Lessons from Buenos Aires’ International Strategy

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Summary

- As global actors, cities around the world cooperate to find solutions to global issues and compete to attract talent, investments, and visitors. In this global competition, cities cannot afford to be reactive. Instead, they must develop international strategies that promote specific attributes, generate a unified narrative, and implement actions aligned to prioritized markets and sectors.
- For the last 15 years, Buenos Aires has increased its international engagement to transform itself from a regional player to a global leader, with an active voice in the ecosystem of cities and institutions.
- The success of Buenos Aires’ International Strategy provides a model for other cities seeking to increase their international engagement, influence on global agendas, and participation in global networks.

Why does Buenos Aires engage on global agendas?

The role of cities on the global stage is growing. For the first time in history, more than half of the world’s population lives in urban areas, and it is estimated that this will increase to two-thirds by 2050. Cities are an engine of development, contributing more than 80% of the global GDP and boosting economies focused on services, knowledge, technology and innovation. But with cities’ rise come new challenges: cities account for over 70% of the world’s CO2 emissions and consume 78% of all energy. It is no surprise, then, that 65% of the 169 targets in the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be reached without the proper engagement of local governments, according to the OECD. An added challenge - and opportunity - is the mobility of people, who increasingly base their relocation decisions not only on "hard" factors - economic or fiscal incentives - but also on "soft" ones such as quality of life and diversity.

City governments engage internationally through two different dynamics: competition and cooperation. On one hand, the world’s major cities compete to attract and retain human talent, investments, and visitors; to host major events; and to occupy a prominent place in global development agendas. Cities such as London, Chicago, Mexico City, Montreal, and Helsinki have developed comprehensive international strategies that promote specific attributes, generate a unified city narrative, and define action plans aligned to prioritized markets and sectors.
On the other hand, a new dynamic of cooperation at the local level has emerged, as cities engage in concrete lines of cooperative action, share experiences and build networks to find common solutions to global issues.

**What is a City International Strategy?**

After a one-year process, Buenos Aires launched its *International Strategy* in 2019 - in the views of the drafters, a foreign policy for the city and a framework that assesses and consolidates the work of the city government and external stakeholders, creating a partnership ecosystem. The main objective of the Strategy is to define a strategic horizon of international engagement at the service of the city’s development in a way that brings tangible benefits to its residents and makes a strong commitment to advancing global progress on issues such as climate action, gender equity, remote work, and sustainable mobility.

**How Buenos Aires built its International Strategy and what other cities can learn from the process**

As a *first step*, Buenos Aires carried out a diagnosis to define the city’s identity and place in the global arena. The diagnosis included a comparative study of international strategies developed by other cities, analysis of rankings, consultations with experts, and surveys of foreign visitors and students. The diagnosis considered the previous international engagement efforts by the Buenos Aires City Government. It also included an open and participatory dialogue process involving more than 30 meetings with leaders of the private sector, civil society, and academia, 40 personal interviews and a survey of more than 100 visitors.

In the *second step*, the findings from the diagnosis were validated through *in-depth interviews* with city government officials and prominent representatives from local and international business, social, cultural, scientific, and academic spheres. The active participation of all these actors is crucial in order to coordinate the international actions of every stakeholder. The strategy is a dynamic tool that needs to adapt to an ever-changing international and domestic context. Thus, an agenda agreed by all parties and a fluid communication channel are essential for the success of an International Strategy.

The *third step* consolidated the findings into a *strategic framework and comprehensive action plan*, highlights of which include:

1. **Integrated promotion of the city**: This includes missions to prioritized regions and markets and positioning Buenos Aires in international events, to showcase the city with key actors critical to the city’s development (including from the private sector, academia, and civil society). Specific sectors are included due to their export potential or ability to attract investments.

2. **City engagement in multilateralism**: These actions are aimed at highlighting Buenos Aires’ commitment to strengthening city-to-city and multilateral cooperation, and having a prominent role in urban agendas. For instance, in 2018, the city, along with the mayor of Paris, hosted the inaugural Summit of the Urban 20, a space that brings together mayors of the main cities of G20 countries, to discuss economic, climate and development issues from an urban perspective. Buenos Aires held the vice presidency of the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities (UCCI) and C40, ratifying its commitments by hosting the 2022 C40 World Mayors Summit, hosting more than 100 mayors.
3. **Collaboration with strategic regional and international stakeholders**: Buenos Aires coordinates Consejo BA Global, a dialogue forum that brings together the private sector, civil society and academic and cultural actors, to enrich its international strategy. There is also a proactive agenda for attracting international stakeholders to the city who can serve as spokespersons abroad. Buenos Aires also built strong networks with think tanks, international organizations and universities for deepening its urban knowledge and capacities.

4. **Talent attraction**: In 2016, Buenos Aires launched Study BA, a strategy to attract and retain international students. Working hand in hand with more than 55 universities in the city and Province of Buenos Aires, the goal is to attract foreign students and improve their experience during their stay. Since then, the number of international students has increased by 50%, from 60,000 to 90,000, contributing to 1% of the city’s GDP.

Buenos Aires also created **Nomads BA**, a program to attract Digital Nomads and remote workers. In 2022, more than 64,000 digital nomads chose to settle in Buenos Aires, a **growth of 570%** compared to the previous year.

**Key takeaways**

Buenos Aires’ experience developing its International Strategy yields three takeaways for global cities:

**First, adopting a thoughtful international strategy is essential.** In today’s world, characterized by increasing international engagement - cooperation and competition - not having a roadmap and strategy means forsaking resources -financial, technical, and reputational- to achieve local sustainable development and growth.

Second, there is no blueprint. **The leaders of Buenos Aires’ learned about international engagement by doing it.** There were no guidelines on how to create an international strategy, little theoretical development, and few examples from other cities, especially from the global south. One reason Buenos Aires’ built its strategy is to create a precedent and model for other cities.

Third, cities are not countries: they only pursue foreign policy and international engagement to the extent that it brings measurable and tangible benefits to their residents. A budget for a city’s international affairs team relies on these benefits, and those teams have to constantly examine and reevaluate their existence.

A strategy for international engagement is a prerequisite to uplifting residents and increasing their quality of life. This is the ultimate goal.

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This City & State Diplomacy Toolkit compiles a collection of case studies and how-to briefs to support the international engagement and global initiatives of local actors. These short, digestible, and practical briefs are written by local practitioners, city and state leaders, and experts based on their direct experience. If you’re interested in learning more about this brief or wish to connect with the Truman team, please fill in this [short survey](#).

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