and that the thesis has not previously been submitted for academic examination towards any qualification. Furthermore, it expresses my own opinions and not necessarily those of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

30 September 2020

Signed **Date**

ABSTRACT

Cities are forging powerful international alliances to improve security and prosperity. According to the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG, 2013), approximately 70% of the world's cities are engaged in some form of international cooperation. This is a global phenomenon described as paradiplomacy (Bontenbal, 2009). The same trend has been seen in South African municipalities. Since 1994, metropolitan municipalities here have increasingly been engaged in paradiplomatic activities, and have collectively entered into more than 130 international sister city agreements (De Villiers, 2009). The cooperative relationships, managed by municipal International Relations (IR) practitioners, are initiated primarily to harness the opportunities of globalisation and economic inter-dependence, and in the interest of socio-economic development (Nganje, 2013). The role of municipal IR practitioners has, therefore, become increasingly important as they have the potential to enhance the global profile and frame the international image of cities through relationship building and information sharing (Fishbone, 2015).

It is within this context that this study offers an analysis of communication strategies, used by IR practitioners in a select South African municipality, to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities. The purpose is to contribute towards the advancement of scholarly debate in municipal international relations by examining stakeholder engagement and relationship management in IR practice from a Public Relations (PR) perspective. The study is likely to assist South African municipal managers, and mayors understand the contribution of IR practices, specifically how the application of PR principles can enhance organisational competitiveness and strengthen strategic international relationships. The theoretical frame of the study was derived from the Public Relations Excellence Theory and the two-way symmetrical communication model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The research methodology of the study was qualitative. A single case study design was used to gather data, using a combination of document analysis, in-depth interviews and content analysis.

The findings of the study show that strategic communication is fundamental to paradiplomatic activity in South Africa, and establishes that municipal IR professionals use a combination of both one way and two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities. Yet, it remains unclear whether this form of engagement is strategic or as a result of PR theory. IR practitioners' use of communication to cultivate more beneficial relationships can therefore be enhanced, if the strategic PR function is integrated in the department and knowledge of excellent PR principles is entrenched.

Furthermore, this study narrows the gap within professional practice of PR and IR and demonstrate convergence of aspects of the two disciplines, supporting research by Fitzpatrick et al. (2013).

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents for their unfailing love, care and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

GLOSSARY

Communication strategy	Communication strategy is defined as the “purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission”. The purposeful use makes it “strategic” (Steyn, 2002).
MIRs	Municipal International Relations
OIAs	Offices for International Affairs
Paradiplomacy	Paradiplomacy is defined as sub-state governments’ involvement in international relationships, through the establishment of formal and informal contacts, to promote socio-economic, cultural or political issues, as well as any other foreign dimension of their constitutional competences (Cornago, 2010).
Sister city relationships	Sister city relationships are signed agreements between municipal authorities. The broad definition describes sister city relationships as cooperative arrangements between cities and towns promoting economic and cultural ties (Stephen, 2008).
The ‘executive’ or ‘the municipal executive’	The Executive Mayor, Executive Deputy Mayor and Members of the Mayoral Committee are referred to as ‘the executive’ or ‘the municipal executive’.

ACRONYMS

AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
IDP	Integrated Development Plan
IR	International Relations
MIRPF	Municipal International Relations Policy Framework
PD	Public Diplomacy
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
WPLG	White Paper on Local Government

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Background to the study

Globally, cities are emerging as influential actors on the world stage. International cooperation agreements and network building have become integral to municipalities' development strategies as they aim to strengthen strategic trade and economic ties abroad (Kuznetsov, 2014; Cornago, 2010; Van Rooyen, 2008). According to United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the international umbrella body for subnational governments, approximately 70% of the world's cities engage in some form of international cooperation (UCLG, 2013), a global phenomenon described as paradiplomacy (Bontenbal, 2009). Examples of such international collaborations include the Dunedin-Shanghai sister city relationship (Maniam, 2011), and the São Paulo-Toronto twin city agreement (Stren & Friendly, 2019).

The same trend has been seen in South African municipalities. Since 1994, metropolitan municipalities in South Africa have increasingly been engaged in paradiplomatic activities, and have collectively entered into more than 130 international sister city agreements (De Villiers, 2009). These cooperative relationships, primarily managed by municipal international relations (IR) practitioners, are predominantly initiated to harness the opportunities of globalisation and economic interdependence, and in the interest of socio-economic development (Nganje, 2013).

Subnational diplomacy is regarded as the new public administration and governance paradigm, enabling mayors and city governments to carve out their niche in the global economy and attract business, talent and opportunities. Scholars consider relationship building through two-way symmetrical communication to be fundamental to IR practice (Saleh, 2017 & Nye, 2008). The main character of the two-way balanced communication model has challenged organisations to conduct direct dialogue with stakeholders, not only to persuade, but also to listen, learn and, most importantly, to adapt the behaviour of the organisation as a result of the communication process.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The role of IR practitioners in municipalities has become increasingly important in determining a city's international relations priorities and objectives, and in delineating the powers, roles, functions and procedures of the relevant city authorities. IR practitioners in local government thus have the potential to be powerful tools to enhance the global profile and frame the international image of cities through relationship building and information sharing (Fishbone, 2015).

The theoretical and practical connections between public relations (PR) and public diplomacy (PD), or the process by which governments communicate and build international relationships, have attracted increased attention from scholars in both fields, following the attacks on the United States (US) on September 11, 2001. Several studies, particularly in the West, have since 9/11 linked PR with PD to find similarities and differences between the two fields and to identify their role in relationship building (see Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). While differences remain, there is consensus from scholars and practitioners in both fields that communication and relationship building lie at the heart of international relations. The application of PR principles in diplomacy is under-researched in South Africa, especially in globalised contexts. There is also a lack of research explaining whether subnational governments have embraced PR principles to enhance international relations.

There is also increasing realisation in scholarship that relationship management through two-way symmetrical communication is at the heart of IR practice (Kenny, 2016; Hayes, 2016). What remains unclear and under-theorised is the extent to which IR practitioners in South African municipalities have embraced PR practices where relationships with global sister cities are built and maintained through two-way symmetrical communication. Failure to employ these practices could result in cities not deriving maximum benefit by way of attracting investment, talent and opportunities and could expose the organisation to reputational risk.

1.3 The objective of the study

The study seeks to analyse the communication strategies used by IR practitioners in a selected South African municipality to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities.

1.4 Research questions

Main research question: What communication strategies are used by IR practitioners in a select South African municipality to build and maintain relations with international sister cities?

Sub-questions:

- What are the key roles and competencies of IR practitioners in a South African municipality?
- What information do municipal IR professionals communicate, and with whom, to cultivate and sustain relations with international sister cities?

1.5 Significance of the study

This study seeks to contribute towards the advancement of scholarly debate in municipal international relations by examining stakeholder engagement and relationship management in IR practice from a PR perspective. The study is likely to assist South African municipal managers and mayors understand the contribution of IR practices, specifically how the application of PR principles can enhance organisational competitiveness and strengthen strategic international relationships.

Furthermore, the study is a response to suggestions by academics that researchers produce contemporary case studies, enlighten scholarship, and narrow the gap between theory and professional practice within the disciplines of public relations and diplomacy. Scholars have identified a need for empirical studies that deepen our understanding of how diplomatic actors build and sustain relationships with foreign publics, and the potential role and value of PR concepts and practices in such processes. The study seeks to explore this process within a South African local government context.

1.6 Chapter outline

This study will be categorised into six chapters.

Chapter One: Introduction and background to the study

This chapter provides an introduction and background to the study. It outlines the research problem, objectives and questions and the significance of the study.

Chapter Two: A literature review

This chapter discusses relevant literature on Public Relations and paradiplomacy; public diplomacy; the conceptual and practical connections between public relations and public diplomacy; as well as the importance of stakeholder relations management and how it relates to diplomacy.

Chapter Three: Conceptual framework

The chapter will present and discuss the conceptual framework of the study. The study's theoretical framework is built on Grunig's Excellence Theory and the two-way symmetrical communication model (Grunig et al., 2006).

Chapter Four: Research methodology and methods

This chapter outlines the research methodology and the research methods used in the study. It justifies the choice of the case study design and the qualitative research methodology. The chapter will also present and discuss data collection instruments, data analysis and ethical considerations.

Chapter Five: Presentation and discussion of research findings

This chapter presents, analyses and discusses the research findings.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter provides a conclusion to the study. It evaluates the major findings of the study and makes recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The relational and communicative aspects of diplomacy have gained currency among scholars in recent decades, resulting in several studies focusing on the conceptual and practical convergence of the two disciplines within the context of the nation-state (Hayes, 2016; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013; Nye, 2008; L'Etang, 2009; and Cowan, 2008). There is a shortage of literature, however, examining the phenomenon at the sub-state level, more specifically within the field of municipal international relations, a gap that this study seeks to explore. This research aims to analyse the communication strategies used by International Relations (IR) practitioners in a selected South African municipality to build and maintain relations with international sister cities. This section illustrates what is currently known on this topic and the broader intellectual trends in Municipal International Relations (MIRs). The chapter discusses the literature on the current state of IR at the sub-state level. It explores the concepts of paradiplomacy and sister city relationships, the Excellence Study, stakeholder relationship management, and the convergence of Public Relations (PR) and IR.

2.2 International Relations within the municipal context

The field of municipal international relations has expanded rapidly in recent years. Driven by a range of factors, most notably globalisation and the role of the city in a regional metropolitan economy, cities are increasingly being acknowledged as internationally important actors and centres of political and economic power (Curtis, 2014). Large metropolitan areas across the globe have developed extensive relations and increasingly collaborate in large international city-to-city organisations that serve to solve challenges and share best practices (Amorim & Martinot-Lagarde, 2013). IR theory that dominated twentieth-century scholarship has always spoken of nation-states as the sole actors in the international arena (Morgenthau 1949; Waltz 1979). More recent research has begun to consider a variety of non-state actors in IR, ranging from sub-national governments (municipalities and provinces) and non-governmental organisations to transnational corporations (Josselin & Wallace 2001). It is mainly due to governments around the globe moving towards greater decentralisation to local authorities. This shift is attributed to increased democratisation and stronger market orientation (Bennett, 1992).

In South Africa, the doors for participation by municipalities in international activities opened following the 1994 democratic elections. While local government has relative autonomy to engage in international relations, it must do so in cooperation with national governing bodies such as the Department of International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO), where official foreign policy promulgation and implementation are vested. The autonomy of the local government is interwoven with the national and provincial spheres. It is also supported by national policies that encourage MIRs such as the Republic of South Africa (RSA) White Paper on Local Government (WPLG) of 1998 (RSA, 1998) and the Republic of South Africa (RSA) Municipal International Relations Policy Framework (MIRPF) of 1999 (RSA, 1999).

The WPLG of 1998 (RSA, 1998) furthers inter-municipal cooperation such as learning exchanges, engagement with municipalities in other countries, domestic and international public-private partnerships, and partnerships with community-based and non-governmental organisations. The MIRPF of 1999 (RSA, 1999), on the other hand, defines MIRs as a link between two or more communities from different nation-states, in which at least one of the key actors is a municipality, and promotes partnerships between South African municipalities and municipalities abroad in ways which will ensure maximum learning, synergy and the promotion of the country’s national interests, including investment promotion.

Ruffin (2013) supports the views expressed in South Africa’s MIRPF (RSA, 1999) and argues that cross-country interurban cooperation, rather than interurban competition, is primarily the governance focus of municipalities within the African context. Ruffin stresses that the urban landscape may not simply be a geo-political, socio-economic locale for capitalist accumulation. Instead, metropolitan municipalities may be de-centralised places of coordination and collaboration for international relations in which municipalities demonstrate public values that direct global cooperation toward local developmental goods and services.

The MIRPF of 1999 (RSA, 1999) cautions that while MIRs can generate considerable benefits for municipalities and the communities they serve, they are not without challenges. Challenges noted include initiatives with little impact and sustainability and individual municipalities that do not have the infrastructure or contacts to find appropriate international partner municipalities. Other problems include international exchanges that distract local governments from their real priorities, as well as a range of different associations and initiatives that can result in confusion, duplication and waste.

Buxbaum (2014), on the other hand, argues that city-to-city cooperation agreements should be greeted with a degree of scepticism in terms of the disparity between the agreement’s objectives, and the practical experience of implementation. Buxbaum’s study reveals that city-to-city cooperation partnerships demand a great deal of investment: time, staff, budget and effort to maintain, and even that may not lead to a tangible outcome. Johannesburg’s city-to-city experience shows that a municipality can distinguish itself as an actor with global reach and power. However, without clear project-based goals, Buxbaum notes that partnerships can often remain in indefinite limbo.

In a study on the growing role of cities involved in international relations, Gongadze (2019) affirms the importance of cities as actors on the world stage. Gongadze investigated city engagement in international issues by studying four case studies of organised transnational networks of cities, namely: C40 Cities, the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, Solidarity Cities, and United Cities and Local Governments, and found that predominant tools and strategies used by city actors to achieve IR-related objectives are mimicking international diplomatic practices. In assessing the substance of city actions, Gongadze argues that these actions are substantial within the limited possibilities of the contemporary global governance paradigm.

Lefevre and d'Albergo (2007) list the activities and actions of an international dimension carried out by cities as:

- initiatives aimed at fostering and improving a city's competitiveness in the global marketplace;
- bilateral intercity partnerships, such as sister cities and twinning schemes, developed initially as part of post-war reconciliation efforts, but which subsequently took on a new functional and symbolic meaning;
- promoting or taking part in multilateral partnerships, such as international networks and/or associations of cities;
- lobbying at international or supranational levels of political decision-making through individual activity, short-term joint action, or by more institutionalised cross-border collaboration by coalitions of cities;
- showing solidarity with the Global South and through other activities aimed at supporting transnational policies for sustainable development, human rights, and the fight against poverty; and
- activity involving diplomacy from below, aimed at the promotion of peace and the prevention of war.

2.3 Paradiplomacy and sister city relationships defined

Over the last decade, cities have gained increasing prominence on the world stage. There has been an explosion of international activity on the part of towns and regions. With hundreds of formalised city networks, regular appearances at (and increasingly active roles in) major multilateral frameworks, the foreign relations of cities can no longer go unnoticed (Curtis, 2014; Acuto, 2016). The section below discusses the concepts of paradiplomacy and sister city relationships.

2.3.1 Paradiplomacy

Ivo Duchacek and Panayotis Soldatos first defined the term paradiplomacy in 1990 as direct international activity by sub-national actors (federated units, regions, urban communities, cities) supporting, complementing, correcting, duplicating or challenging the nation-states' diplomacy (Duchacek, 1990; Soldatos, 1990). The definition was refined nearly a decade later by Noe Cornago, who included a security aspect. Cornago (2010) defined paradiplomacy as sub-state governments' involvement in international relationships, through the establishment of formal and informal contacts, either permanent or ad hoc, with foreign public or private entities, to promote socio-economic, cultural or political issues, as well as any other foreign dimension of their constitutional competences. Later, Alexander Kuznetsov describes paradiplomacy as a form of political communication for reaching economic, cultural and political or any other types of benefits, the core of which consists of self-sustained actions of regional governments with foreign governmental and non-governmental actors (Kuznetsov, 2014).

Van der Pluijm and Melissen's (2007) definition of paradiplomacy, on the other hand, takes on the title of city diplomacy, defined as the processes by which cities, or local governments in general, engage in relations with actors on an international political stage to represent themselves and their interests to one another. The authors argue that cities seem to participate in almost every step of international politics; either marginally or considerably, either formally or informally, and in so doing change and will continue to change current diplomatic processes.

According to Tavares (2016), subnational governments in the developing world – Asia, Latin America and Africa – are increasingly engaged in paradiplomacy, changing traditional notions of sovereignty, diplomacy and foreign policy. Tavares (2016) notes that while paradiplomacy is still young in Africa, as a whole, only in South Africa does it deserve a public eye. Since the field of paradiplomacy in Africa is still new, focusing on a select South African municipality, as this study does, will add to the wealth of knowledge and provide invaluable insights into the nature of paradiplomacy in South Africa from a PR perspective. The originality of this study stems from the fact that no research has been conducted in Africa on paradiplomacy from a PR perspective.

2.3.2 Sister city relationships

International sister city relationships are signed agreements between municipal authorities. The broad definition describes sister city relationships as cooperative arrangements between cities and towns promoting economic and cultural ties (Stephen, 2008). Such forms of twinning occur primarily between cities sharing similar social, economic and political patterns and structures, or historical links. These types of relationships date back to after World War II when several local governments initiated municipal reforms to encourage citizen-to-citizen diplomacy and contribute to conflict prevention (Saunier, 2001). For example, in 1948, following a meeting of French and German mayors, efforts were made to form peaceful twinning relationships between French and German towns on either side of the Rhine (Lucke & Bellochi, 1997). According to Brown (1998), several British cities also formed twinning relationships with German and other European cities after World War II. The sister cities concept gained additional momentum when, in 1956, then US President Dwight D. Eisenhower created an international people-to-people programme as a form of civilian diplomacy (Cremer et al., 2001). In South Africa, cities engage in paradiplomacy by entering into global sister city relationships (De Villiers, 2005). A sister city relationship is formally created when the mayors or highest elected or appointed officials from two communities sign a memorandum of understanding establishing the partnership (Sister Cities International, 2002). The phenomenon of inter-governmental cooperation can be based on friendship, or on cultural, human resource, educational and/or commercial exchanges (Franco & Marmelo, 2014).

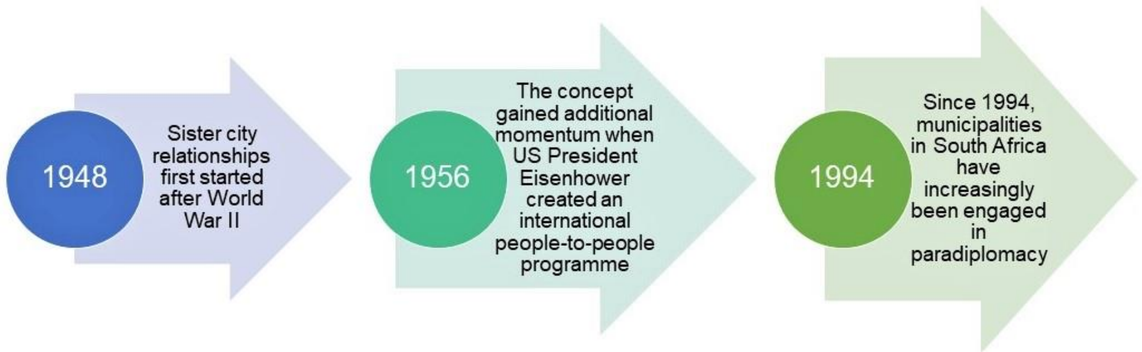

Figure 2.1: A timeline illustrating the history of sister city associations to this study
Source: Cremer et al. (2001); Lucke & Bellochi (1997); Nganje (2013); Saunier (2001)

Clarke (2011) describes transnational municipal relationships as a device, a repertoire and a model having the following key characteristics:

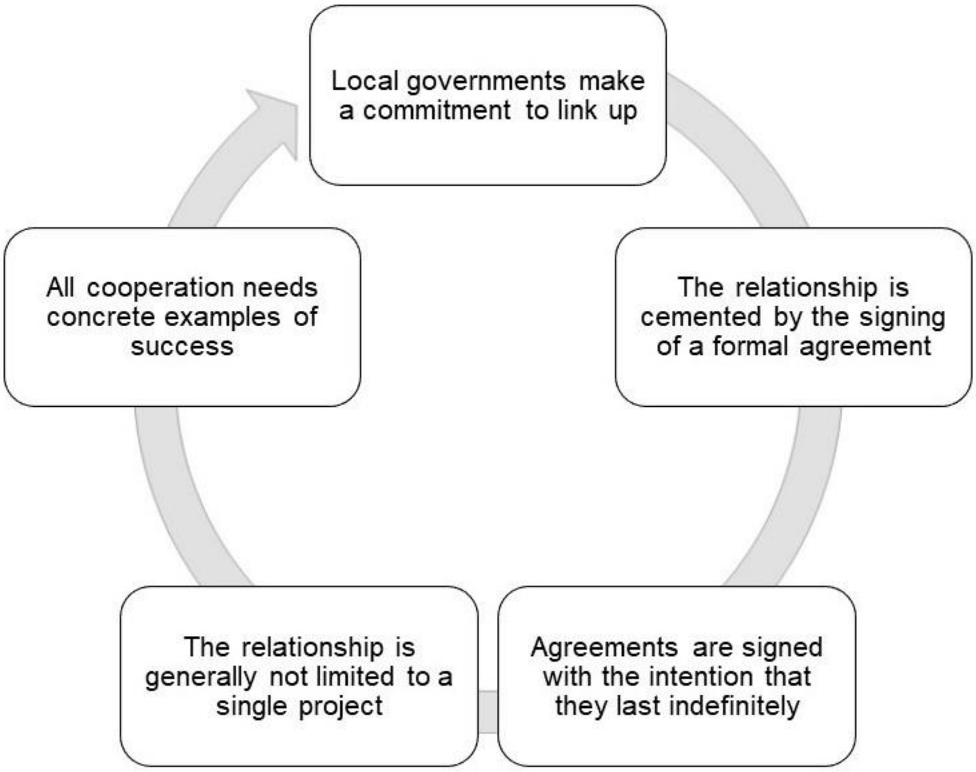

Figure 2.2: Characteristics of formal municipal international relations (MIRs)
Source: Adapted from Cremer et al. (2001); Tjandradewi & Marcotullio (2009)

Based on a historical review of the international city-to-city partnership movement, Buis (2009) identifies three prime motivations for global relationships, namely:

- idealistic motives, such as the desire to promote peace and reconciliation, cement historical bonds, express solidarity, or to contribute international aid to people living in poverty;
- political motivations, with municipal relationships responsive to, and in some cases reflecting, socio-economic and political milestones in various parts of the world; and
- economic motivations, such as searching for business opportunities, trade, investments and employment.

Bontenbal (2013) adds a fourth element, namely capacity building and knowledge transfer, to strengthen urban and regional governance.

In South Africa, municipal IR practitioners manage relationships with sister cities. The role of these practitioners in municipalities has become increasingly important in determining a city's international relations priorities and objectives, and in delineating the powers, roles, functions and procedures of the relevant city authorities (City of Cape Town Strategic International Relations Policy, 2015). In a 2009 study titled '*Strategic alliances between communities, with special reference to the twinning of South African provinces, cities and towns with international partners'*, Jacobus De Villiers found that 130 relationships existed, 35 relationships were identified that have lapsed, and 41 new ones were in the process of being concluded. According to De Villiers (2009), twinning can play an essential part in local economic development and promoting unity on the African continent, but is lacking in South Africa. This is due to an absence of back-up and support, a lack of coordination and synergies between the three spheres of government, a lack of marketing, a lack of municipal capacity at a local level, and the non-compliance of municipalities with official policy. The primary positive outcomes of South African relationships, according to De Villiers (2009), are in the areas of knowledge sharing and training, and financial benefits.

2.3.2.1 Examples of sister city relationships

De Villiers (2009) cites Cape Town (South Africa) and Aachen (Germany); the Hibiscus Coast Municipality (South Africa) and Oskarshamn (Sweden); and Honolulu (Hawaii) and Hue (Vietnam) as examples of successful international alliances. According to De Villiers, sister city relationships are formed and maintained through reliable and regular communication involving all stakeholders and including both mutual understanding and commitment between partners. The foundation of these relationships, argues De Villiers, is built on the attitudes and values of trust, reciprocity, loyalty, understanding, cultural sensitivity, positive attitude towards risk, and flexibility. Beukman (2017) notes that sister city partnerships encourage the development of trust between municipal officials and businesses. They enable more reliable connectivity and more efficient resource access within a city, and can also improve transportation capacities through the creation of direct flights between cities as well as port-to-port forums that will enhance trade capacities. Beukman (2017) references the Cape Town Air Access project, the city's airline expansion and retention strategy, as a model example of this, and the Virginia Beach (USA) and Olongapo (Philippines) partnerships as an example of a port-to-port agreement which has led to trade assurances, newly established businesses, and shared best practice.

Another example is the Dunedin-Shanghai sister city relationship. In a report focused on the relations between the two cities, Regina Maniam (2011) concludes that more benefits can be achieved through city-to-city partnerships by developing a strategic plan to work towards and measure. Maniam notes that while a stable sister city relationship does exist between Dunedin (New Zealand) and Shanghai (China), it is necessary to maintain this as key players often change. Recommendations based on feedback from interviews by Maniam include that, among others:

- a more proactive approach was needed to develop both a strategic and a relationship maintenance plan between the two cities;
- a website containing sister city-related events and information be created to build awareness of the activities and benefits; and
- a Facebook page be set up for publicity.

In a study of sister city relationships within the Portuguese context, Franco and Marmelo (2014) conclude that without the bonds of friendship, trust and loyalty, it would not be possible to attain the success and improved performance of the local authorities involved. The authors argue that the underlying success factors of inter-municipal cooperation, i.e., sister city relationships, are the exchange of experiences, sharing common problems, friendly relations, credibility, transparency, commitment, understanding and cultural awareness.

Examining and comparing the international relations of São Paulo (Brazil) and Toronto (Canada), Stren and Friendly (2019) found that paradiplomacy has a more extended history in São Paulo than Toronto, but that it has followed a very erratic path in both cities. In Toronto, the city went from a period of almost complete ignorance and rejection of the international sphere in the late 1990s, to a period of active involvement. It then experienced denial of international trips as junkets or pleasure-seeking luxury travel by politicians, to the beginning of 2015 when the city – and its mayor – undertook several overseas initiatives and signed several international agreements. In São Paulo, paradiplomacy began in the late 1980s, continuing to a greater or lesser degree in different ways with each successive mayor. Local politics has also influenced its municipal international relations, with mayors from the Right opposing overseas initiatives, while mayors from the Left have supported them. When comparing the two cities, Stren and Friendly (2019) highlight three crucial trends. The first, comparing major commercial capitals in the North and the South, proved that the paradiplomatic function is essential, and becoming even more significant in both. The second trend is the increasing centrality of city-regions in the international political and economic system. As cities have a more substantial role in their economies, their political, cultural and social influence will become even more central. The third trend, which follows from the first two, is that local politics in larger cities will increasingly be related to the international ties that businesses, cultural, and ethnic groups, and policy networks maintain as part of a new global reality.

Wu et al. (2016) highlighted the effect of twinning to promote the cities' potential and success to international and domestic audiences, which in turn contributes to local tourism and informs the local population of their own city's international standing. With regards to the economic implications, the authors note that most of the economically rewarding twinning relations, such as Manchester and Wuhan in 1986 or Shanghai and Liverpool in 1999, have been existent for at least a decade or more. The authors maintain that time and traditional values such as hospitability and reciprocity are required to build up a trusting relationship to open up more economic opportunities between city authorities.

2.4 Defining public relations

Scholars and practitioners have over the decades reported varying views about the knowledge and skills essential to effective public relations. Views that resonate with this study include Grunig's (1992) definition of PR, described as the management of communication between an organisation and its publics. Grunig (1997) emphasises that PR's major purpose is to facilitate understanding among people and other entities, providing them with a means to stay close to strategic constituencies. Similarly, White and Dozier (1992:101) argue that public relations is "a strategic management function" which "includes managing exchanges across the organisational boundary to ensure that the organisation responds to environmental demands and opportunities". Park and Rhee (2010) define PR as a relationship management function between an organisation and its public, based on six relationship maintenance strategies, namely: access, positivity, openness, assurance, networking and sharing tasks. Rensburg and Cant (2011) suggest that the greatest purpose of PR professionals in the organisation is to build a sustainable long-term relationships with key stakeholders. Crable and Vibbert (1986:413), on the other hand, described PR as the "art of adjusting organisations to environments and environments to organisations".

2.5 Excellence in public relations

According to Frost and Michelsen (2017), communication excellence is recognised as central not only to achieving foreign policy or diplomatic success, but to realise any strategic aims. The section below discusses James E. Grunig's (1992) study of excellence in public relations and communication management, a fifteen-year scholarly research project which identified a set of principles of how PR should be organised, managed and practised to contribute the most value to an organisation.

2.5.1 The Excellence Study

A programme of research in public relations, the Excellence Study has developed a conceptual and measurement framework to characterise and measure public relations practices (Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 2001). Sponsored by the Research Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), the study resulted in three books on excellence in PR. The final book written about the project reported extensive data from a survey of 327 organisations in the United States (US), Canada and the United Kingdom (UK). A total of 407 senior communication officers, 292 CEOs or other executive managers, and 4 631 employees completed separate questionnaires that measured different critical success factors for PR. The organisations included corporations, government agencies, non-profit organisations, and trade and professional associations.

The principles articulated in the study provide a theoretical benchmark for assessing the PR function of an organisation (Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al., 2002). The framework started from a four-model typology (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), namely: press agentry, public information, two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical. The four-model typology became widely used in the 1990s, stimulating the study of public relations practices worldwide: in Greece (Lyra, 1991), India (Sriramesh, 1991) and Taiwan (Huang, 1990). Later, the four-model typology was reconstructed into a four-dimensional framework (Grunig, 1997) out of the recognition that in reality, the four models coexist, overlapping with each other.

The Excellence Study has also built the Excellence Theory, a theory of the characteristics of excellence in communication management. The theory was constructed to address the normative question of how the PR function must be organised and managed to make the greatest contribution to organisational effectiveness. The theory will be discussed in the next chapter. Prior to the Excellence Study, communicators had no benchmark to measure against. According to Repper (1992), the normative theory provided by the Excellence Study gives practitioners an opportunity to measure the effectiveness of their communication programmes against that of an ideal programme.

2.5.1.1 Two-way communication

Two-way symmetrical communication is a dialogue between participants in which all are equally likely to influence one another, to change their opinions and to make decisions beneficial for all. According to Grunig and Grunig (2001), excellent PR departments communicate symmetrically with publics in an attempt to balance their organisations' self-interest with the interests of publics. They understand that PR is dialogue and that its purpose is to manage conflict and build, maintain and enhance relationships. The authors affirm that through two-way and symmetrical communication, excellent PR departments become ethics counsellors to management and internal advocates of social responsibility. Supporting this view, Huang (2004) argues that two-way symmetrical communication contributes to several performance measures, which include positive market performance, overall organisational effectiveness, conflict resolution, crisis management, favourable corporate reputation and positive media exposure. Childers (1989) notes that the two-way symmetric model can help accomplish goals and is envisioned as a type of political system involving negotiation, compromise, problem-solving and open discourse that should result in what is most beneficial for both parties. Lane (2007) clarifies that the aim is to give stakeholders or publics influence in the decision-making process. Willacy (2016), on the other hand, cautions that while two-way symmetrical communication offers many benefits, constraints such as representation, time, knowledge and bias can impede its success.

There are several approaches to communication that involve two-way symmetrical communication. Communication includes the mixed-motive model, collaborative model, deliberative approach, participatory approach, public participation or involvement, civic engagement, direct citizen participation, stakeholder management/involvement, risk communication and citizen-centred collaborative public management (Cooper et al., 2006; Thomas, 2013; Simmons, 2007). The most relevant to this study is the stakeholder management/involvement approach. The stakeholder involvement strategy entails honest and open two-way communication for mutually beneficial relationships, based on the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The involvement strategy attempts not only to provide information, answer questions and integrate feedback, but also actively initiates contact with stakeholders and asks them to participate in the generation of ideas.

2.5.2 Relationship cultivation and management strategies defined

The purpose of relationship cultivation is to help organisations reach their goals and, at the same time, help significant stakeholders reach theirs (Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Relationship cultivation includes the idea that some relationships could be damaged and need to be restored, whereas the terms management and maintenance focus on continuing good relationships (Hung, 2005). Grunig and Huang (2000) suggest a relationship cultivation model in which they propose three dimensions to build and maintain relationships: antecedents, cultivation strategies, and outcomes.

The first, antecedents, is described as perceptions, motives, needs and behaviours (see Broom et al., 1997). Antecedents could include social and cultural norms, collective perceptions and expectations, needs for resources, perceptions of the uncertain environment, and legal/voluntary necessity (Broom et al., 1997). Seltzer and Zhang (2011) found that among antecedents for political organisation-public relationships, trust and time (how long parties had been involved in a relationship) were particularly important.

The second relationship dimension in Grunig and Huang's (2000) model is cultivation strategies. These were later defined as "any organisational behavioural efforts that attempt to establish, cultivate, and sustain relationships with strategic publics" (Ki & Hon, 2009:5). Drawing from interpersonal communication research, Grunig and Huang (2000) conceptualised five dimensions of relationship-building, using communication strategies embedded in a two-way symmetrical model. These are:

- *positivity*, which includes organisational attempts to make stakeholders feel more content in the relationship;
- *openness*, also conceptualised as disclosure, referring to the willingness to engage in direct discussions about the nature of the relationship and share internal information (Canary & Stafford, 1994), thus contributing to more symmetry in the relationship;
- *networking*, pertaining to the effort that organisations exert to build alliances or coalitions, described by Huang (2000) as a catalyst in relationship building;
- *assurances*, focusing on legitimacy of the organisation and acknowledgement by the parties in the relationship to express that they are committed to maintaining the relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999); and
- the *shared tasks dimension*, referring to parties' common issues and concerns, such as employment and making profit.

These strategies are considered widely as the base that supports PR's efforts in relationship building.

The third relationship dimension is outcomes or consequences, which include trust, control mutuality, relational satisfaction and relational commitment. Trust refers to integrity, dependability and competence (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Control mutuality refers to how much each party agrees on their rightful power to influence each other. Relational satisfaction is a measure of how favourably each party of the relationship feels toward the other, related to a party's emotional attitude, expectations and the extent to which these are met in the relationship. Last, relational commitment is how much each party of the relationship believes and feels that the relationship is worth putting forth an effort to maintain and promote (Hung, 2005). Also, relational commitment could be continuous, suggesting a party's dedication to the relationships independent of the costs associated with it; and affective commitment, which is an emotional orientation.

2.5.2.1 Types of organisation-public relationships

Ki and Shin (2006) contend that there is no consistent and universally accepted definition for organisation-public relationships. For this study, Ledingham and Bruning's (1998) meaning is considered. According to the authors (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), an organisation-public relationship is "the state which exists between an organisation and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well-being of the other" (1998:62). The definition indicates that interdependence and patterns of interaction bound such a relationship, transaction, exchange and linkages (Broom et al., 2000).

Mills and Clark (1994) developed two types of relationships used in the study of organisation-public relationships: communal and exchange relationships. In communal relationships, benefits are given to please the other. While this may sound like an exchange relationship, members who provide benefits do not expect the other's return or obligation to pay back (Mills & Clark, 1994). An exchange relationship suggests that members benefit one another in response to specific benefits received in the past or expected in the future.

The concepts and theories on communal and exchange relationships developed by Mills, Clark and others (e.g., Clark et al., 1986; Clark & Taraban, 1991; Clark & Waddell, 1985), were later adopted by Hung (2002) who advanced the six types of relationships, namely:

- *exploitative relationships*, which arise when one takes advantage of the other, when the other follows communal norms, or when one does not fulfil their obligation in an exchange relationship (Mills & Clark, 1994);
- *manipulative relationships*, which occur when an organisation, with the knowledge of what publics want, applies asymmetrical or pseudo-symmetrical approaches to communicate with publics to serve its own interests (Hung, 2005);
- *symbiotic relationships*, which happen when organisations, realising their interdependence in the environment, work together with particular publics toward the common interest of surviving in the environment;
- *conventional relationships*, which mean that both sides commit to a common good by their open exchanges, the norm of reciprocity and provide the others with an opportunity to "ask for insight, to provide criticism, and to place a claim upon some of the individual's time" (Bennett, 2001:9);
- *mutual communal relationships*, where each person has a concern for the welfare of the other (Mills & Clark, 1994); and

- *contractual relationships*, which start when parties agree on what each should do in the relationship, akin to writing a contract (set agreement) at the beginning of the relationship. According to Hung (2005), contractual relationships cannot promise equal relationships.

2.5.3 PR roles and their strategic impact on organisational strategy

Extant research suggests that excellent PR units play an essential role in the strategic management of their organisations. In contrast to the conventional view that PR is a technical support function for other management functions, the excellence study showed that PR has a unique strategic management function that helps an organisation interact with all components of its environment (Grunig & Grunig, 2001). In a study, Shamsan and Otieno (2015) emphasise the strategic importance of PR, describing it as a critical strategic enabler. The authors submit that PR strategy is seen to be the outcome of a strategic thinking process by senior management, mainly to improve on strategic management: it provides top-level management with vast means of communication to the public to be in touch with its clients.

Although the concept does not have an explicit definition, most discussions of strategic public relations refer to the plans, objectives and evaluation of PR programmes that should be within the frame of organisational goals (Grunig & Repper, 1992). The authors argue that from the strategic management perspective, effective public relations must be part of strategic management at the organisational level, while it manages its own programme strategically.

To understand the impact of PR on organisational strategy, Steyn (2003) recommends building on early streams of PR research. Broom and Smith (1979), based on the US perspective, conceptualised four theoretical roles, namely: the expert prescriber, the communication facilitator, the problem-solving process facilitator and the technician role. These roles were evaluated but only two roles emerged empirically, namely the role of the manager and the role of the technician. The expert prescriber, communication facilitator and problem-solving process facilitator are all conceptual components of the same empirical role, namely, the manager (Broom & Dozier, 1986). Research is often used in this role to assist in policy decision-making, frequent use of research to plan or evaluate their work, and counsel management (Steyn, 2003). Practitioners fulfilling the technician role in organisations perform at an operational level, providing the communication and journalistic skills needed to implement PR programmes (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Still, they hardly ever undertake research or participate actively in the decision-making process.

According to Van Ruler et al. (2001), there are recognisable differences in the European approach to PR. The most profound difference lies in the reflective role of PR, which they consider to be the most important. The practice of reflective PR entails analysing changing values in society and discussing these with members of the organisation, to adjust organisational norms and values accordingly (Verčič et al., 2001).

In South Africa, Steyn (2000) conceptualised the role of the PR 'strategist' and redefined the 'manager' and 'technician' roles. Based on the strategic management literature, Steyn conceptualised the PR 'strategist' as a strategic role at the top management or societal level. The PR strategist contributes towards the development of the organisation's enterprise strategy. Steyn (2000) redefined the historic PR 'manager' as a middle management role at the functional level, developing PR strategy; and the historic PR 'technician' as an implementation role at the operational level, developing implementation strategy.

In 2009, Steyn relabelled her original PR 'strategist' role (which now included a reflective dimension) as the 'reflective strategist'. According to Steyn (2009), the 'reflective strategist' acts as a coordinating mechanism between the organisation (business, government or non-profit) and the environment. The reflective strategist provides management with an outside (societal) perspective, assisting them to reflect on the organisation's position in the bigger context, to balance organisational goals with the well-being of society (the collective interest/common good). Steyn argues that by spanning the organisational boundary, gathering information utilising environmental scanning, transmitting this information to management, providing it as input to the strategy formulation process, the 'reflective strategist' enlightens management on societal/stakeholder values, norms and expectations for socially and environmentally responsible behaviour. Management is also influenced to state the organisation's position, practise two-way communication and build trusting relationships with stakeholders about issues of strategic importance.

2.5.4 The role of strategic communications in IR

Various means of communication have been utilised in international relations over the last decades, ranging from the traditional mode of negotiation to rampant coercion, prevalent during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Certain groups in parts of the world adopt kidnapping tactics or damage to human life and property as a means of communicating internationally. Blake (1984) argues that diplomatic strategies of communication at an international level do not occur in a vacuum, but are influenced by histories, experiences, culture, tradition and religion, among others. At the nation-state level, Blake maintains that context is the foundation upon which diplomatic communication strategies are built and notes three points. First, the parameters within which the process of communication occurs needs to be assessed. A second element is an objective sought, e.g., whether need-orientated or intent-orientated. The third element is the national interest. Also, Blake (1984) stresses that the one item that ties the whole process together is language – both verbal and non-verbal, described as the main artery of any diplomatic communication strategy. Blake (1984) attributes instances of communication breakdowns to the lack of understanding of diplomatic language by some officials in ministries of external affairs. He highlights that communication without context is the most dangerous form of exchange.

Emerging findings in IR scholarship indicate that effective communication is central to realising all strategic aims. Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission. According to Frost and Michelsen (2017), there is considerable confusion as to what the term ‘strategic communications’ means in the context of international relations. The authors suggest that this confusion may be explained by the diversity of contexts within which the term is deployed, and by the correspondingly diverse spectrum of related, and sometimes interchangeable, concepts used. They conclude that strategic communications are actions that are fundamentally linked to claims and counter-claims about ethical conduct in international relations, and point out that, by using strategic communications, countries and regions clearly can hide things from citizens and/or the international community.

Frost and Michelsen (2017) suggest that private companies contracted by governments are willing to provide such services because it is lucrative. Examples cited include members of the Assad family in Syria who hired several professional contractors to manage their international public image. The British government hired leading PR contractors to provide on-the-ground management of press coverage of its withdrawal from Mosul and in South Africa, President Jacob Zuma hired a well-known British firm to counteract media that portray him as corrupt. The authors maintain that none of these examples, however, diminish the role of ethical claim-making in all strategic communications actions.

2.5.5 Tasks of IR practitioners and the nature of information disseminated

From a country perspective, the field of international relations is concerned with advising, shaping and implementing foreign policy. It is how countries through their formal and other representatives, as well as other actors, articulate, coordinate and secure particular or wider interests, using correspondence, private talks, exchanges of view, lobbying, visits, threats and other related activities (Melissen, 2005).

Barston (2013) asserts that the tasks of diplomacy can be broken up into six broad areas, namely: ceremonial, management, information and communication, international negotiation, the duty of protection and normative/legal. Functions within these categories are set out in the table below:

Table 2.1: Tasks of diplomacy (Source: Barston, 2013)

Tasks	Functions
Ceremonial	Protocol, representation, visits
Management	Day-to-day problems, promotion of interests (political, economic, scientific, military, tourism), explanation and defence of the policy, strengthening bilateral relations, bilateral coordination, multilateral cooperation
Information and communication	Assessment and reporting, monitoring
International negotiation	Self-explanatory
Duty of protection	Self-explanatory
Contribution to international order	Normative, rule-making, mediation/settlement

While very little is written about the role of the municipal IR practitioner and the nature of information disseminated, particularly from the practitioner perspective, a gap this study seeks to fill, Fishbone (2015) notes that IR practitioners are at the heart of successful municipal international relations. Drawing on a series of in-depth interviews with staff in German and British municipal Offices for International Affairs (OIAs), Fishbone (2015) examined in detail how these offices interact. He concludes that municipal international relations staff are commonly the ones making the global connections, doing the day-to-day work of maintaining the international relationships of their city through regular communication. Fishbone (2015:4) writes:

> *Municipal international affairs professionals do everything from forging and maintaining relationships with other cities to welcoming incoming delegations and organising international trips, preparing their elected leadership for international meetings, to maintaining their city's involvement in international networks.*

In a subsequent paper in 2017, Fishbone argues that having IR practitioners located in the mayor's office or executive suite provides some critical benefits, including:

- helping them raise their profile and ability to act;
- providing a vantage point, allowing the OIAs to look across the city as international affairs is a crosscutting issue; and
- enabling OIA staff to represent the mayor effectively.

According to Fishbone, business cards and titles matter in the world of international protocol and diplomacy, while proximity to the mayor's office is an asset when representing the city abroad. Fishbone (2017) suggests that the aspects mentioned above require municipal IR practitioners to adopt some form of a communication strategy to engage with the various stakeholders. This study seeks to understand the communication strategies used by municipal IR practitioners in a South African municipality to build and maintain relations with international sister cities.

2.6 Government communication praxis – the decision wheel

It is important to note that the existing public relations and communication models do not entirely account for the unique environmental characteristics of the public sector. Communicators frequently note that developing communication strategies for government organisations is different from that of business or non-profit organisations (Avery & Graham, 2013). Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) propose that while the general communication principles are the same for all organisations, "the specific conditions to which the principles must be applied are different" (1999:219). The creation of the government decision wheel supports this claim. In this study, Liu and Horsley's (2007) expressions are considered appropriate in understanding government communication praxis. The authors (Liu & Horsley, 2007) offer a theoretical approach to examining the differences between corporate and government communication practices with the introduction of the government communication decision wheel. In a review of the public sector environment literature, they identify eight attributes, "unique constraints and opportunities" (2007:378), that affect government public relations, namely: politics, public good, legal constraints, media and public scrutiny, lack of managerial support for public relations practitioners, poor public perception of government communication, lagging professional development and federalism.

Politics: Politics is the essence of the public sector. Appleby (1973) contends that while other institutions are not free from politics, the government is politics. According to Horsley and Barker (2002), politics in the public sector may restrict creativity and innovation in developing communication programmes because elected officials do not want to appear too far out of the mainstream.

Public good: A principal public sector responsibility is that of serving the citizens (Viteritti, 1997). Therefore, government agencies generally are more concerned with the social purpose of their work, rather than market pressures (Avery et al., 1996; Rainey, 2003).

Legal constraints: While the public good may guide government actions, legal constraints commonly limit the ability of agencies to communicate fully and openly (Liu & Horsley, 2007). Central governments comply with their Freedom of Information Acts; while provinces and local governments often have access-to-information laws.

Media scrutiny: Public sector organisations often face heightened media scrutiny. According to Allison (2004), government decision-making is covered more frequently in the media than the activities of private companies. Some researchers (e.g., Wamsley & Schroeder, 1996), argue that the government is never free from the news cycle. Hence, to avoid negative media coverage, government employees tend to follow the status quo and improvise less (Garnett, 1997; Graber, 2003).

Devaluation of communication: Another constraint on government PR is the lack of importance often placed on communication by management, resulting in several tangible repercussions (Liu & Horsley, 2007). For instance, during budget cuts and reorganisations, Garnett (1997) notes that public relations positions are usually the first to go, leaving unskilled communicators to fill the void.

Poor public perception: Liu and Horsley (2007) contend that public opinion can also devalue government communication. Terms such as ‘propaganda’ and the use of ‘spin’ often make the public sceptical about the intentions of government communications, although the majority of government information is honest (Graber, 2003). Garnett (1997) notes that the government’s traditional use of one-way models of communication, rather than two-way models, also limits dialogue, thus diminishing the role of public feedback.

Lagging professional development: Liu and Horsley (2007) suggest that perhaps due to the government and the public’s negative perceptions of government communication, the professional development of government communicators lags behind the professional development of private sector communicators. Sieb and Fitzpatrick (1995) stressed the importance of professionalism to elevate the public image of a field. The authors argue that one standard metric of professionalism is membership to a professional organisation, providing professional norms and codes of ethics (Cameron et al., 1996).

Federalism: The final characteristic of the public sector environment is that government communicators not only have to deal with their organisational concerns, but also have to work within a system of federalism. O'Toole (2000) defined federalism as "a system of authority constitutionally apportioned between central and regional governments" (2000:2).

Liu & Horsley's (2007) government communication decision wheel incorporates the importance of these characteristics by identifying four coexisting, complementary microenvironments: multilevel, intragovernmental, intergovernmental and external.

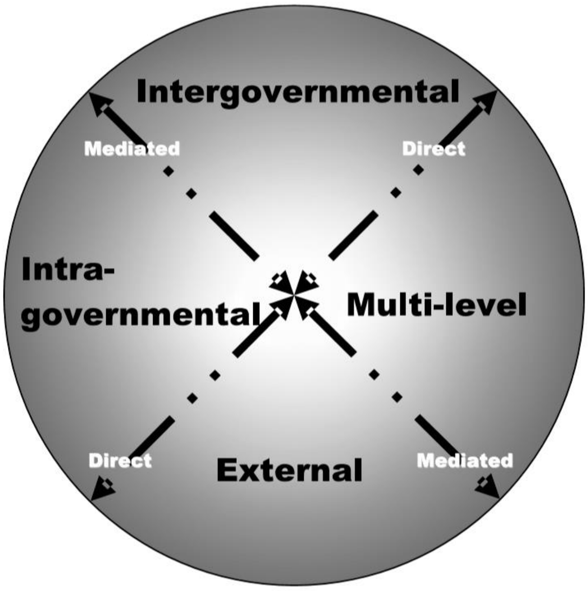

Figure 2.3: The four public sector microenvironments
Source: Liu and Horsley (2007)

Multilevel microenvironment: In this microenvironment, two or more levels of government collaborate on a single issue. Each level of government, however, still maintains some unique and separate responsibilities based on their system of independence.

Intergovernmental microenvironment*:* Here, two or more units at the same governmental level coordinate.

Intragovernmental microenvironment: In the intragovernmental microenvironment, only a single agency takes action. This agency can be part of the local, regional or national government.

External microenvironment: Finally, in the external microenvironment, any level of government coordinates with private and non-profit organisations. This microenvironment is typified by Rainey's (2003) typology, which advocates for a continuum from purely public to purely private organisations, with hybrid organisations in between.

In all four microenvironments, government managers share expertise and resources, as well as coordinate communication (Liu & Horsley, 2007). The authors note that within each microenvironment, government communicators must decide the channel and direction of communication. One axis on the decision wheel represents the media (mediated communication), and the other represents the target publics (direct communication). The intercept point represents the proportion of mediated versus direct to public communication, which would then determine the appropriate channels (see Figure 2.4). Liu and Horsley (2007) submit that this intercept point changes based upon the situation and communication goals. The dashed arrows indicate the permeability of the boundaries between the microenvironments, as well as the direction of the informational flow.

In all four microenvironments, the government may decide to withhold information from the media and/or the public, or to disseminate information directly to the media and/or public. According to Liu and Horsley (2007), the message may originate from the public relations practitioner, the public, and/or the media, indicating the potential for both one-way and two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical communication in the public sector.

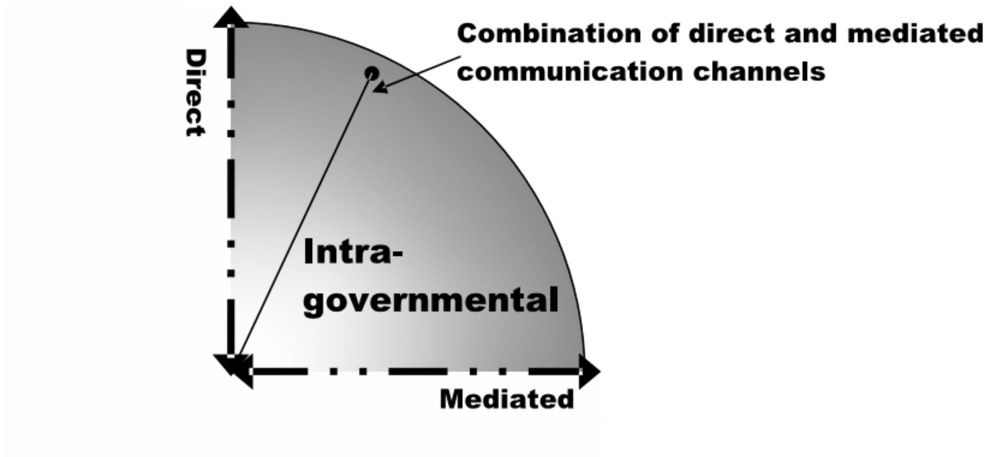

Figure 2.4: The communication direction (marked by the intercept) demonstrates selection of more direct-to-direct channels over mediated channels
Source: Liu and Horsley (2007)

2.7 Stakeholder management

The stakeholder concept has achieved widespread popularity among academics since Freeman (1984) first introduced the stakeholder theory. The impetus behind the idea was to try to build a framework that was responsive to the concerns of managers who were being buffeted by unprecedented levels of environmental turbulence and change (Freeman & McVea, 2001). This section discusses stakeholder management as it relates to developing organisational relationships from a public sector perspective. The normative theories of stakeholder management are presented so as to enable understanding of how communication value is maximised to establish enduring relationships and to avoid conflict between different stakeholder groups.

2.7.1 The stakeholder concept

Although a longstanding term, the development of stakeholder theory was put forward by Freeman in 1984. According to Freeman (1984), it is a proposal for the strategic management of organisations in the late twentieth century. The objective was to delineate an alternative form of strategic management as a response to rising competitiveness, globalisation and the growing complexity of organisational operations (Mainardes et al., 2011). Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives.

Over the last few decades, the stakeholder concept has undergone several shifts in definition and characterisation with works by Clarkson (1994, 1995), Donaldson and Preston (1995), Mitchell et al. (1997), Rowley (2011) and Frooman (1999), enabling greater theoretical depth. However, a coherent definition is difficult to identify (Roberts & Mahoney, 2004). According to Friedman and Miles (2006), there are more than 75 definitions of the term stakeholder. Miles (2011) further identifies the term stakeholder to have been conceptualised 435 times in over 500 reviewed articles. Despite the various conceptualisations, Freeman's (1984) traditional stakeholder definition dominates most academic discussions. This study adopts the definition.

Because the focus of stakeholder management has moved more toward stakeholder relationship management in recent years, scholars propose that stakeholder participation and dialogue should be an essential element of organisational actions (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Foster and Jonker (2005) suggest that the basis of any constructive engagement between an organisation and its stakeholders should be communication that is linked to a mutual understanding as to the basis of agreeable action. The authors note that some organisations have interpreted engagement with stakeholders as a form of management or control, where there is an attempt to organise, structure and manipulate the relationship which leads to a one-sided form of engagement. In contrast, other organisations have attempted to become more involved in a two-way relationship, in which the interests and concerns of both parties are taken into consideration. Modern stakeholder relationships, suggest Crane and Livesey (2003), are characterised by a complex array of shifting, ambiguous and contested interactions between interested parties and within organisations. The authors submit this highlights the central role of two-way communication in constituting, managing and maintaining stakeholder relationships.

According to Grunig and Hung-Baesecke (2015), relationships can be classified into two types.

- Experiential relationships, which are generated based on people's direct experiences within or of an entity.
- Reputational relationships, which are developed based on people's evaluations of information they have received about an entity, such as information from the mass media and hearsay from others.

The Excellence Study (Grunig et al., 2002) found that positive relationships between organisations and publics would encourage publics to be engaged in supportive communicative behaviours toward the organisation.

The King IV Report on Corporate Governance for South Africa (Institute of Directors in Southern Africa, 2016) advocates a stakeholder-inclusive approach for stakeholder relationship governance. Stakeholder inclusivity balances the needs, interests and expectations of material stakeholders in the best interest of the organisation over time. King IV enlists five practices that suggest the governing body should assume responsibility for the governance of stakeholder relationships by:

- setting the direction for how stakeholder relationships should be approached and conducted in the organisation;
- articulating and giving effect to its course on stakeholder relationships;
- delegating to management the responsibility for implementation and execution of effective stakeholder relationship management;
- exercising ongoing oversight of stakeholder relationship management; and

- disclosing arrangements for governing and managing stakeholder relationships, as well as monitoring the effectiveness of stakeholder management and how the outcomes were addressed.

2.7.2 The role and importance of stakeholders in the public sector

There is a general consensus among scholars that the public sector, comprising of all levels of government, their agencies and enterprises, is complex and therefore involves a variety of stakeholders (Boyne, 2002; Bretschneider, 1990; Hood 1991). According to Bryson (1995), attention to stakeholders is crucial for the public sector as success largely depends on satisfying critical stakeholders according to their definition of what is valuable. According to Luoma-aho (2005), the introduction of stakeholder thinking in the public sector is new and can be seen to result from neoliberal principles; suggesting that, to some degree, it merely represents the development toward openness of public sector organisations. Despite its origin, Luoma-aho and Vos (2009) agree that the idea is useful, as it acknowledges that in society today no organisation can function without the approval of those around it. Bryson (2004), citing Nutt (2000), explains that failure to attend carefully to stakeholder interests and information in the public sector can easily lead to disaster. Thomas and Poister (2009) argue that while operating in an increasingly networked environment, public agencies must recognise a growing relevance for their stakeholders.

Fombrun (1996) notes that stakeholders continually form assessments of the organisation, which together form an invisible entity of attitudes, referred to as reputation. The reputation of public sector organisations is not built in the same way as the reputation of corporations, as their functions, scope, publics and aims differ (Luoma-aho, 2007). How stakeholders perceive the organisation will influence their behaviour toward it for better or worse, making reputation an essential issue for public sector organisations (Andreassen, 1994; Luoma-aho, 2005).

Stakeholder literature has introduced various typologies for public sector organisations. Typologies define and guide the type of relations the organisation should have with those around it. According to Podnar and Jancic (2006), identifying stakeholders is a necessary process that enables organisations to create plans and decide on the extent of communication required, desirable and expected with specific stakeholder groups, on the basis of their importance or power. One typology, developed by Mitchell et al. (1997), differentiates stakeholders on the basis of salience, which recognises that not all stakeholders are equal, based on the relative power, legitimacy and urgency of stakeholder claims. According to Mitchell et al. (1997):

- ***power*** is referred to as the degree to which a stakeholder has a coercive, utilitarian or normative means to impose its will on the relationship;
- ***legitimacy*** illustrates that these are socially-accepted and expected structures or behaviours perceived to be desirable, measured based on some socially constructed context of norms, values, beliefs and definitions; and
- ***urgency*** means the degree to which stakeholder claims call for immediate attention.

2.7.3 Stakeholders of IR practice

According to Grunig et al. (1992), each organisation creates publics and stakeholders for itself, as organisational functions influence and affect those around it. Fishbone (2017) describes internal stakeholders of IR practice at the municipal level (inside the organisation) as the municipality's elected leadership (mayor and executive) and municipal staff (technical and other). Externally, offices of international affairs occupy a unique intersection, notes Fishbone (2017). Here, primary stakeholders include the national/federal and regional offices of international relations, counterparts in sister cities and partner and/or member organisations, the consular or diplomatic corps, local community, trade and diaspora groups, as well as visiting government officials, businesses and community groups from abroad.

2.8 The convergence of PR and IR

The conceptual and practical connections between PR and IR has become a key area of focus in academic debates over the last few decades. Extant research suggests significant potential for PR concepts and practices to inform thinking and practices in diplomacy. In particular, there has been increasing interest in public diplomacy's relational and communicative aspects (Cowan, 2008; Jönsson & Hall, 2003; Kelley, 2009; Nye, 2008; Ronfeldt & Arquilla, 2009; Snow & Taylor, 2009; Zaharna, 2009). PR scholars Benno Signitzer and Timothy Coombs have, as early as 1992, attributed the growth of international relationships to the expansion of communication technology and broader public participation in the process of foreign affairs. But it was following the events of September 11, 2001, in the United States (US) that an increasing number of scholars began to explore the links between the two fields. For example, Dutta-Bergmann (2006) suggested that a PR approach to diplomacy based on dialogue and respect for mutual understanding between cultures would be most effective for the US. Similarly, Kruckeberg and Vujnovic (2005) proposed that the US reject propaganda and practise true public diplomacy, relying not only on political theory and the theories of international relations but also on theories and models of PR based on two-way symmetrical communications and community-building. Snow and Taylor (2009) point specifically to the relational focus of PR practices, as reflected in the Excellence Theory (Grunig et al., 2006), as a potential future foundation for public diplomacy. Macnamara (2014), on the other hand, suggests that PR may have more to learn from public diplomacy. Macnamara points out that while the fields of IR and political science are primarily dismissive of any comparison between the fields, PR scholars have focused mostly on how public relations concepts and principles could be applied in public diplomacy contexts. Macnamara (2014) compared key concepts from new public diplomacy (Riordan, 2003) to public relations, finding parallels between the two fields, as well as noteworthy differences.

Melissen (2005) posits that characteristics of the new public diplomacy sound patently similar to the defining characteristics of relational models in public relations. As described by Fitzpatrick (2011), the new public diplomacy anticipates a more collaborative approach to international relations and contributes to mutual understanding among countries/international actors and foreign publics. It helps to build and sustain relationships between countries/international actors and foreign publics; facilitate networks of relationships between organisations and people in both the public and private sectors; involve both foreign and domestic publics; includes foreign publics in policy processes; is based on principles of dialogue and mutuality; emphasise two- way communication and interactions; favour people-to-people interactions; and has a primarily proactive, long-term focus on relationship-building.

Fitzpatrick et al. (2013) suggest that although some differences exist, data provides evidence that perceived conceptual and practical links between public relations and diplomacy are real. The authors' research on the conceptual and practical connections between PR and public diplomacy supports calls for the integration of public relations perspectives in public diplomacy planning and practices (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2007), as well as the hiring of information officers with knowledge in the field of communications (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2006). Scholarship on the synergy between PR and paradiplomatic activity from a developing world perspective is scarce, thus representing a gap which this study seeks to fill.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has revealed the literature that informs this thesis. It has presented various arguments on intellectual trends in municipal international relations (MIRs) and paradiplomacy, and has provided examples of sister city relationships. Furthermore, the chapter discussed the Excellence Study, two-way symmetrical communication in IR, stakeholder relationship management and the convergence of PR and IR. The next chapter discusses the conceptual framework of the study.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

As stated in the earlier chapters, the purpose of this study is to examine the role of communication in municipal international relations. This chapter provides a conceptual framework that can be used to understand how IR practitioners in a South African municipality engage with their international counterparts. The Excellence Theory (Grunig et al., 2006) and the two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), a normative model used in PR to guide interaction between an organisation and its stakeholders, will thus be discussed. The chapter will also present a prescriptive approach to stakeholder theory, which will assist in establishing how municipal IR practitioners build and maintain relationships with international sister cities.

3.2 The Excellence Theory

The Excellence Theory has established a widely accepted conceptual framework for excellence in communication management in public relations research (Yun, 2006). Developed from a programme of research conducted on 327 organisations in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, the Excellence Theory suggests a normative basis to study and evaluate international PR practices. The research programme combined several middle-range theories including theories of publics, public relations and strategic management; models of public relations, evaluation of public relations, employee communication, public relations roles, gender, diversity, power, activism, ethics and social responsibility; and global public relations (Grunig, 1992). The theory states that for an organisation to be effective, it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as management (Grunig et al., 2006). It argues that the value of excellent communication lies within the quality of long-term relationships that organisations develop and maintain. Over the years, the Excellence Theory has reported on empirical evidence (see Dolea, 2012; Lee & Yue, 2020; Thompson, 2018; Thurlow et al., 2016; Toth, 2007; Van Gorp & Pauwels, 2007) that the Excellence principles hold, regardless of the type of organisation – whether for profit, non-profit or governmental (Dozier et al., 1995).

Grunig (1997) elaborated on the fit of the Excellence principles to governmental public affairs. A year later, the Norwegian government was studied as an example of a government that showcases the principles of Excellence in communication management (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999). A review of the works of literature on public diplomacy and the Excellence

Study (Grunig et al., 2006) has shown conceptual convergences between communication practices and excellence in communication management between diplomacy and public relations.

Niemann-Struweg et al. (2007) note that three worldviews have shaped excellence and the accompanying effectiveness of PR: the view that PR is asymmetrical, the belief that PR has both a neutral or advocacy role in society, and the opinion that PR is a technical function. The authors argue that in contrast to these worldviews, an excellent PR worldview is symmetrical, idealistic or critical and is management orientated (Grunig 1993). The symmetrical worldview steers communication to be a two-way process (Dozier et al., 1995). In organisations with a symmetrical worldview, communication plays a central role in the functioning of the company and communication managers try to establish mutual understanding between target publics and the dominant coalition through the effective use of two-way communication (Niemann-Struweg et al., 2007).

This study adopts the strategic management paradigm of public relations to assess communication strategies used by municipal IR practitioners to cultivate relationships with international sister cities. Van den Bosch and Van Riel (1998) define this type of public relations as a bridging, rather than a buffering, function, designed to build relationships with stakeholders, rather than a set of messaging activities intended to buffer the organisation from them. The paradigm emphasises two-way and symmetrical communication to facilitate dialogue between the organisation and strategic stakeholders. This paradigm does not exclude traditional PR activities such as media relations and the dissemination of information. Instead, it broadens the number and types of media and communication activities and fits them into a symmetrical framework of research and listening (Grunig & Grunig, 2001).

Critical scholars such as Weaver et al. (2006) view the opposing interpretive paradigm as the way PR is practised and construe the strategic management paradigm as an “unlikely rarity” and “something of a fantastical ideal” (2006:15). Evaluation research (Dozier & Ehling, 1992), however, shows that the interpretive paradigm is ineffective because it does not deliver the effects its advocates promise or that critical scholars attribute to it. Above all, argue Grunig et al. (2006), the interpretive approach does not provide a normative model for how public relations should be practised. The strategic management model, on the other hand, provides a normative model for an ethical, and both organisationally and socially valued approach to PR practice (Grunig et al., 2002).

The Excellence Study provides evidence that programmes implemented by excellent communicators often had change-of-relationship effects, such as changes in the behaviour of a public, greater cooperation between the organisation and public, and the development of a stable long-term relationship (Grunig et al., 2002). Researchers of the study reported more frequent conflict avoidance effects, such as avoiding litigation and fewer complaints from publics, and therefore identified the importance of relationships in explaining the value of PR to organisations and society (Grunig et al., 2006).

Kim et al. (2013) argue that poor relationships often cost organisations a great deal of money – as a result of litigation, regulation, legislation, negative publicity, strikes, boycotts of products, loss of sales or donations, and public opposition. Therefore, the process of developing and maintaining relationships with strategic publics is a crucial component of strategic management, issues management and crisis management (Yang & Grunig, 2005).

Since the Excellence Study, researchers have further examined the literature on interpersonal communication to identify characteristics of relationships that could be applied to the organisation–public relations, and to develop measures of these relationships. Four qualities of an excellent long-term relationship were identified:

- *trust*, the level of confidence that an organisation and public have in each other and their willingness to open themselves to the other;
- *control mutuality*, the degree to which both organisation and public are satisfied with the amount of control they have over the relationship;
- *commitment* by both to the relationship; and
- *satisfaction* with the relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

3.2.1 Excellence in communication: relational aspects defined

According to Dozier et al. (1995), the value of excellent communication lies within the quality of long-term relationships that organisations develop and maintain. In organisations with excellent communication programmes, dominant coalitions value communicators for their input before decisions are made (Kim et al., 2013). In this study, Grunig's (2006) views that the roles of PR are to scan the environment, span boundaries, engage in issues management and dialogue and identify strategic publics to build long-term relationships, are considered appropriate. The position helps in understanding how IR practitioners in a South African municipality use communication to sustain relations with international counterparts.

3.2.1.1 Environmental scanning and boundary spanning

In the Excellence Study, researchers asked CEOs and heads of PR what contribution their communication function made to organisational goals. One of the most frequent responses was the value of hearing external voices in the strategic management process – voices amplified by PR professionals who scan the publics in the organisation's environment, a practice known as environmental scanning (Grunig, 2006). To bring an outside perspective to strategic decision-making, Grunig (2006) notes that the most excellent communication departments participated fully in strategic management by scanning the social, political and institutional environment of the organisation. In this regard, Chang (2000) found that personal sources of information are more useful than impersonal sources such as media, public opinion polls or published data.

Based on Chang's (2000) research, Grunig and Grunig (2001) developed an ideal process of environmental scanning that included monitoring strategic decisions of management to identify consequences on publics, monitoring websites and other sources of information from activists. The process involves using the situational theory to segment publics, developing a database to analyse data, and tracking media and other sources to monitor the operation of issues management.

Linked to this is the boundary-spanning role in public relations, described by Kaiser (2018) as a practice adopted by PR specialists to strategically connect the organisation's internal networks with external sources of information to nurture and develop mutual relationships. In this strategic role, the communicator acts as an early warning system (Dozier et al., 1995). Such communicators tell the dominant coalition what publics know, how they feel, and how they may behave relevant to strategic decisions under consideration (Grunig, 2006). Communicators act as advocates for publics, articulating those external points of view as they counsel dominant coalitions (Grunig et al., 2002). To have palpable boundary spanning, PR specialists must understand the attitudes and concerns of both internal and external interest groups and establish and maintain cooperative relationships with them (Harter & Krone, 2001).

Steyn (2009) defines the role as mentioned above of PR as that of 'reflective strategist' within the South (and East) African context. Focused on strategic reflection, the reflective strategist acts as a coordinating mechanism between an organisation and the environment, providing management with an outside (societal) perspective, and assisting them to reflect on the organisation's position in the broader context to balance organisational goals with the well-being of society (Steyn, 2009). By spanning the corporate boundary, gathering information and transmitting this information to management, Steyn (2009) submits that the reflective strategist enlightens management on societal/stakeholder values, norms and expectations. In turn, management is influenced to state the organisation's position on issues of strategic importance, practice two-way communication and build trusting relationships with stakeholders.

3.2.1.2 The reflective paradigm of public relations

The initial description of reflective public relations is attributed to Susanne Holmstrom. She defined reflection as ''the production of self-understanding concerning the environment'' (Holmstrom, 2009:191), and deemed it ''the core demand on organisations'' (Holmstrom, 2004:126). According to Van Ruler and Verčič (2005), reflective organisations understand that they exist as the conditional fulfilment of evolving social needs; they recognise, therefore, that ''societal legitimation'' (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2005:239) is a top priority. To ensure such legitimacy – to maintain, in essence, an unofficial social licence to operate – organisations must develop the ''capability of foreseeing potential conflicts between social systems, of evaluating their consequences, and of transforming the reflective observations into organisational learning processes'' (Holmstrom, 2004:125). Marsh (2010) notes that the development of such capacities requires a reflective viewpoint and reflective processes.

A reflective viewpoint, suggests Van Ruler and Verčič (2005), involves viewing an organisation from the outside. This viewpoint, in a hierarchical sense, ''is not a bottom-up but rather a top-down view, or at least it is a macro view of public relations'' (Van Ruler and Verčič, 2005:256). A reflective viewpoint, notes Holmstrom (2005:501), ''can also be identified through semantic shifts, for example, from 'persuasion' to 'shared responsibility, negotiations' and from 'managing' relationships to 'building' or 'engaging in' relationships''. Heath (2006:104) added that reflective organisations constantly monitor ''whether their power is used only for a narrow interest or the larger interest of society''.

As reflective practitioners incorporate public opinion into this expansive viewpoint, they push beyond the quantity of units of analysis to the quality of those units, continually assessing whose voices may have been excluded (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). In related postmodern assessments of public relations, Holtzhausen (2000) and Duffy (2000) have noted the duty of practitioners to seek out and help empower the voices of marginalised others. Other scholars (Heath 2006; Holmstrom, 2004) have suggested that reflection complements and expands the concept of two-way symmetry. As a result of this reflective viewpoint, organisations become adept at enacting ''self-restriction ... self-regulation ... (and) self-control'' (Holmstrom, 2004:125).

Aligning with Steyn's (2009) reflective strategist role, Heath (2006) suggests that reflective managers thus counsel organisational leaders regarding social legitimacy; conceptualise plans to communicate internally and externally; and help execute communications in the furtherance of organisational goals and a fully functioning society (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). Undergirding these functions are four models of communication: information (dissemination of organisational information to reduce uncertainty); persuasion (promotion of the organisation to others); relationship (furthering mutually beneficial relationships); and dialogue (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2005).

3.2.1.3 Stakeholder relations and mediating conflict resolution

Stakeholder relations and conflict resolution have been central topics in public relations scholarship over the last three decades (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Grunig & Grunig, 2001; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon, 1997, 1998; Huang, 2004; Ledingham et al., 1999; Wilson, 2000). Conceptually, research suggests that public relations increases organisational effectiveness "by building quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies" (Grunig et al., 1992:86) and reduces conflict between the organisation and its publics and/or stakeholders (Grunig et al., 1998). Empirically, drawing from the Excellence Study, Grunig et al. (1998) concluded that PR contributes to organisational effectiveness in two respects: (a) by helping to build stable and quality relationships over time; and (b) by managing conflict as well as by reducing the cost of conflict that results from regulation, pressure and litigation.

According to Heath (2001), relationship management is an important paradigm for public relations scholarship and practice. Existing literature provides several key relational features that typically represent the essence of organisation–stakeholder relations, such as control mutuality, trust, relational commitment and relational satisfaction (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001).

Control mutuality reflects the unavoidable nature of power asymmetry between an organisation and its publics. Both trust and satisfaction reflect the cognitive and affective aspects of the relationship, whereas the level of commitment reflects the degree of resource interchange involved (Huang, 2001). Trust is defined as "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (Huang, 2001:66). Relational satisfaction is conceptualised as "the extent to which one party feels favourably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced", and relational commitment is "the extent to which one party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy" (Huang, 2001:67).

In addition to the four relational characteristics, this study adopts Huang's (2001) fifth relational factor, face and favour, which reflects Eastern culture in understanding the sustenance of relationships between sister cities. Huang (2001) maintains that from the viewpoint of resource exchange, face and favour are regarded as media and resources that a person can present to others as a gift in the course of social exchange. With respect to the particular concept of face, engaging in "face work" with others is important in social interactions in Eastern culture. Basically, the extent to which a person "faces" the other party, including such interactions as "saving face", "giving face", "maintaining face" and so on, can be used to measure the depth of the relationship between and among the involved parties (Huang, 2001:67).

According to Plowman et al. (2001), the most completely developed model of conflict and public relations is the mixed motive model of PR. This combines the new model of symmetry for two-way communication (Dozier et al., 1995) with seven negotiation tactics. These are competition, collaboration, compromise, avoidance and accommodation (Thomas & Schmidt, 1976), unconditionally constructive (Fisher & Brown, 1988), win/win or no deal and principled (Covey, 1989, 1991), and mediated (Huang, 1997).

Susskind and Field (1996) have built on concepts of conflict resolution developed over many years. Among their relevant concepts are: to acknowledge the concerns of the other side, to encourage joint fact finding, to commit to minimise impacts, and to act responsibly – all tactics in accord with the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

As it stands, the Excellence Theory explains how PR contributes value to organisations, publics and society and explains how an empowered PR function makes a unique contribution to strategic management. The theory elucidates the critical role of relationships in the planning and evaluation of public relations programmes; it identifies different models of communication and explains which models are the most effective strategies for cultivating relationships with publics (Kim et al., 2013).

3.3 Two-way symmetrical communication

The two-way symmetrical communication model is broadly considered the best in the practice of public relations (Parkinson & Ekachai, 2006), as well as the most ethical (Signitzer & Wamser, 2006). In addressing the role of public relations in international affairs, Grunig (1992) states that two-way symmetrical public relations would eliminate most ethical problems of international public relations, adding that it would make PR more effective in producing international understanding and collaboration. The two-way symmetrical communication model is significant for this study as it will be used as a benchmark to assess how municipal IR practitioners cultivate relationships with international sister cities. To fully understand the model's contribution to communication and international relationship building, it is important to examine the four public relations models developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) which describe how PR practitioners practise communication in organisations. The models can be divided into two types of communications; firstly, contact unidirectional – press agentry and public information models (the information is sent from the sender to the receiver); secondly, bidirectional communication – two-way asymmetrical and symmetrical models.

The two-way asymmetrical model works in order to influence publics' behaviour, while the two-way symmetrical model works in order to create a balanced relationship between an institution and its audiences (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). These models are some of the main theoretical frameworks that have been applied in developed and developing countries alike (Creedon, 1993; Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Murphy, 1991; Huang, 2000; Lyra, 1991; Sriramesh, 2002; Van Leuven & Pratt, 1996; Abdelhay, 2014; Al-Enad 1990; Diab, 2010; Saadan, 2009). Furthermore, it has been proved that these models have played a significant role in terms of description and practice of PR in order to build a mutual relation between organisations and their audiences, as well as organisations with each other (Mackey, 2003). In relation to this study, Diab (2010) utilised these models in his thesis to explore the role of PR occupation in the diplomatic sector of Egypt.

3.3.1 The press agentry model

The press agentry model was designed as a one-way communication model, meaning from sender-to-receiver, and refers to a communication strategy without the need for careful planning and study of the targeted public (Grunig, 2006). According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), the main focus of this model is on publicity and propaganda. In general, practitioners of the press agentry and publicity model use the mass media as a channel for achieving their own goals. According to Abdelhay (2014), practitioners do no research aside from monitoring the media in which they sought to place favourable articles about their clients, and predominantly rely on propaganda and untruthful techniques. This model, in terms of how to apply it in diplomacy, refers to information and activities that are published to foreign publics for the purpose of convincing them (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Zhang & Swarts, 2009). According to Tam (2015), one-way models in public diplomacy seek to convey only favourable information about a nation or region; it notes that such types of purpose-driven programmes are often criticised for manipulating public perception.

3.3.2 Public Information model

The public information model is similarly characterised by one-way communication but the distinction relies on the approach of honesty in communication (Suyono & Hanathasia, 2014). Practitioners of this model are referred to as journalists-in-residence who disseminate accurately, but usually only favourable information about their organisations (Grunig, 2001). Their aim is to improve the image of the institution, not to volunteer unfavourable information. Mass media, such as press and news release, newsletters and direct mail, are used to disseminate information to different audiences in this model. Furthermore, Grunig and Hunt (1984) argue that PR practitioners based on this model seek to distribute information in order to persuade publics. The model was widely applied at the beginning of the twentieth century by governments and some industry organisations when they hired PR specialists to disseminate information about their institutions to the audience (Grunig & Hung, 2002). This kind of PR approach does not seek or even expects any feedback from its audience. According to Diab (2010), the public information model was used by many embassies in Egypt to disseminate information to the Egyptian society and Egyptian government institutions in order to influence them.

3.3.3 Two-way asymmetrical model

Unlike the press agentry and public information models (both characterised by one-way communication), the two-way asymmetric model seeks to receive feedback from the audience. Practitioners conduct scientific research to determine how to persuade publics to behave in the ways their client organisations wish (Grunig, 2009). This scientific persuasion approach, argues Diab (2010), utilises social scientific concepts in order to influence publics and then convince them to the organisation's targets. The model's two-way approach supports a feedback loop to allow PR practitioners to monitor their persuasive communication and the implications of their messages on others (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The benefit from this feedback, argue the authors, is to help the institution place their information in a more acceptable way for the audiences. For example, in election campaigns, the two-way asymmetrical model is used by PR strategists to impact and then persuade the voters to vote for them.

3.3.4 Two-way symmetrical model

The two-way symmetrical model aims to build mutual understanding between an organisation and its audiences. The main character of this model has challenged organisations to conduct direct dialogue with stakeholders, not only to persuade but also to listen, learn, resolve conflict and adapt the behaviour of the organisation as a result of the communication process (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 2009). Most importantly, the model strives to contribute to building long-term relationships between institutions and their audiences, by considering the interests of both sides (Diab, 2010; Grunig et al., 2002). The two-way symmetrical model remains one of the main theoretical frameworks in the PR field today. The model also dominates PR research and has been applied in different developed and developing countries alike.

The two-way symmetrical communication model is also seen as the most ethical approach to creating organisational-public relationships and is more effective in meeting organisational goals than the models mentioned previously (Dozier et al., 1995). The model has been used by governments in order to maintain mutual cooperation, benefit and sometimes even restraint (Diab, 2010; Tam, 2015). According to Lindeborg (1994), the two-way symmetrical model serves as a mechanism by which organisations and publics, or stakeholders, interact to manage interdependence and conflict for the benefit of all.

With regard to two-way communication's application in IR, the model can be used to increase mutual understanding and benefit, and reduce misunderstanding between countries (Tam, 2015). Diab (2010) further lends credence to the importance of the two-way communication model in building a relationship, as well as reducing misunderstanding between nations. Vanc and Fitzpatrick (2016), in their study about the scope and status of public diplomacy research by public relations scholars between 1990 and 2014, emphasise the importance of the two-way communication model in diplomacy in order to build relationships. According to Steyn and Puth (2000), organisations that practice two-way communication to address issues of strategic importance, as well as concerns and interests, are in a position to establish mutually beneficial relationships that generate legitimacy, trust and a good reputation.

Despite the fact that the four models of PR still dominate the field in many developed and developing countries, the models have over the years been criticised by many scholars and practitioners. Murphy (1991) was the first to criticise the models with the Game Theory. In the Game Theory, symmetrical communication embodies pure-cooperation games between both the institution and its public, where working together is the aim of the game. Holtzhausen

(2000), L'Etang and Pieczka (1996), and Motion and Weaver (2005), among others, argue that Grunig and Hunt's (1984) symmetry model tends to the organisation's interest in favour of the audience, and does not address issues of inequalities in authorities within institutions. They also claim that the symmetry model is unrealistic because PR practitioners have an allegiance to the institutions, not to the public.

In response to these critiques, Grunig (2006) asserts that the models of PR do not attempt to explain everything in public relations; instead, it is a comprehensive way of thinking that can be used to solve many positive and normative public relations problems. Regarding the symmetrical model, Grunig el at. (2002) emphasise that the concept of symmetry directly implies a balance of the organisation's and the public's interest.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter provides a conceptual frame for analysing how a select South African municipality uses communication strategies to engage, build and maintain relations with international sister cities. The next chapter discusses the research design and methodology used.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology adopted to achieve the objective of the study, which is to assess the communication strategies used by IR practitioners in a South African municipality to build and maintain relations with international sister cities. The methods of inquiry, including the choice of the research design and data collection; namely the semi-structured interviews, as well as data analysis methods, are presented. The interview process is explained in detail. Also discussed are the strategies used to reach the targeted participants. Attention is also paid to the process of selecting the sample, where the method of purposive sampling was implemented as the most suitable qualitative approach for this study. Furthermore, the ethical issues taken into consideration are discussed.

According to Somekh and Lewin (2005), research methodology is defined as the rules by which a particular piece of research is undertaken. It is the overall strategy applied in conducting research and includes the procedures that allow the work of the researcher to be analysed, repeated and adopted (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). Mouton and Muller (1998) state that the choice of a methodology depends entirely on the research problem and the objectives the study seeks to meet.

4.2 Qualitative research methodology

Three primary approaches can be used in research to obtain knowledge. They are quantitative (positivist), qualitative (interpretivism) or mixed-methods research methodology. According to Newman and Benz (1998), qualitative and quantitative approaches represent different ends on a continuum. The qualitative methodology intends to understand a complex reality and the meaning of actions in a given context. In contrast, the quantitative method seeks to obtain accurate and reliable measurements that allow a statistical analysis (Queirós et al., 2017). Both methodologies offer a set of plans, potentialities and limitations that must be explored and known by researchers. Mixed-methods research resides in the middle of this continuum as it incorporates elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Cresswell, 2013).

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology guided by a single case study to understand the communication strategies used by IR practitioners in a select South African municipality to build and sustain relationships with international sister cities. Single case studies are particularly useful for process studies that examine the rich, real-world context in which a phenomenon occurs (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007).

This interpretive method proved suitable because it fits the theoretical framework and is more appropriate than a quantitative approach to address the research questions. Starman (2013) asserts that the qualitative approach is the most successful approach when a phenomenon under investigation is not well-understood or well-defined. The method is characterised by an interpretative paradigm, which emphasises subjective experiences and the meanings they have for an individual.

Bryman (2012) submits that in qualitative research, in the process of gathering and analysing data, the emphasis is on words rather than numbers. It is thus interpretive as individuals use it to understand their social settings and provide a view of ever-changing social reality. According to Cresswell (2013), the process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The primary strength of the qualitative approach is the ability to probe for underlying values, beliefs and assumptions. Another benefit of the qualitative approach is that the inquiry is broad and open-ended, allowing the participants to raise issues that matter most to them (Yauch & Steudel, 2003). Ritchey and Coker (2014) emphasise that a qualitative method is needed when a researcher seeks to obtain information from people who practice a specific role, who are specialists. The objective of the qualitative methodology is to produce in-depth and illustrative knowledge to understand the various dimensions of the problem under analysis (Queirós et al., 2017).

Schensul and LeCompte (2012) suggest that by immersing and interacting with a study's participant, a researcher comes to understand behaviours and the meanings attributed. This position informed the choice of methodology, as most interpretive studies adopt a qualitative research approach. Furthermore, an extensive corpus of academic inquiry on paradiplomacy hinges on qualitative research approaches, such as the use of comparative case studies and single case studies to explore the international relations of subnational governments.

4.2.1 Limitations of qualitative research methodology

The researcher was aware of the limitations of qualitative research. The limitations consistent with this study were observed. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2013), qualitative research requires considerable preparation and meticulous planning. Choy (2014) further notes that the collection and analysis of the data generated can be time-consuming. This time factor suggests why qualitative research commonly employs a fairly smaller number of respondents, which may compromise the quality of the study.

Critics of qualitative research argue that the strategy lacks rigour, is impressionistic and delivers biased results (Mackieson et al., 2019). Maxwell (2005), on the other hand, advocates that qualitative research works with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes, which corresponds to a deeper space of relationships, processes and phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalisation of variables. Similarly, Crescentini and Mainardi (2009) note that the adoption of qualitative research techniques is not a handicap to publishing a research article. Because the purpose of this research is explorative, and will employ methods of collection of data such as interviews and document analysis, the qualitative strategy was seen to be most appropriate.

4.3 Research Design

The research design refers to the strategies followed in addressing a research problem. It provides the overall structure for the procedures the researcher follows, the data the researcher collects and the data analyses the researcher conducts (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Simply put, it represents the blueprint for the collection, measurement and analysis of data. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), a research design places researchers in the empirical world. It connects them to specific sites, persons, groups, institutions and bodies of relevant interpretive material including documents and archives. The choice of a research design reflects decisions about the priority given to a range of dimensions of the research process (Bryman, 2012). The study adopted an explorative case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the communications strategies used by municipal IR practitioners to build and maintain relations with international sister cities.

4.3.1 Exploratory case study approach

The interest in case studies as a method for generating and testing theory has recently gained strength, especially in research in the areas of strategic management (Cassell et al., 2006; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Gibbert et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2007; Platt, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007). According to Yin (2014), the case study's value lies in its ability to deal with a variety of evidence, such as documents, artefacts, interviews and observations beyond what might be available in a general historical study. The method is preferred when "how" or "why" questions are being posed. It is also relevant when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 1994). Burns and Grove (2001) define exploratory research as research conducted to gain new insights, discover new ideas and increase knowledge of a phenomenon. Dubois and Gadde (2002) further note that the single case study strategy can generate insights into a phenomenon in its real-life context, leading to detailed, empirical descriptions and the development of theory.

Yin (2009), however, stresses that case studies have both advantages and disadvantages as a research method. The researcher understands and acknowledges this fact. Although some have criticised case studies as a weak basis for generalisation (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Soy, 1997), other proponents dispute this view with the qualification that research (single case studies included) is rarely an entirely new discovery of phenomena but a refinement of understanding (Bergen & While, 2000). Woodside (2013) defends case studies by arguing that the objective of case study research is not to generalise findings to a population but to prove a theory. Yin (2014) similarly refutes criticism of generalising a case study research and presents a well-constructed explanation of the difference between analytical generalisation and statistical generalisation. Yin (2014:67) argues that "in analytical generalisation, the previously developed theory is used as a template against which to compare the empirical results of the case study".

Reflecting on the use of single cases, Mariotto et al. (2014) note that the single case allows a more precise understanding of the circumstances in which phenomena occur and therefore tends to be more reliable. The focus is on one particular unit. A unit can be an individual, a group, an organisation or a local community – and is recommended as a suitable design when a researcher wants to understand the interaction between a specific context and a phenomenon (Jacobsen, 2002). Yin (2009) likewise defines the single case study method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident.

According to Cronin (2014:20), case study research is a highly legitimate research method appropriate for qualitative research dealing with "the understanding and change of interwoven complexities associated with interpersonal processes that emerge in a wider social context". Yin (2009) further notes that the single case study method allows investigators to retain a holistic view of real-life events, such as organisational and managerial processes, international relations and the maturation of industries. Merriam (1998) argues that single case studies allow one to get as close to one's area of interest as possible, both through direct observation in the natural environment, but also because one gets access to the subjective factors.

The single case study method was therefore chosen by the researcher to examine the communication strategies used by IR practitioners to build and maintain relations with their international counterparts. This method enabled the researcher to understand the complex real-life activities in which multiple sources of evidence were used. The fact that the literature reviewed revealed a gap in actual cases exploring the communication strategies used by IR practitioners at the subnational level to build and sustain relations, further validated the chosen approach.

4.4 Unit of analysis

The municipality chosen is one of the most globally active metropoles in South Africa with more than a dozen active international sister city relationships. While historical relationships with international partners date back to the apartheid era (as early as 1975), the municipality has only since 2011 – following the election of a new mayor – rapidly gained a reputation in the international arena. This was largely due to its internationally oriented development strategy under the new administration and efforts to turn the municipality into an attractive destination for investment. Prior to 2011, the municipality was party to various sister city agreements and international conferences, but lacked a clearly defined agenda. Policies dealt with how to conduct international business but did not address motivations for improved international relations. In 2012, the municipality's policy shifted towards proactive marketing, economic relationships and best practice sharing, resulting in the establishment of a dedicated international relations unit, located in the Office of the Executive Mayor. The unit – currently comprising of four IR practitioners, including a manager – is responsible for maintaining, building and managing relationships with foreign cities (formal and friendly) and strategic partners (international memberships) from around the world. Between 2011 and 2019, the municipality entered into 17 international sister city partnership agreements. The municipality, in its strategic IR policy, emphasises the importance of building international relationships, cooperation and partnerships that encourage economic growth and opportunity. Municipal IR practitioners guide how the organisation proactively seeks to develop new relationships with partners that have the potential to enhance the municipality's economic, social and cultural life. Of the existing sister city agreements (as at 31 December 2019), two are in Africa, four in Europe, three in the United States, three in Central and South America, one in the Middle East, and five in Asia. The chosen municipality was thus the most appropriate unit of analysis for this study.

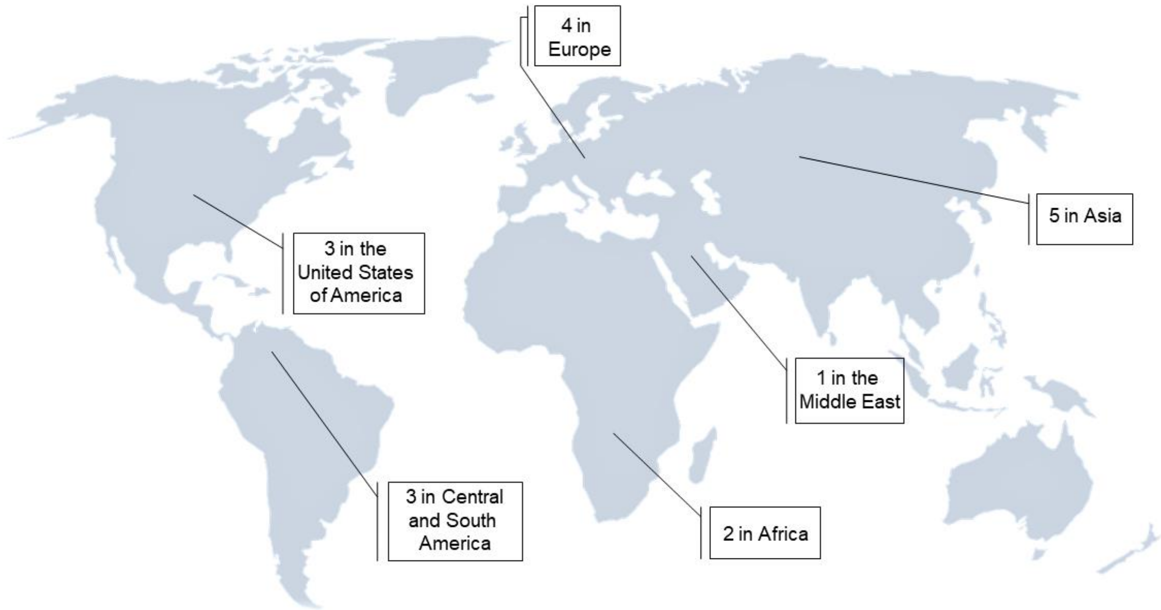

Figure 4.1: The number of active sister city agreements per continent
Source: The municipality's International Relations Annual Overview (2019)

4.5 Data collection techniques

This section summarises the various techniques used to gather data and how the data was analysed, interpreted and presented. Researchers can draw from a variety of different sources when collecting data in case study research. These include interviews, direct or participant observations, and artefacts such as documents or records (Norander & Brandhorst, 2017). For this study, the researcher collected data from semi-structured interviews (four participants) and document analysis (the IR unit's 2019 annual overview, policies, publications and press releases). The aim was to understand the communication strategies used by municipal IR professionals in a South African municipality to build and sustain relationships with international sister cities. Data collection took place between August 2019 and December 2019.

4.5.1 Semi-structured interviews

Using the semi-structured interview as a data collection tool allowed me, (the researcher), to obtain first-hand information from municipal IR practitioners. According to Saunders and Townsend (2016), the semi-structured interview is a purposeful conversation between two or more people, requiring the interviewer to establish rapport and ask short and unambiguous questions, to which the interviewee is willing to respond, and to listen attentively. Creswell (2013) further notes that qualitative interviews have their origins in qualitative research philosophy and that they take the form of a conversation to understand the participant's constructed nature of reality. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were used in this study to explore and understand how IR practitioners in a South African municipality build and maintain relations with international sister cities.

According to Edwards and Holland (2013), semi-structured interviews provide a platform for the participant to respond freely and give their perspective on the subject matter. The flexibility of the interview, note the authors, also serves as an advantage for the interviewer, because the interviewer can probe responses further and trace the real meaning behind the responses of the participant. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews have an explorative nature, meaning that during the meeting the researcher has the crucial role in guiding and keeping all participants on the topic under investigation (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The flexibility of this approach, particularly compared to structured interviews, also allows for the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the researcher. Through individual interviews, the researcher seeks to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say (Kvale,1996).

For this study, semi-structured interviews were chosen because they suited the nature of the inquiry. They allowed the researcher to prepare questions beforehand and probe for further details and clarifications where necessary.

4.5.2 Limitations of semi-structured interviews

Aware of the limitations attributed to the chosen interview technique, an effort was made by the researcher to counter the weaknesses. For example, interviews were conducted at precise locations selected by the participants to ensure that they were comfortable and relaxed, and could open up. The research participants were given the research proposal and the ethical clearance certificate from the university after indicating their desire to participate in the study. Since contact with participants was established before the interviews, appointments were made and dates agreed upon by the participants, the researcher was able to conduct interviews smoothly with no cancellations or postponements. Though time-consuming and labour intensive, as highlighted by Adams (2015), the researcher was able to elicit detailed candid insights. Much time was also spent obtaining the necessary approval from the municipality to access the IR practitioners.

4.5.3 Research participants and sampling procedure

According to Henning et al. (2004), the criteria used to select participants come from the researcher's understanding of the issue under investigation. Four participants in this study, employed by the municipality chosen, were purposively and conveniently selected based on the positions they hold, as well as their role in communicating with and building and sustaining relations with international sister cities. Purposive sampling techniques are primarily used in qualitative studies. They may be defined as selecting units (e.g., individuals, groups of individuals or institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study's questions (Patton, 1990). Maxwell (1997) further defined purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which particular settings, persons or events are deliberately selected for the vital information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices. This type of sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015).

4.5.4 Document analysis

For the researcher to validate and understand further how municipal IR practitioners engage with international sister cities, there was a need to use other techniques of collecting information. Hence, document analysis was employed. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic material, which requires that data be examined and interpreted to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The analytical procedure involves finding, selecting, appraising and synthesising data contained in documents (Bowen, 2009). The data yielded is then organised into major themes and categories through content analysis (Labuschagne, 2003). This technique was chosen to triangulate the data and provide a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility. According to Patton (1990), triangulation helps the researcher guard against the accusation that the study's findings are simply an artefact of a single method, a single source or a single investigator's bias. The researcher managed to obtain the International Relations unit's 2019 annual overview, the unit's strategic policy and IR-related press releases issued by the municipality in 2019. Permission to access these documents was sought during the personal interviews.

4.6 Data analysis

Data was analysed qualitatively. According to Cresswell (2013), data analysis in qualitative studies requires the researcher to make sense of the primary data obtained. This process yields a deeper understanding of the data, analysing the same data using different methods and, finally, interpretation of the data. Primary data was collected via semi-structured interviews with four municipal IR practitioners. A voice recorder was used to record the interviews, which the researcher later carefully transcribed. Given that the researcher was the primary instrument for collecting and analysing the data (Terre-Blanche et al., 2006), the researcher endeavoured to listen empathetically during the interviews. The researcher also interpreted the findings subjectively.

To complement the interviews, the researcher obtained and analysed documents such as annual reports, bulletins, policies and press releases issued by or related to the municipality's IR unit. Permission to access these documents was sought during the interviews. This process is meant to ascertain whether there is a correlation between the data collected from the interviews and the data obtained through document analysis.

The researcher triangulated the findings of the documents analysed with insights from the interviews. Triangulation is a qualitative research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources (Carter et al., 2014).

For this study, qualitative content analysis was used to analyse and explain the data transcribed from the digital recordings of the interview transcripts and selected documents. Given that the data was obtained from different sources, the researcher applied Tesch's eight-step strategy (Tesch, 1990) to triangulate the findings and maintain a logical and thorough analysis as it emerged from the content.

First, to get a sense of the whole, the researcher carefully read through all the data. Following this, he organised the data into chunks of information and started identifying patterns and creating themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that the primary purpose of this stage is to establish the depth and breadth of data collected. Once the data familiarisation process was completed, the researcher started to design initial codes from the data set. According to Boyatzis (1998:63), this phase of thematic analysis is "the most basic element of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon".

The data was then organised into meaningful groups so that repeated themes could be identified and coded. Coding is the pivotal link between data collection and explaining the meaning of the data (Charmaz, 2006). Saldana (2013) defines code as a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing and evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. The author explains that this form of data can be retrieved from multiple sources including but not limited to field notes, journals, official documents, interview transcripts and participant observation.

During coding, the researcher utilised Grbich's (2012) block-and-file technique to conduct a two-level analysis, i.e.,

- each participant's transcript was individually and manually coded, line by line; and
- similar quotes gathered from all participants were classified into segments and arranged in a table for further analysis.

This was critical as the study sought to do an in-depth analysis of the communication strategies used by municipal IR practitioners in a select South African municipality to build and maintain relationships with sister cities. Once the researcher had identified potential patterns, the search for themes began. This was achieved when he read the coded segments several times and compared them to each other in order to identify any similarities or differences. This method is a thematic map that helps to find the relationship among themes, as well as to make them visual (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.6.1 Thematic analysis

After identifying some themes, the researcher started to refine them and create a thematic map to arrange them. As part of the refinement, the researcher also identified some sub-themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:92), the latter can be useful for "giving structure to a particularly large and complex theme, as well as for demonstrating the hierarchy of meaning within the data".

The last stage was to present the findings. During this phase, the researcher arranged the data and undertook the final analysis to produce the outcomes. The presentation of the results, embedded in narrative format with the use of quotes where necessary, can be found in the next chapter.

4.6.2 Reliability and validity

According to Yin (1994), as in all research, consideration must be given to construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. Lincoln and Guba (1985:316) state that: "Since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former (validity) is sufficient to establish the latter (reliability)".

It was necessary to establish a transparent chain of evidence to allow the readers of the case to reconstruct how the researcher departed from the initial research questions and reached the conclusions (Gibbert et al., 2008; Yin, 2005). For this purpose, thick description (Geertz, 1994) and triangulation (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) were indicated procedures (Gibbert et al., 2008).

As recommended in Creswell (2013), Merriam (2009), Meyer (2001) and Yin (2009, 2012), the research problem and questions were framed from theory, and a study rationale developed. According to Meyer (2001), the development of a well-informed theoretical framework to guide a single case study should improve consistency, rigour and trust. This study adopts the qualitative research method as is consistent with background literature, to capture the complexity of the object of study, how IR practitioners in a select South African municipality use communication to build and maintain relations with international sister cities. According to Hyett et al. (2014) quoting Meyer (2001), "the development of a well-informed theoretical framework to guide a case study improves and enhances rigour, consistency and credibility in qualitative case study research" (Hyett et al., 2014:3). For this purpose, having a theoretical proposition before data collection is a vital phase in the rigorous qualitative case study research. The benefit of developing a theory is the presence of more robust research design and methodology and a heightened ability to interpret the data collected and to link it with the study questions and objectives (Hyett et al., 2014).

In-depth interviews were conducted with all four IR practitioners in the municipality's IR unit to achieve multiple sources of data. The researcher compared information collected from interviews with the documents analysed to verify the validity of data. This triangulation of data collection methods enabled the researcher to corroborate information collected from the individual participants.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are an essential component of research. According to Strydom (2005), researchers are obliged to research in an ethically acceptable manner. In this study, the rights of participants were protected through the informed consent form that participants were expected to read, understand and sign before the interview. According to Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996), informed consent is the agreement of an individual to participate in a study after being informed of the facts that would be likely to influence his or her willingness to participate. In order to avoid perceived deception regarding the purpose of the research, a formal procedure according to the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's (CPUT's) ethical guidelines for collecting data from participants was followed before undertaking the research. This involved submitting the research topic to the Higher Degree

Committee (HDC) of CPUT for approval, undergoing research proposal presentation and sending signed consent letters from the participants.

Participants were made aware that they were not obligated to participate in the study and could, therefore, drop out at any stage of the interview. Additionally, anonymity was guaranteed throughout the process. Permission to record the interviews was also obtained at the start of each session. Anyone approached to participate in the study had the right to decline without any justification.

As per the agreement, the name of the municipality and the names of participants were not mentioned in the process of reporting. Instead, pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality as follows:

- IR practitioner 1 – Sam*
- IR practitioner 2 – Julian*
- IR practitioner 3 – Michael*
- IR practitioner 4 – Lee*

Confidentiality in this study meant that the participants researched should be protected by making it challenging to attach aspects of data to a definite individual. This enabled the participants to share their views freely, and, in turn, aided the researcher to gain comprehensive information.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter presented a detailed description of the methodology used in the research, the population, sample, data collection instruments as well as strategies used to ensure the ethical standards, reliability and validity of the study. The next chapter discusses the research findings of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to analyse and understand the communication strategies used by municipal international relations practitioners in a select South African municipality to build and maintain relations with international sister cities. In-depth interviews were conducted with each of the municipality's four IR specialists, which included the IR manager, to obtain first-hand information on the tactics used to communicate and cultivate relations with international counterparts. Ethical factors were observed throughout the study including the use of pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Pseudonyms were selected for the IR professionals as follows:

- IR practitioner 1 – Sam
- IR practitioner 2 – Julian
- IR practitioner 3 – Michael
- IR practitioner 4 – Lee

Additionally, to validate and understand further how IR practitioners engage with international sister cities, document analysis was employed. Documents examined included the IR unit's 2019 annual review, its strategic policy and protocol guidelines, international trip feedback reports, sister city partnership agreements and IR-related press releases issued by the municipality between 1 January to 31 December 2019.

This chapter discusses and analyses the findings of the research undertaken. The analysis was guided by the PR Excellence theories, as well as the literature on PR knowledge and stakeholder relationship management. The report is presented in a narrative form using quotations where necessary, as extrapolated from the interview transcripts and the documents analysed.

5.2 Strategies used to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities

The research findings show that IR professionals in a selected South African municipality are using a combination of one-way and two-way symmetrical communication strategies to foster relationships with international sister cities. One-way communication approaches are used to disseminate information and increase visibility (one-directional), whereas two-way implies an exchange of information through openness, feedback and evaluative research (Huang,1997). In-depth interviews revealed that strategies employed by municipal IR practitioners include research, information dissemination, networking, advocacy and interpersonal communication. The aforementioned strategies are consistent with Grunig and Huang's (2000) conceptualised dimensions of relationship-building using communication strategies embedded in a two-way symmetrical model.

5.2.1 Two-way symmetrical approaches

Findings further revealed that the dominant two-way communication channels being used to build and maintain relationships with sister cities include official international missions and meetings with visiting delegations, technical exchanges, emails, telephone calls and virtual engagements. Documents analysed verify that these communication channels are being intentionally utilised to network and cultivate reciprocal relationships with international sister cities.

5.2.1.1 International missions, hosted meetings and technical exchanges

International missions, meetings with visiting delegations and knowledge-sharing through technical exchanges are the key passageways through which the municipality dialogues and cultivates mutually-beneficial relationships with international sister cities. IR practitioners interviewed stated that outbound missions were either purposive, in the case of investment and trade missions, or compulsory when fulfilling commitments such as attending conferences that fulfil the requirements of the municipality's membership of international organisations or sister city agreements. Stated Julian*:

> *"As IR officials, we have to continuously maintain these relationships so that they don't go dormant. Key to managing and maintaining these is regular communication and continuously finding ways to establish relations with key contacts in sister cities, which is mainly done during international missions, when hosting visiting delegations and through technical exchanges. Every month we have to show some type of activity, so we are required as IR officials to engage consistently."*

An analysis of the IR unit's 2019 annual review showed that the municipality embarked on 79 international missions to over 40 countries. According to Lefèvre and d'Albergo (2007), intercity relationships occur as a result of deliberate actions carried out by players operating within a city's political and governance system. Three of the four IR professionals interviewed for this study revealed that the process to initiate relationships with international cities, whether formal or informal, was strategic and could take several years to achieve. Additionally, all of them stated that relationships pursued were guided by the municipality's international relations strategic policy and that a sister city agreement (the initiation of formal city-to-city partnerships) had to be ratified by the municipality's publicly elected officials, including the executive (i.e., the executive mayor, the executive deputy mayor and members of the mayoral committee). Findings also show that municipal IR professionals conducted extensive research before engaging with prospective sister cities and that the intelligence gathered was fed back to the organisation's senior management for evaluation and decision. Sam* explained that:

> *"As IR, we do extensive research before initiating these relationships…"*

Michael* commented that:

> *"When identifying international partners, we often look at the strategic focus of the municipality, taking into account strategic documents like the city's Integrated Development Plan (IDP)."*

Lee* added that:

> *"Relationships are initiated around set goals and objectives, as dictated by the executive."*

This finding clearly indicates that municipal IR professionals in South Africa are embracing two-way symmetrical communication by conducting research, employing listening tactics and providing feedback to the organisation's senior management and the executive. The two-way symmetrical communication model in public relations (Grunig, 1994) is considered the most influential framework, emerging from the Excellence Theory. The aforementioned finding is also consistent with one of Grunig's (1992) principles of excellent communication, in which the practitioner has access to senior managers with the greatest power in the organisation. This access allows the practitioner to provide feedback from key stakeholders to influence decisions or change the behaviour of the organisation (Grunig et al., 1992).

An analysis of the municipality's policy documents and interview data further revealed that hosted engagements with visiting sister city delegations were crucial to strengthening relationships. During such visits, IR practitioners have the opportunity to have interpersonal engagement and dialogue with officials, as well as counterparts of these cities.

Annual reports analysed revealed that IR professionals in this study hosted 65 international delegations during the municipality's 2018/19 financial year from, among others, the United States, Finland, Spain, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Thailand, Pakistan, India and

Austria. Interviews further revealed that the dissemination of information, particularly related to economic data and opportunities for investment, was a key focus of such hosted engagements. A description on the IR unit's webpage states that: "The International Relations unit deals with economic diplomacy daily and works towards showcasing [the municipality] on global platforms, enhancing an enabling environment for new investments and creating new enterprises within the local economy."

Michael explained that:

> *"A large part of what we do is economic diplomacy. I can say that around 70% of visiting delegations come here for trade and investment-related information or decision-making. They want to do business with Africa and South Africa. The content of these engagements relate to investment opportunities, what the municipality's priority sectors are, etc. As IR officials, we coordinate and facilitate these engagements. We are not the subject matter experts. Our role is to get the technical officials in the room to explain these processes. However, it is critical for an IR official to be present to facilitate the engagement and to guide the discussion if necessary."*

During the interviews, it was found that key action points often arose from hosted engagements with visiting delegations, which are tracked by IR professionals and reported on quarterly. Lee pointed out that these engagements often led to considerable investment, knowledge exchange and city-to-city collaboration.

> *"Quite a few investment success stories have come from these… It truly fills you with a sense of pride when you drive around the city and see the factories and businesses that have opened as a result of a meeting you helped facilitate, or from the information you shared with a visiting delegation."*

According to Ki and Hon (2009), meetings and other focused engagements are essential for cultivating satisfactory relationships, as they provide access and opportunity for both the organisation and stakeholder to express or share opinions and thoughts.

5.2.1.2 Networking

According to Davidson et al. (2019), networked urban governance is emerging as a significant feature of metropolitan strategy and activity. Research findings in this study revealed that building networks in and outside of the municipality were critical in strengthening relationships with international sister cities. Interviewees told that such networks assisted with peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and collaboration, information gathering and resources. Julian explained that networking at a diplomatic event, for example, enabled IR professionals to build linkages and become key connectors for the organisation.

> *"I could meet someone at a consular corps event who is an expert on climate change, for example, and through our engagement, I could link that individual with an official in our environment department. By networking with sister city counterparts and members of the diplomatic community, we also become important linkages or connectors, which could potentially enhance the work of the municipality."*

Sam pointed out that:

> *"Networking is critical in IR. It enables us to engage in a two-way dialogue with stakeholders, and in some instances, allows us to gain an understanding of their perception of the municipality, as well as their expectations."*

5.2.1.3 Electronic and telephone communication

Emails and telephone calls also emerged among the key communication strategies used to engage with sister city counterparts. Interviews revealed that telephone calls and personalised emails are also being used to maintain two-way communication with international sister cities. Interviewees stated that these methods of communication were preferred and were often the most effective channels of communication. Michael noted that:

> *"With time differences, the best channel for personalised communication is email. It also allows for the person to read through the email, apply their mind or solicit responses from colleagues, and then reply."*

Julian pointed out that:

> *"Email works best for effective two-way communication because an official in a sister city may have to get my email translated from English into Mandarin, for instance. In my experience, email works well, but I will from time to time also reach out with a telephone or Skype call."*

Lee emphasised that:

> *"As IR professionals, we know our sister cities, and we know which method works best for each of them. Depending on the situation and the urgency, I will call – taking into consideration the time difference, or if the communication is not too urgent, I will email."*

Without exception, all interviewees emphasised the fundamental and paramount importance of regular dialogue. Riordan (2003) describes dialogue in international relations as listening as well as talking, and accepting that you don't have all the answers and that others might have valid alternative solutions. IR professionals in this study revealed that without regular and open dialogue, it is impossible to build, less maintain, relationships with international sister cities. Sam stated that:

> *"Looking for and identifying opportunities for engagement and genuine dialogue is a key aspect of the job."*

Michael pointed out that:

> *"Regular open dialogue is critical. There is no place for deceit when it comes to engaging with sister cities. The majority of our sister city agreements are active because of active dialogue and two-way communication. Without it, there are no international relations."*

Consistent with the tenets of two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig, 1992), the above quotation shows that municipal IR professionals are harnessing interpersonal communication to build and maintain relationships with key stakeholders. Through open dialogue, counterparts in sister cities are regularly provided with an opportunity to resolve issues and negotiate competing interests.

Additionally, Michael stated that what made one-on-one engagement and frequent dialogue easier in their location was the fact that the municipality had a large diplomatic presence.

> *"So there is an opportunity here to leverage and make use of the diplomatic presence to have dialogue and engage with the consuls general and their staff."*

Furthermore, the findings revealed that municipal IR professionals are gradually also adopting IR websites and email newsletters as a strategy of digital interactivity and value creation. Sam stated that:

"We have started working with our internal communications department to look at how we can better utilise the municipality's website and other digital communication channels. We also work closely with our investment colleagues, whose digital information – economic data and resources – we share with sister cities and other partners."

5.2.1.4 Virtual meetings

Research findings further revealed that virtual meetings in the form of video conferencing via Skype and Zoom are emerging channels in IR for two-way communication and knowledge sharing. Interviewees explained that while these were not frequently used, and often relied on internet connectivity in participating locations, when they did connect virtually with international partners, it allowed for engaging meetings. Lee noted that:

"I'd agree that Skype or video call is a good way to engage in two-way communication. Some might feel that they can open up or engage more freely. However, as IR, we haven't fully explored all of these digital communication channels yet, but I'm sure we will."

5.2.2 One-way communication approaches

Interviews and an analysis of the IR unit's annual review revealed that one-way communication approaches are also key in the arsenal of strategies used by municipal IR practitioners to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities. Tactics include disseminating promotional digital and print resources to sister cities and members of the consular corps based in the municipality, as well as message formulation for speeches, letters, press releases and talking points for the executive when they engage on international relations.

5.2.2.1 Digital and print promotional resources

IR professionals interviewed revealed that they frequently disseminate digital and print resources to sister cities, visiting delegations and members of the consular corps based in the municipality. Resources obtained and analysed include a Universal Serial Bus (USB) flash drive containing economic data, videos, an overview of the key economic sectors and investment opportunities in the municipality; a promotional brochure which is available in five foreign languages; an executive summary of the municipality's Integrated Development Plan (IDP); digital copies of the municipality's economic performance indicators, issued quarterly; and press releases, issued following visits by international delegations and after members of the executive returned from international missions. Sam stated that:

> *"When it comes to collateral, like publications and promotional material and even gifts for visiting delegations, we work very closely with sister departments, particularly our enterprise and investment colleagues. They develop and package the material, sometimes with input from the IR team, and we disseminate these to our international partners."*

Julian pointed out that:

> *"The information packaged in the brochures and the digital resources are extremely important and valuable for sister cities and their stakeholders. Investors use the data and information to make decisions on whether to invest in the municipality or not. So, the dissemination of the material has a dual purpose – to promote the municipality and position it as globally competitive, and to help stakeholders make informed decisions."*

As indicated in the quotation, the dissemination of information, while one-way, appears to be more nuanced and driven by the need to inform international stakeholders and potential investors, attract economic gain and position the municipality globally.

5.2.2.2 Positioning the municipality on the world stage

The in-depth interviews and content analysis revealed that the IR unit works towards promoting and positioning the municipality as a competitive global hub for economic, social and cultural activity – one that values international connectivity as a means to facilitate job creation through private sector-led economic growth. During in-depth interviews, IR professionals acknowledged that reputation management played a part in their engagements and interactions with sister cities. Reputation in international relations is about having a good name on the world stage, and refers to collective judgments of a country, region or city's image and character that are used to predict or explain its future behaviour (Mercer, 1996). Simply put, Wang (2006) describes it as others' summary construct of a nation, region or city's culture, policy and conduct. According to Tuch (1990), cultivating and managing a favourable international or world opinion has been the mandate of public diplomacy in international relations for decades. Findings of this study confirmed the practice in a South

African municipality. Analysis of the municipality's IR policy revealed that "the articulation of a clear set of goals and objectives that promote the interests of [the municipality] and that align with the values and strategic policy objectives of the administration" were fundamental to the successful realisation of its broad economic and social aims. Objectives listed in the policy include:

- attracting investment;
- promoting local businesses abroad;
- attracting visitors;
- attracting large strategic events;
- promoting civic life;
- promoting the municipality as a model of excellence and innovation in government;
- gaining policy insights from other international city governments; and
- shaping the social policy agenda, particularly with regard to matters of redress, reconciliation, delivery and diversity.

According to interviewees, the IR unit collaborates with various departments to promote and showcase the city internationally for the benefit of the municipality and its residents. In this regard, Julian stated that:

> *"We do this constantly… ensuring that the city is viewed in a positive light by our international partners. Through our interactions with them alone, for example, by assisting with queries timeously, being accommodating, cordial and honest; I believe it enhances the city's image."*

Another interviewee pointed out that the responsibility to protect the city's reputation was frequently highlighted to the executive and officials participating in international engagements. Noted Lee:

> *"It's part of the advice and the briefings we provide. Municipal officials are well aware of the fact that they represent the city when they travel or engage on international platforms. Through our engagements with the technical experts in the various departments, we subtly remind them of this from time to time."*

Sam emphasised that:

> *"In as much as we can, we always shamelessly promote [the municipality], whether with diplomats stationed here or visiting delegations, or when we embark on international missions ourselves. With every engagement, we look at ways of promoting [the municipality] and sending out a positive message."*

5.2.2.3 The strategic voice of the executive

Interviews revealed that the executive mayor and executive deputy mayor are the face and voice of the municipality on international affairs. Interviewees stated that through their international engagements, interactions and speeches, the executive could influence and cultivate relationships with international stakeholders. In this regard, the briefings and input from IR professionals to speeches, presentations and official communiques were vital. Julian explained that:

> *"What comes out of the mouth of the executive during these international engagements becomes extremely important in our efforts to build and maintain relationships. Therefore, the pointers we provide to the spokespeople who craft the speeches and press releases are so important."*

Document analysis further revealed that statements and IR-related press releases issued by the municipality are communicated in the name of the executive mayor, executive deputy mayor or members of the mayoral committee, demonstrating the importance of the voice of the executive in building international relationships.

5.2.2.4 Press releases and ad-hoc international media engagement

IR professionals in this study reported that while they do not directly engage with the media, they do provide strategic input for IR-related press releases and media engagements. Interviewees agree that these PR tools contribute to strengthening relations with international partners. Analysis of the findings showed that media relations within the municipality are centralised in the communications department. All press releases, press interviews and enquiries are managed by and issued from the media office. In this regard, Lee stated that:

"In IR, we are not authorised and can't directly engage with the media. However, we do provide input into IR-related press releases and statements by providing a broad narrative containing key points."

Julian pointed out that during international trips, mainly when spokespeople for the executive are not in attendance, IR professionals often have to facilitate engagements between the executive and foreign media.

"If no spokesperson or media professional is travelling with the delegation, we would usually refer the journalist to the municipality's media office or, depending on the circumstances, we would facilitate an interview with the member of the executive – be it the executive mayor, the executive deputy mayor or mayoral committee member, depending on if they agree. We would then also immediately inform the city spokespeople."

The findings demonstrate that relationships cultivated by municipal IR practitioners are as a result of both one-way and two-way communication. Probed on the importance of social media as a strategy to strengthening ties with international partners, IR professionals revealed that this was an area yet to be explored. In contemporary IR literature, engagement has been discussed in association with the use of social media to promote dialogue, mutual respect, partnership and mutual understanding (Zhang 2013). In this regard, Sam pointed out that:

"While I am very pro social media, I do understand that the municipality's regulations don't allow for IR to have a separate social media account. Therefore, we have started engaging with the communications department to investigate ways of using existing platforms to communicate IR activities."

Michael stated that:

"I think we have to be active on social media as IR because that is where the world is engaging. Pretty soon we will have no choice. While saying that though, I do think that trained media professionals should manage the platforms, with input from the IR team."

Lee, on the other hand, emphasised the importance of the executive having a social media presence, as opposed to the IR unit itself.

"It's more important for the mayor, as our champion on international relations, to have a social profile. Most times it's the mayor who meets international delegations or travels on international missions – so it makes sense for the executive to be the face of our engagements and international activity. As IR, our role instead is to provide input and strategic advice to the mayor's spokesperson on content to post rather than manage a social media account exclusively for IR-related engagement."

5.3 Key roles and tasks of IR practitioners in a select South African municipality

The research findings of this study show that at a broad level, municipal IR practitioners in South Africa are adopting the reflective strategist role, based on the mirror function of PR (Steyn, 2000). According to Steyn (2009), the reflective strategist fulfils the coordinating role between the organisation (government, business or non-profit) and key stakeholders. They provide management with an outside (societal) perspective, assisting them to reflect on the organisation's position in the bigger context to balance organisational goals with the well-being of society (the collective interest or common good). In-depth interviews revealed that a key focus of municipal IR practitioners is to strategically manage international relationships and act as the primary point of contact between the municipality and international stakeholders (the external environment). Critical functions of IR professionals were described as building and maintaining international relations through regular engagement, as well as fulfilling a strategic support and facilitation role within the municipality. Furthermore, IR professionals in this study mentioned interpersonal communication as a critical function and paramount to strengthening relationships, particularly during international missions and when hosting foreign delegations. Research and knowledge of current and international affairs, monitoring environmental developments, and providing counsel to the municipal executive and senior municipal officials were also highlighted as essential IR functions.

5.3.1 Initiating international relationships

Interviews revealed that the process to initiate relationships with international cities, whether formal or informal, was strategic and could take several years to achieve. Policy documents analysed confirmed that the IR manager recommended potential sister city partnerships to the executive based on three relationship types: business-enhancement partnerships, governance improvement partnerships and social development partnerships.

5.3.1.1 Business enhancement partnerships

Before entering business-enhancement partnerships, IR practitioners assess the potential to attract inward investment, consider market access for goods and services, synergies across industries, opportunities for skills and technology transfer, as well as business networking opportunities.

5.3.1.2 Governance improvement partnerships

Document analysis revealed that for governance improvement partnerships, the prospective sister city's track record of excellence and innovation is considered, together with opportunities for knowledge and skills transfer, bearing in mind the following: opportunities for personnel exchanges and secondments; comparable size, population and Gross Domestic Product (GDP); and national membership of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), the African Union (AU), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Commonwealth of Nations, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or Mercado Comun del Sur (MERCOSUR), the South American trade bloc.

5.3.1.3 Social development partnerships

For social development partnerships, IR practitioners stated that recommendations were made based on comparable socio-economic conditions and shared democratic values. They also listed other factors, such as existing historical ties and opportunities for dialogue, networking, exchanges or partnerships for community and non-governmental organisations, sports groups and cultural institutions, among others.

The following were some of the responses solicited:

> *"We do extensive research before initiating these relationships…"*
>
> *"When identifying international partners, we often look at the strategic focus of the municipality, taking into account strategic documents like the city's Integrated Development Plan (IDP)."*
>
> *"Relationships are initiated around set goals and objectives, as dictated by the executive."*

5.3.2 Managing and maintaining relationships with international sister cities

Findings of the study show that the management of international sister city agreements is a core function of municipal IR practitioners. In-depth interviews revealed that IR professionals managed around six sister city agreements each, with the IR manager overseeing operations and providing direction. The interviews further revealed that as part of the managing process, IR practitioners regularly evaluated existing sister city relationships. They also guide how the municipality could proactively seek to build new relationships with partners that have the potential to enhance the city's economic, social and cultural life. Data from municipal documents analysed revealed that formal sister city agreements are entered following a request by another city to enter into such relations or following an evidence-based recommendation by the IR unit to the executive, to enter into formal relationships with a specific city.

IR professionals also revealed that a critical component of managing sister city agreements was to build and maintain relationships with IR counterparts in those cities. Julian stated that:

> *"A large part of our role is relationship management and communication. We have to continuously maintain these relationships so that they don't go dormant. Key to managing and maintaining these is regular communication and continuously finding ways to establish relations with key contacts in sister cities, which is mainly done during international missions, when hosting visiting delegations and through the South African embassies and consulates in sister city countries, or the consulates and embassies representing those cities in South Africa. Every month we have to show some type of activity, so we are required as IR officials to engage consistently."*

Similarly, Lee pointed out that:

> *"IR is all about carefully managing relationships. Diplomacy and following the correct protocol are crucial. You cannot do the job if you can't communicate. You have to be trained in verbal and non-verbal communication."*

Explaining the role of IR professionals as "key connectors" in building and maintaining relationships with sister cities, Michael stated that:

> *"Sister city agreements, while not binding, do commit the municipality to cooperation. There are often particular things that cities want to cooperate on. Our role is to facilitate these, which is usually how a sister city relationship flourishes. IR officials*

also act as key connectors, which link experts in international sister cities with technical professionals in the municipality. In that way, the actual relationship is mainstreamed into the everyday work of municipal officials. Expert officials in both or more cities are then able to communicate and collaborate, with IR having an oversight role through our quarterly audits."

All of the IR professionals interviewed identified two-way communication with counterparts as critical in building, maintaining and managing relationships with international sister cities. IR practitioners stated that the tenor of and approach taken in presentations, as well as when questions were posed and answered during engagements, played a critical role in strengthening relationships. They revealed that adhering to the "basic IR rules of engagement", and the applicable protocol was fundamental to sustaining relations. Lee pointed out that:

"Attention to detail is critical. One word can destroy an entire relationship."

"You need to be very careful about what you say and how you say it. What you say to China, you cannot say to Taiwan; and what you say to Israel, you cannot say to Palestine. How and what you communicate with international partners is vital in building and maintaining these relationships."

The in-depth interviews further revealed that active listening, honesty and transparency were critical in the preservation of relationships with sister cities. As argued by Grunig and Grunig (2001), these are characteristics of excellent communication practice. IR professionals stated that using tact and diplomacy appropriately can lead to improved relationships and are a way to build and develop mutual respect, which in turn leads to more successful outcomes. Julian explained that:

"In this environment, you have to be sensitive to people's opinions, beliefs, ideas and feelings. The job requires effective tact and diplomacy."

In the same vein, Sam and Michael pointed out that:

"Listening is crucial. You need to carefully observe your interlocutors and pick up on the nuances to respond appropriately."

"There can be no deceit. Credibility is everything. The key to building these relationships is honesty."

These findings resonate with Hon and Grunig's (1999) relationship management theory, which emphasises the importance of cultivating relationships with key publics through openness and honesty.

5.3.3 Managing international memberships

Findings of this study revealed that in addition to sister city relationships, municipal IR professionals also managed international membership agreements. Data from documents analysed showed that the municipality had 17 international membership affiliations (as at 31 December 2019), ranging from the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group to the UN Global Compact and the World Energy Cities Partnership, among others. A municipality becomes a member of an international organisation either by invitation or approval of the executive. It often follows an evidence-based recommendation from the IR unit. IR professionals stated that membership to international organisations is guided by, among others, the international standing of the organisation, the utility to be gained from the membership and cost implications. Interviewees revealed that benefits of international memberships included access to global member networks, resources and best-practice models.

5.3.4 Strategic support and counsel

The findings of this study revealed that providing strategic support and counsel to the executive and senior municipal officials were further essential functions of IR professionals.
According to the interviews, this was because the executive is the face and official voice of the municipality on international relations. This finding proves that municipal IR practitioners in South Africa are empowered in the dominant coalition, a key tenet of PR Excellence (Grunig et al., 1992). Furthermore, IR practitioners stated that senior municipal officials were advised on diplomatic protocol ahead of international missions. Lee pointed out that the purpose was to ensure that members of the executive and senior officials representing the municipality on global platforms were aware of all protocol and briefed on the subject matter of the mission. Julian stated that:

> *"Adhering to the correct protocol is fundamental to building and maintaining relationships with international partners. The role of IR is to ensure that the executive and municipal officials travelling on official business are aware of all applicable protocol before meeting any foreign delegation or embarking on any international trip."*

Similarly, Michael pointed out that:

> *"You can, for instance, destroy an entire relationship by not presenting your host or guest with a gift – and on top of that, the type of gift you present them with is even more important. So, the protocol and following the correct protocol is critical."*

Data from document analysis revealed that the municipality developed a set of IR protocol guidelines as a resource and general framework for members of the executive and officials hosting and embarking on international missions. The published protocol guideline covers the following broad topics:

- receiving international delegations and foreign dignitaries;
- receiving international event invitations;
- requests to participate in international tele or video conferences;
- embarking on official executive international missions;
- entering into sister city agreements;
- becoming a member of an international organisation; and
- evaluating applications by municipal officials to travel abroad.

An example of the strategic support provided to the executive included preparing comprehensive briefing documents and presentations ahead of hosted meetings with visiting delegations or foreign dignitaries, and before they embark on international missions. Interviews further revealed that the briefing documents comprised of where the member/s of the executive and/or municipal official/s were going and who they were meeting. It also contained information such as what to expect and what the meeting/s were about, notable persons in attendance – if they were speaking at a conference or delivering a speech, and the allotted speaking time, among others. Furthermore, the Lee noted that:

> *"We will also brief and liaise with the spokespeople and/or media team tasked with preparing speeches or press releases related to the engagement. During the briefing, we will provide pointers, e.g., what they should focus on for a specific engagement. During international trips, we could have up to 10 or more meetings, and every audience is different. Through the briefings, we provide the guidance and advice to ensure that the correct approach is taken."*

To source the information required, IR practitioners interviewed revealed that they utilised their broad understanding of the organisation, as well as contacts in local partner institutions, to ensure that the correct information, resources and data were obtained and presented to international guests and/or audiences. This finding reveals that IR professionals scan the publics in the organisation's environment, a practice known as environmental scanning (Grunig, 2006), to source key information that can inform how the municipality presents and positions itself internationally. Julian pointed out that:

> *"Researching and sourcing information from sister departments within the municipality, as well as from external partners, some of whom are funded by the municipality, are important parts of putting that final briefing document together."*

Highlighting the importance of the pre-engagement briefing, Lee stated that:

> *"It is impossible to go into a meeting or embark on an international meeting without these briefings. Another important point to mention is that we cannot simply hand them the briefing document without a thorough verbal briefing. Members of the executive are extremely busy and may not have time to read through everything. Therefore, in these briefings, we verbally focus on the important points. The full briefing document is there as a backup. You need to constantly provide verbal updates on the programme, travel plans and most importantly, the content of the engagement."*

Findings of the study revealed that another vital aspect of the advisory role of municipal IR professionals was to provide strategic input on policy considerations and other matters related to international relations. Michael pointed out that:

> *"Providing strategic input on global developments to inform city decision-making, particularly around partnerships and investments, is key. In so doing, we fulfil that strategic economic diplomacy advisory role."*

The aforementioned provides clear evidence that municipal IR practitioners are adopting the reflective strategic role of PR, as conceptualised by Steyn (2009). The findings also show that the key roles and functions of IR professionals in a South African municipality are consistent with emerging findings of developed countries, particularly where relationship building is emphasised through productive dialogue, engagement, networking and boundary spanning, and the provision of strategic counsel (Fan et al., 2019; Fishbone, 2015).

5.4 Skills required to build and maintain relations with international sister cities

The study revealed that in-depth knowledge of current and foreign affairs, diplomacy, research in understanding stakeholder needs, administration and public relations management skills are critical to excellent municipal IR practice. Furthermore, the analysis highlighted that interpersonal communication skills are crucial in building long-term relationships with both local and international stakeholders.

5.4.1 Knowledge of current and international affairs

IR professionals of this study repeatedly emphasised the importance of research and understanding current and international affairs in their efforts to strengthen relationships with international partners. In this regard, interviewees stated that they started their day by scanning the top news stories on local and international websites. In particular, Lee explained that they would search for stories related to cities and countries with whom the municipality enjoyed close relationships. For instance, attention would be given to cities and countries where the next visits were scheduled or expected. Julian emphasised that:

> *"This kind of research is necessary to gain in-depth knowledge and understanding of the current environment in that city or country, and to assess the current challenges to prepare the executive and municipal officials who regularly engage with international stakeholders."*

Lee pointed out that:

> *"As part of our advisory role, we need to be informed and knowledgeable of what's happening around the world at any given time. I may have to write a memo to the mayor or the city manager advising why the executive or a municipal official might not be able to travel to a specific country or region due to conflict, political uncertainty or disease there for instance. You need to constantly be aware of all of these things, which will ensure that the advice you provide is accurate."*

Michael stated that:

> *"Every morning, my first hour of work, I scan all the news sites – both local and international. You cannot work in IR and perform an advisory and strategic role and not know what is going on in the world. You need to be extremely well read. For example, you could have a scheduled visit planned with a certain city, and a week*

before they are expected to arrive something happens in that city. Even just knowing that something happened in that city – whether good or bad – when they get here, it's something to engage about. It's all part of the building and maintaining of those relationships."

5.4.2 Interpersonal communication skills

IR professionals emphasised the importance of interpersonal communication in building and maintaining relationships both in and outside of the municipality. The research interviews revealed that municipal IR professionals regularly scheduled direct engagements and interactions with internal and external stakeholders to strengthen relations through two-way dialogic communication. It mirrors statements by international studies scholar Liz Orr (2017), who indicated that for IR practitioners to foster international relationships, it was necessary to achieve a personal connection and an understanding of humanity. In this regard, Michael pointed out that:

> *"In IR, the role of the individual, particularly at the municipal level, becomes essential in forging relationships. In a similar role previously, but at a different sphere of government, I didn't think that people mattered. I thought that the machine was more important. However, in this role at the municipal level, I've realised that the role of people, building relationships and engaging in two-way communication is critical to the job."*

Sam explained that interpersonal communication with international counterparts proved to be extremely beneficial.

> *"As IR officials at the city level, we don't see our sister city counterparts often – some of them we haven't met in person at all. However, when we do get the opportunity to travel with the executive to these cities or when we host visiting delegations from these countries, direct engagement becomes very important to sustain relationships."*

> *"For instance, there have been occasions where international partners have been in town, perhaps attending a conference, and we would have a quick catch-up over coffee. You will be amazed at how much information gets shared during these informal engagements. On another occasion, a colleague was in the United States on a mission with the mayor and met with someone on my behalf. These engagements and direct interactions are valuable and beneficial for international relationships."*

5.4.3 Diplomacy

According to Hocking et al. (2012), diplomacy in international relations remains a significant factor in protecting interests, developing international friendships and promoting peace and security. IR practitioners in this study revealed that tact and diplomacy were fundamental in building and maintaining relationships with international sister cities. Interviewees stated that engagements with certain cities required a particular approach. Julian explained that:

> *"Tact and diplomacy are skills central to IR. You require an understanding of people from different backgrounds and need to be sensitive to their opinions, beliefs, ideas and feelings. What you say and how you say it are important in cultivating and sustaining these relationships."*

Lee pointed out that:

> *"Diplomacy is vital when it comes to initiating relationships with cities. You need to master the art of making people feel important. Ego stroking is part of it, but also emotional intelligence, assertiveness and empathy. It's about balance. We cultivate relationships and are very aware that we are not here to make enemies."*

5.4.4 Public relations management and administrative skills

The interviews further revealed public relations communication expertise, such as research, to understand the needs of key stakeholders, the ability to craft messages for official communiques and fact-checking, as valuable skills. Additionally, interviewees stated that general administration skills, for municipal compliance, was a prerequisite. Interviewees explained that IR practitioners are required to be "general all-rounders". Sam pointed out that:

> *"IR officials are prolific writers. Daily, there is a lot of writing, research and analysis. As a result, fact-checking also become extremely important. We have to ensure that our references are 100% accurate."*

Julian related that:

> *"Apart from the mandatory quarterly compliance reports, we also craft letters on behalf of the executive which are sent to international sister cities and partners. These include official notices, memos and even congratulatory messages."*

Michael further highlighted that:

> *"As IR officials, we don't think of ourselves as PR people. But we do have an innate understanding that we play a PR role because positioning [the municipality] internationally is one of the goals that we work to all the time."*

The findings demonstrate that municipal IR professionals in South Africa understand the synergies between PR and IR. Analysis of the results further reveal that IR practitioners handle all international stakeholder relations on behalf of the municipality and that the PR and administrative skills mentioned above contribute to strengthening ties with international partners.

5.5 Information disseminated to international sister cities by IR professionals

In-depth interviews and content analysis revealed that the nature of information disseminated by IR professionals to international sister cities included mainly logistical information related to itineraries for scheduled trips and engagements, as well as presentations and investment promotion information for foreign missions and visiting delegations. Furthermore, interviewees revealed that significant achievements or milestones reached were often communicated, as well as the profiles and biographies of the executive, ahead of scheduled international meetings and engagements. Also, two interviewees stated that, at times, technical knowledge is also shared with international sister cities. Julian stated that:

> *"This type of information usually comes directly from the subject matter experts, which in most cases are senior officials. The exchange would usually be facilitated by the IR unit or be a direct engagement between our officials and their counterparts in the sister city. For example, senior environment officials from the two cities could exchange ideas around a specific project on climate change, or our investment facilitation colleagues could engage with folk in another city on economic opportunities here."*

Michael explained that:

> *"It's about sharing technical knowledge and best practice models. This type of collaboration and knowledge-share further strengthens relationships between ourselves and sister cities."*

5.5.1 Logistical information, itineraries and presentations

IR professionals in this study reported that information disseminated to sister cities differs from one city to another, depending on the deliverables listed in the respective sister city agreements. Content analysis revealed that deliverables ranged from cooperation and exchange of expertise in the fields of health and safety, arts and culture, environment, urban planning, waste management, food safety, infrastructure development, and trade and investment, among others. Interviewees stated that the bulk of information communicated with international sister cities, however, related to logistics around imminent engagements, meetings and associated presentations. Sam explained that:

> *"We mainly communicate logistical information relating to incoming visiting delegations or outgoing international missions. Coordinating everything with precision and then communicating the plans and itineraries to all stakeholders is critical in the field."*

Michael further pointed out that:

> *"It comes back to the strategic facilitation role of IR officials, and us ensuring that the most important elements are communicated before and after key engagements."*
>
> *"Another important element is the presentations. While we don't always prepare these, we ensure that presentations are sent to participants either before or after meetings. These presentations are hugely important as international partners or colleagues from sister cities might use the data to make key decisions."*

Also, interviewees revealed that IR professionals also regularly penned and disseminated "letters of congratulations" to sister cities on behalf of the executive. Sam stated that:

> *"We write a lot of letters. For example, if a sister city wins an award or a new mayor is elected, we would prepare a letter, in the name of our mayor, congratulating our sister city. It's all part of building and maintaining the relationship."*

5.5.2 Economic and investment promotion information

The findings of the study revealed that municipal IR professionals paid specific attention to communicating information related to the economy and in particular investment promotion. Interviewees explained that USB flash drives containing key economic data, information on sustainability, resilience and the municipality's investment incentive scheme were regularly distributed to sister cities and other international partners. Content analysis revealed that the videos disseminated position the municipality as a preferred destination in Africa for trade and investment, and directs viewers to the municipality's dedicated investment website for more information. According to the IR webpage, the IR unit deals with economic diplomacy daily and works towards showcasing the municipality on global platforms, enhancing an enabling environment for new investments and creating new enterprises within the local economy. Interviewees stated that through communication, the IR unit actively helps facilitate inward investment, particularly in the catalytic growth sectors identified in the municipality's Integrated Development Plan (IDP). Lee explained that:

> *"As IR, we rely heavily on our enterprise and investment colleagues for content. They produce videos and appropriate promotional material, and we share it with our database. It's important to remember that as IR, we are that link. Sharing this type of information with sister cities could help land investment, which leads to economic growth and job creation."*

Sam pointed out that:

> *"We have in the past collaborated with colleagues in marketing on promotional brochures, which positioned the city as a holistic destination – a place to visit, live, work and play. For this project, IR specifically helped verify the translations, as the brochures were translated into five foreign languages. When it comes to sourcing content for distribution, we always work with sister departments and our colleagues in communications."*

5.5.3 Profiles of the executive

Interviews further revealed that IR professionals often disseminated the profiles (biographies and images) of the executive to sister cities ahead of meetings and international engagements. According to one interviewee, communicating the profiles of the executive ahead of international trips "has become the norm" and is often requested by visiting delegations "weeks in advance". Analysis of the biography of the mayor, disseminated during a visit to a sister city in the United Arab Emirates in December 2019, revealed that profiles included an image, a few paragraphs of the mayor's political career, culminating with the date of election as mayor, and contact details including a telephone number, postal and email address, and a link to the municipality's website.

5.6 Challenges in building and maintaining relationships with sister cities

The study probed the challenges faced by municipal IR practitioners in strengthening international relationships. In this regard, interviewees cited non-responsive sister cities, the lack of resources and navigating bureaucracy. IR professionals revealed that trying to revive dormant sister city relationships was the biggest challenge. Furthermore, interviewees stated that the lack of understanding of the role of IR within the municipality, particularly among officials and certain councillors, also proved challenging at times.

5.6.1 Non-responsive sister cities

Research findings revealed that non-responsive cities posed the greatest threat to sister city relationships. Interviewees stated that indolence on either side resulted in dormant partnerships. Julian pointed out that:

> *"Being responsive is vital to keeping the relationship intact and deriving the benefits outlined in the sister city agreement. Without regular contact and communication, the relationship grows dormant very quickly."*

Likely reasons for non-response, according to IR professionals in this study, included the lack of resources and staff, changes in political leadership, distrust and misconceptions of the city or country. Lee explained that:

> *"One of the reasons why certain cities in Africa simply won't engage or take several months to respond, is because they might view South African cities as bullies. They think that we want to prescribe to them: what to do and how to do it. If we suspect this, we will do our best to reassure them and dispel that misconception. But, we never give up on the relationship from our side. We continue to reach out and try our best to revive dormant sister city agreements."*

Similarly, Michael pointed out that:

> *"As IR officials, we don't just give up. Sometimes you need to develop a strategy to get through to a non-responsive city, which could mean tapping into resources and networks close to that city. An example: I had been trying to get hold of a colleague in a Kenyan city for months without success, and a few weeks ago we hosted a delegation from another Kenyan city. After the meeting, I approached the presenter and asked if he had a contact in a particular city dealing with international relations.*

His response was: 'Yes, I know just the guy'. So, using your networks and being proactive in this space can help open doors to what we term non- or unresponsive cities."

Julian stated that:

"It is incumbent on us to ensure that sister city relationships remain active. Council demands that. Therefore, it is challenging just to give up. There are places we have been sending emails and calling for years with no response. The best we do then, is just continue sending emails periodically. My manager always says, let the record show that you did try."

These findings demonstrate the tenacity of municipal IR practitioners in South Africa, who occasionally adopt specific strategies to connect with unresponsive sister cities, albeit unsuccessful at times.

5.6.2 Resource deficit

Interviewees in this study highlighted the lack of resources as another significant challenge facing municipal IR practitioners. According to Fan et al. (2019), fruitful relationships with sister cities require an investment of both human and financial resources. Sam stated that:

"I do believe that we would be more proactive in building and maintaining relationships if there were more of us. Compared to other IR units, we have a small team – only four IR staff, in fact only three, and a manager overseeing everything. In other cities, you have regional desks per continent or territory. For instance, you'll have a desk for Europe with say five people working on relationships and engagements with that region, and the same for North America and Asia. We find that here, we have to be Jacks and Jills of all trades. Our vision one day is to have double the amount of IR staff we have now, so that we can become experts per region."

Julian pointed out that:

"The problems with maintaining sister city relationships sometimes also revolve around resources – both human and financial. In terms of finances, we cannot pay for anything. So, instead of the municipality paying for technical experts to go on exchanges, we often have to ask sister cities to sponsor one or more of our officials to go on a learning expedition to their city. The city does sponsor some international

travel, but there is a strict process in place and it is budget dependent. When your primary mandate is service delivery, it is challenging to motivate for an official to go on an international learning exchange – which is seen as a luxury, and is even more difficult for us to pay to host our sister city counterparts here."

5.6.3 Bureaucracy

Interviewees identified navigating bureaucratic red tape as a further challenge to building and maintaining relationships with international partners. However, IR professionals stressed that this was not unique to their municipality only. Michael stated that:

"Bureaucracy is a challenge for IR officials in almost every other city in the world. There is process everywhere, and in government, it is especially important to follow due process."

Similarly, Julian pointed out that:

"The bureaucracy does hamper operations. Getting a trip report processed, for example, could take several months. Report templates often change, and if you've completed the wrong template, the entire report gets sent back and you have to start from scratch."

"What we have to contend with is that we are dealing with a massive city administration, and nothing happens without signature approvals. So reports for international travel go back and forth and end up in a bureaucratic maze. That is a real challenge. Having said that though, I do understand why these things are done so stringently. If you look at other suffering municipalities, it's because they don't pay the same attention to these processes, which the auditor-general demands."

"Red tape is a challenge everywhere. From an implementation point of view, bureaucracy can be very frustrating for IR officials, but it's something you have to negotiate. As a government employee, you need to know that it comes with the territory. While it is our job to try and negotiate the bureaucracy, it makes the job of an IR official a lot harder. What we can do, however, is be transparent with our partners. Yes, it adds strain and is frustrating, but manage the relationship with your international counterpart by informing them that the process will take time and that you will only get back to them in three weeks, if that's the case."

5.6.4 The lack of understanding of the role of IR within the municipality

Interviewees further revealed a fundamental lack of knowledge among some municipal staff and councillors of the role of the IR unit, particularly in cultivating international relationships. Interviewees stated that there was a misconception by some that the IR unit's only function was to go on travel junkets. Two interviewees said that others viewed IR as a travel office, comprising of travel agents responsible for planning their international trips. To address the misconceptions, interviewees revealed that the IR unit would embark on an internal communication drive, in collaboration with the municipality's communications department, to inform colleagues of their role. Michael explained that:

> *"I promote and try to advocate for the IR unit whenever possible, so that more departments within the organisation are aware of what we do. Building and maintaining relationships is strategic, it's soft and nuanced and not easily seen, but it is very real and derives enormous benefit for the municipality."*

Lee pointed out that:

> *"People think that we are here to provide holidays. They don't always see the strategic value of IR, and how we link the important functions of the municipality."*

5.6.5 The impact of political and administrative change and uncertainty on communication and relationships with international sister cities

Research findings revealed that political and administrative change and uncertainty could significantly impact engagements with international partners. In-depth interviewees revealed that there was often a lull in communication with global stakeholders during times of uncertainty. Fan et al. (2019) submit that periodic changes in political leadership, as a result of local elections, could affect the viability of sister city relationships, and that communication during these periods needs to be carefully managed. Interviewees in this study revealed the following in this regard.

Sam noted:

> *"I've experienced two election cycles and can confirm that interactions are not as frequent during those times. Essentially, the city council is dissolved – there is no mayor. If no one is in charge politically, then international engagements cease. It does cause a break in work and communication because most of the international relationships formed, and even agreements signed, are largely as a result of the*

person of the mayor – the individual, the personality. It could take up to a month after the new mayor is elected and sworn in for communication and engagements to restart."

Julian stated that:

"Political uncertainty affects our work quite negatively, but we are also quite robust. It's the uncertainty that often puts things on hold, because the executive – in particular the mayor and deputy mayor – they are our political principals; most of the communication is issued in their names. They are at the forefront of the municipality's international relations. If there is uncertainty, it permeates into our relationships with other cities. However, we do our best to reassure partners that we may be going through a change of leadership, but we are still here. We keep the relationship going, despite who the mayor is. It's part of the open and honest, two-way communication."

Michael pointed out that:

"The nature of IR is political and people in the field understand that. Because city councils are politically fluid, you find that sometimes you can have an amazing contact in a city council in one city. Then something happens politically, and all of a sudden, this person disappears. Then, it takes forever trying to find a new contact in that city – so political changes and transitions do affect our work."

Citing ways to sustain sister city relationships despite political and administrative changes or uncertainty, Michael explained that:

"Everything starts with a political touchpoint in IR, but the idea is always to move it from that space into the administration by mainstreaming the relationship into municipal departments. Then the politics become more ceremonial than actually operational. While saying that, things like political transitions will always be something that you need to negotiate in that space."

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings and interpretation of the data collected during the research process to meet the objectives of this study: to analyse the communication strategies used by municipal IR practitioners in a South African municipality to build and maintain relations with international sister cities. The findings reveal that PR, as an important communication tool, plays a significant role in building and maintaining relationships with international sister cities. Furthermore, it has been made clear that municipal IR practitioners are aware of the importance of practising two-way symmetrical communication in their efforts to strengthen relationships with sister cities. The study has also found evidence suggesting that Grunig's (1992) communication models could be applied to the field of municipal international relations. Findings of this study have also shown clear synergies between PR and IR, especially concerning their roles in building internal and external relationships.

Notably, findings indicate that both one-way and two-way symmetrical communication strategies are used in different ways to build and maintain relationships and to disclose information to sister city counterparts. IR professionals revealed that regular and open dialogue, often on the side lines of formal meetings and conferences, was fundamental to building long-term relationships. This validates the theoretical frame of the study as derived from public relations Excellence Theory and the two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The two-way symmetrical communication model emphasises the importance of dialogue between an organisation and stakeholders. Research findings further revealed that virtual meetings in the form of video conferencing via Skype and Zoom are emerging channels in IR for two-way communication and knowledge sharing. One-way approaches such as the dissemination of digital and print resources to international sister cities, visiting delegations and members of the consular corps are also considered in this study as strategic in building long-term relationships with international partner cities. Resources obtained and analysed include a USB flash drive containing:

- economic data, videos, an overview of the key economic sectors and investment opportunities in the municipality;
- a promotional brochure which is available in five foreign languages;
- an executive summary of the municipality's Integrated Development Plan (IDP); and
- digital copies of the municipality's economic performance indicators, a quarterly publication which presents and analyses economic and related trends in the municipality.

Furthermore, research findings revealed that the municipality's IR policy and protocol guidelines promote two-way communication and regular engagement with international sister cities. Among others, the policy recommends mechanisms to evaluate existing relationships, and provide guidance on the manner in which the municipality could proactively seek to build new relationships with international partners through dialogue, further demonstrating the importance of two-way communication in strengthening international relationships.

The following chapter concludes this study, with more pointed conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

Central to this chapter is the aim of providing recommendations based on the study's analysis. The chapter begins with a summary of the research process, followed by an expression of its key findings by making a synopsis of results based on the questions that guided the study. The reason for adopting such a route is underscored by the fact that the research questions succinctly encapsulate the study's aims and objectives. Furthermore, the recommendations of the study, limitations and topics for future research will bring the chapter to a close.

6.2 Synopsis of the research process

For this study, a qualitative research methodology guided by a single case study was adopted to understand the communication strategies used by IR practitioners in a select South African municipality to build and sustain relationships with international sister cities. Single case studies have been found to be particularly useful for process studies that examine the rich, real-world context in which phenomena occur (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007). The unit of analysis is one of the most globally active metropoles in South Africa, with more than a dozen active international sister city relationships. The municipality has a dedicated international relations unit responsible for maintaining, building and managing relationships with foreign cities (formal and friendly) and strategic partners (international memberships) from around the world. Of the active sister city agreements (as at 31 December 2019), two are in Africa, four in Europe, three in the United States, three in Central and South America, one in the Middle East and five in Asia.

Data for the study was collected from semi-structured interviews (four participants) and document analysis (of the IR unit's 2019 annual overview, policies, publications and press releases) to understand the communication strategies used by municipal IR professionals in a South African municipality to build and sustain relationships with international sister cities. Data collection took place between August 2019 and December 2019. To achieve multiple sources of data, in-depth interviews were conducted with all four IR practitioners of the municipality's IR unit. To verify the validity of data, the researcher compared information collected from interviews with the documents analysed. This triangulation of data collection methods enabled the researcher to corroborate information collected from the different participants.

6.3 Summary of the key findings

The study's conclusions are presented in line with the research questions as set out below:

- What communication strategies are used by IR practitioners in a select South African municipality to build and maintain relations with international sister cities?
- What are the key roles and competencies of IR practitioners in a South African municipality?
- What information do municipal IR professionals communicate, and with whom, to cultivate and sustain relations with international sister cities?

6.3.1 Strategies used to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities

The research findings show that municipal IR professionals in a select South African municipality are using a combination of one-way and two-way symmetrical communication strategies to foster relationships with international sister cities. One-way communication approaches are used to disseminate information and increase visibility (one-directional), whereas two-way implies an exchange of information through openness, feedback and evaluative research (Huang,1997). In-depth interviews revealed that strategies employed by municipal IR practitioners include research, information dissemination, networking, advocacy and interpersonal communication. These are consistent with Grunig and Huang's (2000) conceptualised dimensions of relationship-building using communication strategies embedded in a two-way symmetrical model.

6.3.1.1 Two-way symmetrical communication strategies

Two-way symmetrical communication strategies adopted by municipal IR professionals of this study include regular and open dialogue, via either face-to-face meetings or electronic communication, and strategic engagements with internal and external stakeholders, including the consular corps, international partners and municipal officials, either at networking events, meetings and presentations or during international missions. Interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of consistent dialogue, describing it as fundamental to building long-term relationships. This aligns with Grunig's (1992) Excellence Theory which advocates two-way symmetrical communication to cultivate long-term relationships.

Moreover, findings revealed that municipal IR practitioners also fulfil a boundary-spanning role, or, as Steyn (2009) defines it, as that of "reflective strategist". The boundary-spanning role in PR is described as a practice adopted to strategically link the organisation's internal networks with external sources of information to nurture and develop mutual relationships (Kaiser, 2018). According to Dozier et al. (1995), the communicator in this role acts as an early warning system. Such communicators tell the dominant coalition what publics know, how they feel, and how they may behave, relevant to strategic decisions under consideration (Grunig, 2006). By spanning the organisational boundary, gathering information and transmitting this information to management, Steyn (2009) submits that the reflective strategist enlightens management on societal/stakeholder values, norms and expectations, and that management is influenced to state the organisation's position on, practice two-way communication and build trusting relationships with stakeholders about, issues of strategic importance. IR professionals revealed that building networks in and outside of the municipality was key to strengthening relationships with international sister cities. The findings show that such networks assisted with peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and collaboration, information gathering, resources and enabled municipal IR professionals to build linkages and become key connectors for the organisation.

6.3.1.2 One-way approaches

The study was further able to establish that municipal IR practitioners also use one-way communication strategies to disseminate information and engage international sister cities and their publics in order to promote economic opportunities and enhance relationships. Tactics include disseminating digital and print resources to sister cities, and visiting delegations and members of the consular corps based in the municipality. These include USB flash drives, also referred to as informational "toolkits" containing economic data, videos, an overview of the key economic sectors and investment opportunities in the municipality; promotional brochures which are available in five foreign languages (French, German, Mandarin, Portuguese and Spanish); digital copies of the municipality's economic performance indicators, a quarterly publication prepared by the municipality's investment and economic research departments; and press releases issued, following visits by international delegations and after members of the executive return from international missions.

In addition, the study's findings show that IR professionals provide strategic input to speeches, presentations and official communiques issued by the municipal executive. Also, findings revealed that municipal IR professionals are gradually embracing websites and email newsletters as a strategy for information dissemination, digital interactivity and value creation. While findings show that IR practitioners do not directly engage with the press, municipal IR professionals do provide strategic input to IR-related press releases and for media engagements. These findings prove that PR communication strategies add value to municipal IR functions.

Furthermore, findings reveal that IR professionals have the ability to enhance the global profile of the municipality with the correct messaging and consistent communication. The study established that the IR unit works towards promoting and positioning the municipality as a competitive global hub for economic, social and cultural activity; one that values international connectivity as a means to facilitate job creation through private sector-led economic growth.

Reputation in international relations is about having a good name on the world stage, and refers to collective judgments of a country, region or city's image and character that are used to predict or explain its future behaviour (Mercer, 1996). Simply put, Wang (2006) describes it as others' summary construct of a nation, region or city's culture, policy and conduct. According to Tuch (1990), cultivating and managing a favourable international or world opinion has been the mandate of public diplomacy and PR in international relations for decades. However, research findings further revealed that political and administrative change and uncertainty can significantly impact not only the municipality's image, but also engagements with international partners. Findings reveal that there was often a lull in communication with international stakeholders during times of uncertainty. Fan et al. (2019) submits that periodic changes in political leadership, as a result of local elections, could affect the viability of sister city relationships, and that communication during these periods needs to be carefully managed. IR practitioners interviewed stated that they do their best to reassure international partners during times of uncertainty to "keep the relationship going" through "open and honest, two-way communication".

6.3.2 Key roles and tasks of IR practitioners in a select South African municipality

The research findings show that the fundamental role of the municipal IR practitioner in a select South African municipality is to strategically manage international relationships and act as the primary point of contact between the municipality and international stakeholders, which includes sister cities. Primary functions of the municipal IR professional include initiating, building and maintaining international relationships, as well as managing international sister city partnerships and international memberships. Findings revealed that IR professionals managed approximately six sister city agreements each, with the IR manager overseeing operations and providing direction. The study further shows that as part of the managing process, IR practitioners regularly evaluated existing sister city relationships, and provided guidance on the manner in which the municipality could proactively seek to build new relationships with partners that had the potential to enhance the city's economic, social and cultural life.

Furthermore, the study established that municipal IR professionals both host and coordinate visits of international delegations, and often embark on international missions. Findings revealed that during such visits, IR practitioners have the opportunity to have interpersonal engagement and dialogue with foreign public office bearers, as well as counterparts of sister cities. Interviewees stated that this was critical in strengthening relationships with international sister cities. Documents analysed revealed that IR professionals in this study hosted 65 international delegations during the municipality's 2018/19 financial year from, among others, the United States, Finland, Spain, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Thailand, Pakistan, India and Austria. The study further revealed that the dissemination of information, particularly related to economic data and opportunities for investment, was a key focus of hosted engagements and international outbound missions.

Additionally, findings revealed that providing counsel to the municipal executive and senior municipal officials was another critical IR function. This includes providing strategic support and counsel on diplomatic protocol ahead of meetings and before international outbound missions. Findings revealed that the purpose was to ensure that members of the executive and senior officials representing the municipality on international platforms were aware of all protocol and were fully briefed on the subject matter to be discussed or presented. This finding proves that municipal IR practitioners in South Africa are empowered in the dominant coalition, a key tenet of PR Excellence (Grunig et al., 1992).

The findings affirm that the roles and functions of IR practitioners in a select South African municipality are generally consistent with emerging findings of cities in first world countries. In a study on the role of municipal IR practitioners in European cities, Fishbone (2015) notes that municipal international affairs professionals do everything from forging and maintaining relationships with other cities to welcoming incoming delegations and organising international trips; preparing their elected leadership for international meetings, to maintaining their city's involvement in international networks. However, IR professionals are often presented with challenges in the role. This study revealed that these include non-responsive sister cities, the lack of resources and navigating municipal bureaucracy. IR professionals revealed that trying to revive dormant sister city relationships was their biggest challenge. Furthermore, interviewees stated that the lack of understanding of the role of IR within the municipality, particularly among officials and certain councillors, also proved challenging at times. Findings furthermore revealed that municipal IR practitioners occasionally adopted certain strategies to address these challenges. These included strategic attempts to reconnect with unresponsive sister cities through dialogue, finding innovative ways to negotiate and navigate bureaucracy, and launching internal communication campaigns to inform municipal staff and politicians of the work of the IR unit. This is in line with Grunig's (1994) two-way symmetrical communication model which provides a platform for honest dialogue and understanding.

6.3.3 Core skills required to build and maintain relationships with sister cities

The findings show that in-depth knowledge of current and international affairs, diplomacy, research for the purpose of mutuality and public relations management skills are critical to excellent municipal IR practice. Furthermore, the analysis highlighted that interpersonal communication skills are critical in building long-term relationships with both local and international stakeholders. IR professionals in this study repeatedly emphasised the importance of research in understanding stakeholder needs and knowledge of current and international affairs, in their efforts to strengthen relationships with international partners. In this regard, interviewees stated that they started their day by scanning the top news stories on local and international websites. In particular, one interviewee stated that they would search for stories related to cities and countries with whom the municipality enjoyed close relationships. For instance, attention would be given to cities and countries where imminent visits were scheduled to or expected from.

Additionally, interviewees revealed that municipal IR professionals regularly scheduled direct engagements and interactions with internal and external stakeholders to strengthen relations through two-way dialogic communication. This mirrors statements by Orr (2017), who suggests that in order for IR practitioners to foster international relations, it is necessary to achieve a personal connection and an understanding of humanity. Additionally, as recommended by Edelman (2014), such direct engagements provide both parties with an opportunity to engage in robust conversations geared towards achieving mutual understanding and trust. Findings further revealed that skills such as tact and diplomacy are fundamental in building and maintaining relationships, as engagements with certain cities required a very specific approach.

Moreover, the findings show that public relations communication expertise, such as research, the ability to craft messages for official communiques, memos and do fact checking, are valuable skills. These findings narrow the gap within professional practice of PR and IR and demonstrate convergence of aspects of the two disciplines. Supporting research by

Fitzpatrick et al. (2013) suggests that although some differences exist, data provides evidence that conceptual and practical links between PR and IR are real. Following an extensive literature review, this study appears to be the first to analyse the synergy between PR and paradiplomatic activity from a developing world perspective.

6.3.4 Information disseminated to international sister cities by IR professionals

The study also analysed the nature of information communicated by municipal IR professionals, in order to cultivate and sustain relations with international sister cities. Findings reveal that the type of information disseminated includes mainly logistical information related to itineraries for scheduled trips and engagements, as well as presentations and investment promotion information for international missions and visiting delegations. Furthermore, the study establishes that significant achievements or milestones reached were often communicated to sister cities, as well as the profiles and biographies of the executive ahead of scheduled international meetings and engagements. Additionally, findings show that at times technical knowledge is also shared with international sister cities, demonstrating reciprocity. A number of these are consistent with the type of information disseminated by municipal international affairs practitioners in developed countries (Fishbone, 2015).

In addition, findings reveal that information is primarily shared with diplomats and counterparts in international sister cities, as well as their associated organisations, such as Chambers of Commerce and related government-funded institutions. Findings reveal that information disseminated to sister cities differs from one city to another, depending on the deliverables listed in the respective sister city agreements. The study establishes that information communicated with international sister cities is related to logistics around imminent engagements, meetings and associated presentations.

Furthermore, findings show that municipal IR professionals pay special attention to communicating information related to the economy and, in particular, investment opportunities. Interviewees reveal that USB flash drives containing key economic data, information on sustainability, resilience, and the municipality’s investment incentive scheme are regularly distributed to sister cities and other international partners. Content analysis reveals that the videos disseminated position the municipality as a preferred destination in Africa for trade and investment, illustrating the benefits of establishing enterprises in the municipality. The videos and promotional material direct consumers to the municipality’s dedicated investment website for more information. According to the IR webpage, the IR unit deals with economic diplomacy on a daily basis and works towards showcasing the municipality on global platforms and enhancing an enabling environment for new investments.

6.4 Recommendations

A primary challenge highlighted by IR professionals in this study is the lack of capacity to better engage and communicate with international sister cities, to build and sustain long-term relationships and revive dormant relations. According to Fan et al. (2019), successful relationships with sister cities require investment of both human and financial resources. IR practitioners in this study repeatedly emphasised the need for more staff, pointing out that they would be more proactive in building and maintaining relationships, and could with a larger team invest more time strategically engaging with international counterparts. The study therefore recommends that the organisation's leadership consider increasing the size of the municipality's IR unit. This will likely improve the quality of relationships with international sister cities. The current staff compliment is four practitioners, including the manager.

Furthermore, and to enhance current relationship building strategies, the study recommends integrating the PR function into the IR department. As argued by Grunig et al., (1992), only in an integrated system of public relations can the organisation be effective and develop new communication programmes for changing strategic publics. The study therefore recommends either the recruitment of a PR strategist with experience in international relations, or the appointment of a dedicated resource from the municipality's communications department to service or merge with the IR unit to impart knowledge and help develop an all-inclusive strategic communications plan. Such a resource would ideally also assist with awareness and information about the role of the IR unit within the municipality to address misconceptions among municipal staff and councillors, which was highlighted as another challenge by IR practitioners. The additional human resource would furthermore enable IR professionals to increase the frequency of meetings with international stakeholders at an interpersonal level. According to Grunig el at., (2002), two-way symmetrical communication strategies, such as interpersonal communication, creates win-win situations and enables partners to obtain knowledge deemed important that would not be disclosed publicly.

The findings further note that municipal IR practitioners rarely use the municipality's social media platforms to engage and communicate, both with local citizens and with international sister cities and their publics. It is an area that IR professionals in this study say is yet to be explored. According to Macnamara (2014), engagement has recently become a buzzword in IR, especially around the topic of social media. Organisations in public and private sectors, and publics, initiate engagement when they cognitively share salient topics of mutual interests (Dhanesh 2017). According to Tam (2019), publics' engagement behaviours could range from passive (e.g., clicks, views, reads) to active (e.g., advocates), whereas organisations' engagement behaviours could range from control (e.g., inform) to collaboration (e.g., participate). In international relations, engagement has been discussed in association with the use of digital and social media to promote dialogue, mutual respect, partnership and mutual understanding (Zhang 2013). Examples of engagement with international stakeholders, including sister cities, include the use of digital and transmedia engagement for co-creation and co-option of shared values (Pamment 2016) and digital monitoring, to assess international perceptions and identify issues affecting foreign publics (Cull 2013). This study therefore recommends the use of social media as a supportive communication strategy for municipal IR professionals to directly engage with international sister cities and their publics, to monitor international perceptions and to further cultivate relationships with international partners. Current social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube provide platforms for which municipal IR professionals and stakeholders can interact with each other through two-way symmetrical communication. The social networks can further be used to communicate the municipality's values, disseminate economic data and investment opportunities, and support the IR unit's mandate, which includes promoting and positioning the municipality as a competitive global hub for economic, social and cultural activity.

Though the IR unit has developed comprehensive international relations protocol guidelines, the study recommends the development of a strategic framework and implementation plan which outlines how the municipality interacts and builds and maintains relationships with international sister cities. According to Maniam (2011), more benefits can be achieved through city-to-city partnerships by developing a strategic plan to work towards and measure against. A further recommendation is the development of a webpage on the municipality's website that captures sister city success stories, activities and information to build awareness of international engagements and how these benefit the municipality and residents.

The recommendations presented are based on information provided during the interviews, and research findings.

6.5 Limitations and future research

As argued by Almutairi (2013), there can be no research study without limitations. The most significant limitation of this study was that the selected municipality could not be named. This limited the researcher in terms of referencing relationships with specific sister cities. However, this did not prohibit the researcher from extracting, analysing and presenting findings of communication strategies used by IR professionals of the municipality to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities. As per the signed agreement, the name of the municipality and the names of participants could not be mentioned in the process of reporting. Confidentiality in this study meant that the participants researched should be protected by making it difficult to attach aspects of data to a definite individual. This enabled the participants to share their views freely, and, in turn, aided the researcher to gain comprehensive information.

Based on the study, it is clear that strategic communication is fundamental to paradiplomatic activity in South Africa at the municipal level. The study presented the view only of municipal IR professionals in South Africa, omitting the opinion of counterparts and stakeholders in international sister cities. Further research could therefore focus explicitly on the international stakeholders that South African municipal IR professionals interact and engage with, to explore their communication preferences and expectations.

In addition, future research could include comparative studies to evaluate communication strategies used by municipal IR professionals in other parts of Africa; and identify the strengths and weaknesses of communication approaches in sustaining sister city relationships. According to Sister Cities International (SCI, 2002), a growing number of cities, towns and villages in Africa are engaged in various forms of international partnership agreements. These include friendship, twinning and sister city relationships, among others.

Also, studies can be conducted focusing on how paradiplomacy is affected and if communication strategies differ when a city or province is under the political leadership of an opposition party versus when it is under the political leadership of the party controlling the federal or national government. For instance, in South Africa eight of the nine provinces are controlled by the country’s ruling political party, the African National Congress (ANC), which is responsible for South Africa’s foreign policy. Only the Western Cape province, which includes the internationally active Cape Town metropolitan area, is controlled by the country’s opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA).

Furthermore, and as argued by Fitzpatrick et al. (2013), Ki (2015) and Vanc and Fitzpatrick (2016), more studies are needed in order to detect convergences, as well as differences between PR and public diplomacy in international relations. In this context, this study appears to be the first empirical study that attempts to understand the role of PR in international municipal relations from an African perspective. Consequently, this dissertation calls for more empirical studies that investigate the synergies between PR and paradiplomacy, especially in Africa and the developing world at large.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter, through its review of the three major questions of the research, started with an intention to delineate the major findings of the study. From the review of the first question, the study shows that municipal IR professionals are using a combination of one-way and two-way symmetrical communication strategies to foster relationships with international sister cities. Strategies employed include research, information dissemination, networking, advocacy and interpersonal communication. These are consistent with Grunig and Huang's (2000) conceptualised dimensions of relationship building using communication strategies embedded in a two-way symmetrical model.

In its review of the second research question, the findings show that the fundamental role of the municipal IR practitioner is to strategically manage international relationships and act as the primary point of contact between the municipality and international stakeholders. Primary functions of municipal IR professionals include initiating, building and maintaining international relationships, as well as managing international sister city partnerships and international memberships. The study shows that as part of the managing process, IR practitioners regularly evaluated existing sister city relationships, and provided guidance on the manner in which the municipality could proactively seek to build new relationships with partners who have the potential to enhance the city's economic, social and cultural life. Furthermore, the findings show that in-depth knowledge of current and international affairs, diplomacy, research and administration, and public relations management skills are critical to excellent municipal IR practice.

In the review of the final research question, the study found that the nature of information disseminated by municipal IR professionals include mainly logistical information, presentations and investment promotion information for international missions and visiting delegations. Significant achievements and milestones reached were often also communicated to sister cities, as well as the profiles of executives ahead of scheduled international meetings and engagements. In addition, technical knowledge is also shared. Findings reveal that this information is primarily shared with diplomats and counterparts in international sister cities, as well as their associated organisations, such as Chambers of Commerce and related government-funded institutions.

This study offers an analysis of communication strategies used by international relations practitioners in a select South African municipality to build and maintain relationships with international sister cities. It seeks to contribute towards the advancement of scholarly debate in municipal international relations and is likely to assist South African municipal managers and mayors understand the contribution of IR practices, specifically how the application of PR principles can enhance organisational competitiveness and strengthen strategic international relationships.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Research ethics approval certificate

Cape Peninsula
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P.O. Box 652 • Cape Town 8000 South Africa •Tel: +27 21 469 1012 • Fax +27 21 469 1002
80 Roeland Street, Vredehoek, Cape Town 8001

Office of the Research Ethics Committee	**Faculty of Informatics and Design**

05 April 2019

Ethics clearance was granted to Mr Clayton Basil Barnes, student number 203156238, for research activities related to the MTech in Public Relations Management in the Faculty of Informatics and Design, Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Title of research proposal:	**An analysis of communication strategies used by a South African municipality to build and maintain relations with international sister cities**

Comments

Formal consent should be obtained from the organisations involved in the study and research activities are restricted to those detailed in the research proposal.

Signed: Faculty Research Ethics Committee	5/4/2019 **Date**

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
INFORMATICS AND DESIGN
ETHICS APPROVAL GRANTED
- 5 APR 2019
Cape Peninsula
University of Technology

APPENDIX B: Letter to interviewees and consent form

Cape Peninsula
University of Technology

14 March 2019

RE: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION FOR MTECH RESEARCH

Dear Sir/Madam

This letter serves to confirm that Mr Clayton Barnes is a bona fide Master of Technology in Public Relations Management (full research) student in the Media Department at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. His exploratory study investigates and analyses the communication strategies used by South African cities to build and maintain relationships with global sister cities.

We therefore seek permission from your City to assist him to gather data (through interviews and other relevant research methods that maybe germane to his study) to help build knowledge in this emerging scholarly and professional field. This research will adhere to strict ethical standards regarding voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality among others as guided by CPUT's ethical code. The data will be recorded only for academic purposes and all documents, recordings and transcripts of conversations will be treated with confidentiality and disposed of at the conclusion of the study.

If permission is granted, the researcher will send through a copy of the research proposal for your perusal and a formal consent letter to be signed as part of the University's research administration process. Do not hesitate to contact me for more information if needs be.

Yours Faithfully

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Cape Peninsula
University of Technology

Informed Consent Form

I ………………………………………………………………… voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous.
- I understand that extracts from my interview may be quoted.
- I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.
- I, along with the researcher, agree to sign and date this consent form.

--- ----------------

Signature of participant Date

-- ----------------------

Signature of researcher Date

Clayton Barnes

APPENDIX C: Interview questions

Guiding Questions

1. Briefly explain your role within the IR department.

2. Who are your various stakeholders that you engage with?

3. What role does communication play in dealing with these stakeholders, particularly the partner cities and international member organizations?

4. How would you rate the importance of trust and transparency in your communication with partner cities and organizations?

5. How do you get your message across to stakeholders (sister cities/member organizations)?

6. There are principles of PR that help organizations develop a positive reputation globally, for example having a communications protocol, being transparent, using various tactics to promote the organization, by staying proactive, and fact checking the information you relay. Do you prescribe to any of these in your communications? If so which ones and why?

7. How do you achieve support and a favorable image among your international peers/ sister cities?

8. Tell me about your experiences of engaging with peers and stakeholders in sister cities. Walk me through the communications process.

9. Who do you communicate with the most in sister cities? Please explain the steps or process followed when you engage.

10. Two-way communication is critical in IR. Do you agree and why?

11. There is an assumption that IR practitioners in local government have the potential to be powerful tools to enhance the global profile and frame the international image of cities through relationship building and information sharing. Do you agree with this view? Please elaborate.

12. How often do you spend time communicating with peers, stakeholders and/or publics in sister cities?

13. What in your opinion are the challenges associated with your role in terms of building and maintain relations or communicating with peers in sister cities?

14. Do you mind sharing copies of the briefing documents you prepared for the last 2 trips or the last 2 visiting delegations you hosted, as well as the quarterly reports for the last financial year?

15. How important is the use of social media? Is it a communication strategy used by municipal IR professionals?

16. What challenges do you encounter in your relationships with sister cities or in communicating with them?

17. Do you have any concluding thoughts?

APPENDIX D: Letter from the proofreader

This is to confirm that the proofreading and editing of the thesis

AN ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES USED BY A SOUTH AFRICAN MUNICIPALITY TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN RELATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL SISTER CITIES

By

CLAYTON BASIL BARNES

Cape Peninsula University of Technology

was done by Jenny Mostert in September 2020.

I have a Master's Degree in Education; in 2004 I completed John Linnegar's Training Course in Copy Editing and Proofreading; and in 2012 I completed John Linnegar's Advanced Training Course in Copy Editing and Proofreading. I have since worked in the field of school textbooks, journals, magazine and book articles and university theses. I am a full member of PEG (Professional Editors' Guild).

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