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South–South Cooperation and the Promise of Experimentalist Governance: The ASEAN Smart Cities Network

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Abstract

This article considers the impact that increasing pragmatism and pluralism are having on South–South cooperation (SSC). Focusing on the growing sway of multilateral platforms for cooperation between cities and the reinvigoration of regionalism, it identifies experimentalist design principles for fostering autonomy-enhancing initiatives between developing countries that have the capacity to learn from and scale up locally-informed, adaptive problem solving. The first part of the article frames SSC in light of experimentalist governance theory. The second part provides a case study of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Smart Cities Network, an initiative that captures the promise and challenges of enhancing SSC through regional experimentalist governance of city-to-city partnerships.

Keywords

Association of Southeast Asian Nations; city-to-city partnerships; experimentalist governance; regional integration; Smart Cities Network; South–South cooperation

Issue

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1. Introduction

Whether cast as a transitional crisis stemming from the limits of American-led neoliberalism or as a civilizational crisis generated by the emerging East and South, deepening polycentrism and growing organizational diversity are disrupting the post-war international order (Acharya, 2018; Ikenberry, 2018; Keohane & Nye, 2012). As the influence of Western development institutions, models, and policy frameworks wane, public and private actors throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America are increasingly engaging in small-scale explorations and unscripted learning by doing around how to, for example, protect the planet, address persistent inequalities, and create good jobs (Grabel, 2018; Rodrik, 2008). These new opportunities for experimentation have contributed to the well-documented expansion of South–South cooperation (SSC; Jing et al., 2020; Mawdsley, 2019).

This article draws on experimentalist governance theory to examine the merits and limitations that increasing

pragmatism and pluralism are having on SSC. It is my contention that, while growing experimentation and heterodoxy have allowed developing countries to explore novel ideas and directions, greater effort needs to be made to leverage these opportunities through the intentional design and implementation of experimentalist governance frameworks across the Global South. At one level, then, this article seeks to contribute to development theory by applying an experimentalist governance lens to the proliferation and diversification of South–South initiatives. At another level, it seeks to contribute to development practice by identifying experimentalist principles that could guide the design and delivery of more effective South–South initiatives.

Due to its distinctive, locally-informed, and adaptive problem solving, experimentalist governance is normatively promising (de Búrca et al., 2013). For instance, it has been argued that because of its unique participatory and deliberative features this mode of governance destabilizes entrenched forms of authority—

technocratic authority, in particular—paving the way to democratic renewal (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010). With its focus on United Nations conventions, European integration, and Global North-led cross-border commons management, as a theory of transnational governance, however, experimentalism has been largely framed in terms of the liberal international order (de Búrca, 2017; Zeitlin, 2015; Zeitlin & Overdevest, 2021). The potential of this mode of governance as a mechanism through which developing countries pool resources and knowledge, collectively learn to identify and remedy constraints on development, and discover alternative—“de-Westernized”—paths to modernity has remained unexplored (Eisenstadt, 2003). The article thus addresses the following two questions: Are there South–South initiatives that display the features of experimentalist governance? In what ways does a South–South perspective shed new light on experimentalist governance?

I proceed in two parts (Sections 2 and 3), mirroring the two stages of the exploratory research this article reports on. I begin by cataloging SSC initiatives in terms of a heuristic for thinking about the emergence of experimentalist governance in relation to other modes of pluralist governance. This analytical exercise reveals that, while there are currently no South–South mechanisms that display all features of experimentalist governance, there are three promising initiatives at the regional level that focus on city-to-city partnerships. These initiatives exemplify the growing relevance of cities as laboratories for co-producing sustainable development through the scaling up and pooling of locally-informed problem solving. This first part of the article thus provides evidence of the growing importance, in developing contexts, of platforms for fostering collaboration between urban areas as sites of transnational experimentation (Acuto, 2016; Amiri & Sevin, 2020; Menezes et al., 2019). It also points to the growing relevance of regional institutions across the Global South as fora for catalyzing SSC beyond narrow trade—or market-led integration (Acharya, 2007).

I then provide a case study of one of these initiatives—namely, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Smart Cities Network (ASCN). The ASCN captures the promising role of a Southern regional institution in promoting autonomy-enhancing cooperation for sustainable development among its member states. It illustrates efforts to operationalize the smart cities paradigm as a leapfrog strategy in a developing context—Southeast Asia. And it also highlights the increasing ambitions of ASEAN in the context of the geostrategic pivot to the Indo-Pacific. This “intrinsic case study” does not aim to make descriptive or explanatory generalizations (Grandy, 2010, pp. 499–501; Yin, 2018). It seeks, rather, to explore how the unique case of ASCN compares with the ideal type of experimentalist governance that has been proposed within the framework of re-embedding liberalism.

2. South–South Cooperation: An Experimentalist Approach

The impressive increase in the flow of grants, loans, and technical knowledge, and the greater volume of trade and investment among developing countries over the past two decades has successfully mobilized resources for inclusive growth in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Morvaridi & Hughes, 2018). This proliferation of South–South linkages, however, has also brought forth new dilemmas and reframed old ones (Bracho, 2018). While the proverbial “decline of the West and the rise of the rest” has eroded the power of the northern “aid industry,” new forms of dependency and indebtedness have emerged within the Global South, challenging the principles of solidarity, concessionality, and non-interference that once oriented the relations between post-colonial and newly independent states during the first decades of the Cold War (Jing et al., 2020). Paradoxically, furthermore, these new South–South linkages seem to be diluting the emancipatory and transformative promise of SSC (Golub, 2013). Rather than challenging the world system from without in the spirit of the Third World emancipatory projects of earlier generations, South–South flows and policy complementarity increasingly aim at redistribution, rebalancing, and integration from within the strictures of economic globalization.

Experimentalist governance provides a privileged perspective for assessing the role of city-to-city partnerships as a novel modality of SSC that has emerged in this changing context. This perspective also allows us to rethink key dilemmas that have undergirded the legacy of SSC since the 1955 Bandung (Asian-African) Conference, including the nature of institutional change; the contrast between rhetoric and implementation, aspirations and taking to scale; the post-developmental critique of modernist projects; and the tensions between re-embedding liberalism and constructing multiple modernities.

Over a decade ago, Rodrik (2008) had already described a “new” development economics skeptical of ex-ante knowledge and emphasized the contextual nature of policy solutions that was gaining leverage with the erosion of the Washington Consensus. This approach applies to the growth diagnostics of macro-development economics the “experimentalist mindset” that is usually associated with the randomized control trials in micro-development economics. The micro-macro convergence in development economics is not about a specific set of policies, but about how one does policy. Starting with strong assumptions about both the problem and the solution, the traditional way of thinking about economic development or SSC is presumptive, rather than diagnostic. By contrast, the new approach begins with relative agnosticism concerning the problem and gives pride of place to experimentation as a strategy for the discovery of solutions or development pathways.

More recently, Grabel (2018) has convincingly argued that the multilayered, polycentric, and redundant features of the international order are opening space for forms of pragmatic strategies and institutional experiments that are conducive to autonomy-promoting policies and unscripted learning by doing. This “productive incoherence,” as she calls it, is especially visible among the emerging markets and developing economies of the Global South. It is Hirschman’s (1967/2015) approach to development strategy and institutional change, Grabel submits, that allows us to understand why these relatively small and disconnected innovations—this “incoherence”—in the global financial architecture, in particular, widens policy space and opportunities for potentially “productive” innovation across developing contexts. Against the heroic vision of the Bretton Woods “moment” and the New International Economic Order, Grabel argues that the focus of SSC should be on harnessing the gradual and evolutionary developments that take form through disparate innovations, local heresies, and small-scale explorations.

De Búrca et al. (2014, 2013) offer a useful framework for thinking about the institutional arrangements that have brought forth this “experimentalist mindset” and “productive incoherence” in the field of international development. Marshaling a social evolutionary approach oriented by organizational theory and economic sociology, they trace the emergence of transnational experimentalist governance in relation to two other modes of global pluralist governance. In what follows, I deploy this framework as a heuristic for thinking about the potential and limitations of the different institutional mechanisms that have been established to foster SSC (see Table 1).

Exemplified by the United Nations System, the Bretton Woods Institutions, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/World Trade Organization (WTO), the first mode of governance—*comprehensive, integrated international regimes*—crystallized during the early years of the postwar period and has long formed the backbone of the liberal international order (since 1945). A geopolitical condition for this mode of gover-

nance is the concentration of power in either one state or a small number of states with relatively congruous interests. Provided by the United States and Western Europe prior to the “rise of the rest,” this “hegemonic leadership” is operationalized through the principal-agent model where the Atlantic democracies are considered as the chief principals who establish international organizations to act as their agents in addressing global problems that are defined in advance, according to specific procedures that are also stipulated beforehand (de Búrca et al., 2013).

Mechanisms for promoting SSC that emerged under this mode of governance include: the 1964 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and its closely affiliated Non-Aligned Movement (1961) and Group of 77 (1964); the New International Economic Order, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1974; the United Nations Office for South–South Cooperation (UNOSSC), established by the UNDP in 1974; the 1978 United Nations Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries and its two follow-up meetings—the first and second high-level United Nations Conferences on SSC held, respectively, in Nairobi, in 2009, and Buenos Aires, in 2019; and OECD development assistance committee (OECD DAC), created in 1960 as a forum for donor countries.

Integrated international organizations stagnated, fragmented, and were increasingly contested beginning in the 1990s with the emergence of a “new world order” and its correlated “disaggregated sovereignty” (Slaughter, 2005). In this vacuum emerged a second mode of governance—*regime complexes*—which can be characterized as transnational and nonhierarchical multi-stakeholder constellations around particular issue-based mechanisms. Examples of this second mode of governance (since 1995) include: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC); the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria (The Global Fund); and the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA; see Keohane & Victor, 2011; Morse & Keohane, 2014). Some of these new forms of

Table 1. South–South cooperation and the evolution of governance arrangements.

Mode	Type	Period	Examples	
			Global governance	SSC
One	Comprehensive and integrated international regimes	1945–	United Nations System; Bretton Woods Institutions; GATT/WTO	UNCTAD; OECD DAC; UNOSSC
Two	Regime complexes and orchestrated networks	1995–	UNFCCC; The Global Fund; IRENA	Development Cooperation Forum; GPEDC; Delhi Process
Three	Experimentalist governance	1995–	IATTC; CRPD; Montreal Protocol	IADB Cities Laboratory; ADB Future Cities Program; ASEAN ASCN

Source: Adapted from de Búrca et al. (2013).

authority, moreover, can be considered “orchestrated networks” in the sense that:

They are supported and coordinated by existing (often Mode One) international organizations, seeking to extend governance beyond the point of state agreement or to deepen the application of rules by involving other organizations and actors in their construction. (de Búrca et al., 2013, p. 13)

Mechanisms for promoting SSC that emerged under this mode of governance include: the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC), a multi-stakeholder partnership to promote the 2030 Agenda, established in 2012 and supported by UNDP and OECD; the Development Cooperation Forum, launched in 2007 under the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Council to promote greater coherence and provide a normative framework for the growing diversity of development partners; and the Delhi Process, a platform for dialogue and knowledge enhancement around SSC created in 2013 and coordinated by the Delhi-based Research and Information System for Developing Countries, the Forum on Indian Development Cooperation, and the Network of Southern Think Tanks.

While regime complexes emerge as a strategy to grapple with increasing pluralism, pervasive uncertainty linked to the growing complexity of issues—for example, climate change—generates *experimentalist governance*. This third mode of governance (since 1995) refers to the gradual institutionalization of a recursive process of provisional goal-setting and revision, involving open participation by a variety of stakeholders, lack of formal hierarchical arrangements, and extensive deliberation in decision making and implementation (de Búrca et al., 2013, p. 16). More restrictive and demanding than other pluralist and post-hierarchical forms of authority, global experimentalist governance has the following five features: (a) the commitment by multiple stakeholders to participate in a nonhierarchical decision-making process; (b) the agreement of a common problem and the articulation of open-ended goals; (c) the delegation of responsibility and discretion to lower-level actors having contextualized knowledge to implement these goals in their respective settings; (d) continuous feedback through monitoring and evaluation; and (e) a system of peer review for revising rules and practices (de Búrca et al., 2013, p. 17).

Examples of this third mode of governance include the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the Montreal Protocol on Substances Depleting the Ozone Layer (de Búrca et al., 2013, pp. 21–46). Central to the IATTC’s objective of preserving tuna stocks and protecting dolphins in the Eastern Tropical Pacific is the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of existing practices by on-board observers as opposed to benchmarks stipulated

by signatory countries. To achieve the broad framework goal of eliminating discrimination based on disability, the CRPD depends, for instance, on national implementation and monitoring, as opposed to the periodic review by an international body. And to meet phase-out targets for chlorofluorocarbons and other ozone-depleting substances, the Montreal Protocol established a decentralized system where the Ozone Secretariat, through mechanisms like the Technology and Economic Assessment Panel and the sector-specific Technical Options Committees, pool information from local units to facilitate continuous learning about adjusting controls, the feasibility of substitutes, and other elements of the implementation experience.

There are currently no SSC mechanisms that display all features of global experimentalist governance. Three promising initiatives in terms of their potential to learn from, and scale up locally-informed problem solving are the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) Cities Laboratory, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Future Cities Program, and the ASEAN ASCN. As regional platforms for fostering collaboration between subnational—city—governance regimes, these three initiatives are an often overlooked manifestation of the deepening polyarchy and growing organizational diversity that characterizes the field of international development.

Like United Cities and Local Governments, the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, Local Governments for Sustainability, G20 Global Smart Cities Alliance, World Cities Summit, and the World Smart Sustainable Cities Organization, these three initiatives bring together municipal governments and local stakeholders to pool knowledge and coordinate action around, for instance, smart infrastructure, climate change, social protection, public health, migration, and the social and solidarity economy. IADB Cities Laboratory, ADB Future Cities Program, and ASCN capture the growing role of cities—in particular “global cities”—as key articulators in the “new geographies of centrality” (Sassen, 2018, p. 5). As global cities from the South and East exert increasing sway, and as middleweight cities continue to gain ground on megacities (Dobbs et al., 2011), today, at the dawn of the fourth industrial revolution—that latest round of technological innovation which includes, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, big data, the internet of things, and cloud computing (Schwab, 2016)—urban centers are becoming important sites for SCC.

These three regional city-to-city initiatives exemplify the co-production paradigm in international development that has emerged in and through the dynamics of devolution and network governance. The vertical pivot downward from national to lower levels of government and the horizontal pivot outward from the state to business and civil society of our post-Westphalian age has brought to the fore two interrelated challenges (Falk, 2016, pp. 20–43): on the one hand, the challenge of pooling local/indigenous knowledge and professional/scientific knowledge; on the other, the

challenge of blending the adaptability of bottom-up civic engagement and the technocratic complexities of top-down programming (Briggs, 2008; Corburn, 2005). The three initiatives seek to operationalize this blending and pooling through the scaling up of “urban living laboratories” (Naumann et al., 2018). They aim to generate place-based “usable knowledge” that can address pressing social problems and can serve as catalysts for change and innovation from below. IADB Cities Laboratory, ADB Future Cities Program, and ASEAN ASCN are important modalities of SSC in a context where the boundaries between private, public, and community action are increasingly being blurred by the growing sway of multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder initiatives, including public-private partnerships.

As mechanisms of experimentalist governance, these three initiatives can be understood as potential correctives to the post-development approach to SSC. By giving pride of place to indigenous knowledge and social movements, the post-development paradigm offers important resources for rethinking South–South linkages beyond the parameters of Western modernity (Escobar, 2015). The post-structuralist-inspired turn to ethnographic and place-based subaltern knowledge breaks with the model of instrumental rationality and homo economicus that grounds modern development projects. Yet post-developmentalism remains limited by its contestatory and discursive view of social change as the thinking—through the radical alterity of the “colonial difference”—the transition to another possible—post-capitalist, post-growth, and non-anthropocentric—world. By emphasizing collective problem solving and implementation research over post-structuralist theory and the sociology of social movements, the experimentalist framework focuses on the innovative potential of indigenous knowledge and social movements as taking to scale real-sector development projects. From a comparative civilizations point of view, these three experimentalist initiatives can contribute to the South–South discovery of alternative—“de-Westernized”—paths to modernity (Eisenstadt, 2003). As such, they problematize conventional assumptions, like, for instance, the relationship between economic progress and liberal democratic institutions, or between modernization and secularism.

In the next section, I will examine ASCN from an experimentalist governance perspective. To better appreciate the significance of this case study, I first briefly discuss the reinvigoration of regionalism today.

3. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ Smart Cities Network: A Case Study

Given their relative proximity to local knowledge and access to the cultural and historical resources for orienting non-Western visions of world order, regional institutions across the Global South are today growing in relevance. They are increasingly becoming channels for the heterodox and pragmatic strategies that have gained

sway in the field of development and have played a central role in the well-documented expansion of SSC (Jing et al., 2020). Long considered a peripheral element of the post-war international order, providing “small but useful pieces” to the puzzles of global security and welfare (Nye, 1971, p. 199), the crisis of American or Western-led multilateralism has given rise to a new emphasis on regionalism. Perhaps the key structural determinant of this nascent “global world order of strong regions” is the diffusion of power from the G7 to the G20 in and through the growing influence of emerging countries from the South and East (Acharya, 2007). As evidenced in the slew of appealing but analytically dubious acronyms that have come to the fore in the last two decades (for example, BRICS, IBSA, Next 11, CIVETS, MINT, MIST, and MIKTA), this latest wave of “middlepowerdom” is reinvigorating regional institutions (Walton & Wilkins, 2019, pp. 4–8).

Asia-Pacific exemplifies the relevance of regionalism for today’s world order. As the region’s share of global flows (trade, capital, people, etc.) increases in the Asian Century, so too is the interregional share of these flows through, for instance, the proliferation of “Asia-for-Asia supply chains” and the growing complementarity of the region’s diverse economies (Tonby et al., 2019). In addition to increasing economic interconnectivity, the cohesion of the “Asian regional order” stems as well from a sense shared by Asian states of representing “emerging” and “post-colonial” countries and the “conviction that world order is now rebalancing after an unnatural Western irruption over the past several centuries” (Kissinger, 2014, p. 212). This solidarity is tempered by the diverse lessons Asian countries have drawn from their historical legacies as well as by the pursuit of their different national interests. Moreover, regional volatility has increased as Asia’s center of gravity has shifted from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020).

Established in 1967 with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand as its founding members, and eventually integrating Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam, the development of ASEAN captures this growing potential of regional institutions for fostering SSC (Acharya, 2009). The regional organization’s three pillars—Political-Security Community, Economic Community, and Socio-Cultural Community—embody the deepening of cooperation between member states, from collective diplomacy against external powers, through policy convergence for trade liberalization and export-oriented industrialization, up to the more ambitious coordination in the areas of, for instance, social pensions, bio-diversity, food safety, social enterprises, active aging, and disaster risk reduction (ASEAN, 2015).

Signed in November 2020 and dubbed the largest free trade deal in history, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement, comprising the ten ASEAN member states, the ASEAN+3 countries (China, Japan, and South Korea), and the two Australasian

countries (Australia and New Zealand) that—along with India—are part of the ASEAN+6, points to the “triumph of ASEAN’s middle-power diplomacy” (Petri & Plummer, 2020). With a GDP of just over three trillion USD, which already constitutes the world’s fifth-largest economy (behind the United States, China, Japan, and Germany), and with a total population of 650 million, which already represents the third most populous territory in the world (behind China and India), ASEAN is poised, with the adoption of the RCEP, to gain increasing sway (ASEAN, 2019a). In this context, the regional organization is determined to be a leading actor in shaping the nascent institutional architecture of the Indo-Pacific, with the aim of achieving “a seamlessly and comprehensively connected and integrated region that will promote competitiveness, inclusiveness, and a greater sense of community” (Anwar, 2020; ASEAN, 2019b, pp. 4–5). This broad vision of regional order, which includes the implementation of the SDGs, will only be advanced if ASEAN pushes beyond the limitations of trade—or market-led regionalism and taps into the innovative potential of, for instance, bottom-up, multi-stakeholder governance. The ASEAN ASCN is a move in this direction.

ASCN is an instructive case study insofar as, coordinated by ASEAN, it provides insights into the promising role of a Southern regional institution in promoting autonomy-enhancing cooperation for sustainable development through municipal-level exchanges among its member states. It captures the shift from the narrow “open regionalism” of the neoliberal age to a broader “post-hegemonic,” “developmental,” “multiplex” or “regulatory” regionalism, with its promise of coordinating industrial policies and enhancing cross-border social protection as a reconfiguration of the “collective self-reliance” of old (Acharya, 2018; Deacon et al., 2007; Gürcan, 2019; Jones & Hameiri, 2020). More specifically, the case of ASCN illustrates how a regional organization from Asia-Pacific is grappling with these efforts in the context of the geostrategic pivot to the Indo-Pacific at the dawn of the fourth industrial revolution, where security and welfare issues are increasingly interlocking and being channeled through partnerships for smart cities.

A fruit of productive incoherence, ASCN exemplifies the opportunities for innovation provided by increasing experimentation and pluralism. Yet, lacking some of the experimentalist features mentioned earlier, this initia-

tive still has not unleashed its potential as an effective mechanism for adaptive problem solving and learning between Southeast Asian countries. Most notably, ASCN is oriented by a common problem and open-ended goals; it involves multiple stakeholders participating in a non-hierarchical decision-making process; and it delegates responsibility and discretion to lower-level actors having contextualized knowledge to implement these goals in their respective settings. However, ASCN currently lacks an institutionalized mechanism for providing continuous feedback and a system of peer review for revising rules and practices, two closely related experimentalist elements I subsume under “diagnostic monitoring of a portfolio of projects” (Kuznetsov & Sabel, 2017). I will now turn to an analysis of ASCN’s design principles in light of these four experimentalist features, as summarized in Table 2.

3.1. Common Problem and Open-Ended Goals

Driven by Southeast Asia’s demographic transition and impressive economic growth, the share of ASEAN’s population living in cities has doubled since the regional organization’s founding. Urban areas throughout the region, moreover, are projected to add another 70 million people by 2025, not only through the continued expansion of mega-cities like Bangkok and Jakarta, but, increasingly, through the growth of middleweight cities—with populations between 500,000 and five million—like Phnom Penh and Vientiane (ASEAN, 2018). ASCN was launched under Singapore’s Chairmanship in April of 2018 during the 32nd ASEAN Summit as a platform where cities from the ten ASEAN member states learn from each other on how to more effectively address this unprecedented rate of urbanization. Key challenges include, strained infrastructure and congestion, increasing resource footprint, unmanaged internal—rural-to-urban—migration, growing prevalence of non-communicable diseases, increased threat of cyber-attacks, expansion of slums and informal settlements, and pervasive vulnerable employment.

The common problem that orients ASCN—“smart and sustainable urbanization”—remains vague at the outset. Like with, for instance, “clean water,” “sustainable forestry,” or “good jobs,” ASCN’s experimentalist actors know they desire a certain outcome; yet they are uncertain about how to achieve it (Rodrik & Sabel, 2020).

Table 2. ASCN’s experimentalist design.

Experimentalist features	ASCN
Common problem and open-ended goals	Smart and sustainable urbanization
Discretion to lower-level actors	ASEAN cities
Nonhierarchical multi-stakeholder decision-making process	Participation of private-sector solution providers and ASEAN external partners
Diagnostic monitoring of a portfolio of projects	<i>remains to be developed</i>

Source: Drawing on Kuznetsov and Sabel (2017), adapted from de Búrca et al. (2014).

The broad and open-ended framework that guides the work of ASCN captures the imprecise and provisional nature of the ends and means proposed to address this common problem. In terms of ends, three strategic outcomes—corresponding to the three pillars of sustainable development—are proposed as a metric of smart and sustainable urbanization: a high quality of life, a competitive economy, and a sustainable environment. How these outcomes are to be blended and combined is evolving and context-dependent. Three principle means are operationalized and fine-tuned through the implementation experience: first, the leveraging of the innovative potential and technological advances of the fourth industrial revolution to “leapfrog development phases” and “turn disruption into opportunity” (Ludher et al., 2018, pp. 43, 57); second, the enhancement and alignment of two often juxtaposed “urban systems”—integrated master planning by the public sector and dynamic and adaptive multi-stakeholder governance; and third, the prioritization of one of the following six focus areas: civic and social life, health and well-being, safety and security, quality environment, built infrastructure, and industry and innovation.

3.2. Discretion to Lower-Level Actors

As perhaps ASCN’s key experimentalist feature, ASEAN member states delegate responsibility and discretion to city governments—or more precisely, to city multi-stakeholder governance regimes—with the understanding that these lower-level actors will marshal valuable contextualized knowledge and pool resources from their

respective settings, decomposing the imposing challenge of rapid urbanization into discrete problem-solving efforts (Rodrik & Sabel, 2020). A mechanism for tapping the growing dynamics of devolution that has been giving cities across Southeast Asia increasing responsibility in the delivery of social services and public administration more generally (ASEAN, 2018, p. 16), ASCN, then, has the potential to innovate both regional integration and SSC efforts by pivoting from top-down to bottom-up implementation. Thus, for instance, by fostering cooperation around city-specific initiatives that cut across political-security, economic and socio-cultural issues, ASCN has been cast as an opportunity to achieve “effective cross-pillar coordination,” a perennial concern given ASEAN’s siloed organizational architecture (Ludher et al., 2018). And, to the extent that it leverages the productive incoherence of networks of city-to-city exchanges, ASCN can be seen as an attempt to go beyond the dominant Westphalian model of SSC where national governments are the primary actors.

An initial cohort of 26 pilot cities from across the ten ASEAN member states were selected in 2018 to develop action plans comprising of two priority projects (see Table 3). These cities are located in countries that have recently achieved lower-middle-income status, like Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar, as well as in high-income countries like Brunei Darussalam, and Singapore. Cities also range in size, from Bandar Seri Begawan and Luang Prabang, with a population of 64,000 and 98,000, respectively, to the aforementioned megacities of Bangkok and Jakarta, which are nearly 100 times larger. This difference in scale, density, and availability of

Table 3. ASCN pilot cities (2018–2025).

Country	Income group	City	Population (thousands)	Projects
Brunei Darussalam	High	Bandar Seri Begawan	64	1. Kampong Ayer Stilt Village Revitalization 2. Clean River Management
Cambodia	Lower middle	Battambang	161	1. Urban Street and Public Space Management 2. Solid and Liquid Waste Management
		Phnom Penh	2,800	1. Pedestrian Walkway Development 2. Public Bus Service Enhancement
		Siem Reap	268	1. Smart Tourist Management System 2. Solid Waste and Wastewater Management
Indonesia	Lower middle	Makassar	1,800	1. Health Care Delivery Enhancement 2. Integrated Online Tax Services
		Banyuwangi	1,600	1. Digital Skills for Youth Initiative 2. Eco-Tourism Sector Development
		Jakarta	10,100	1. Innovation Platform for Job Creation 2. Integrated Public Transportation System
Lao PDR	Lower middle	Luang Prabang	98	1. Heritage Wetland Restoration 2. Pedestrianization of Urban Spaces for Ecotourism
		Vientiane	821	1. Drainage Management System 2. Sustainable Urban Transport System

Table 3. (Cont.) ASCN pilot cities (2018–2025).

Country	Income group	City	Population (thousands)	Projects
Malaysia	Upper middle	Johor Bahru	1,500	1. Centralized Data Center for Public Administration 2. Integrated Urban Water Management System
		Kuala Lumpur	1,800	1. Geospatial Information System for Governance 2. Integrated Submission System Upgrading
		Kota Kinabalu	453	1. Townships Revitalization 2. Smart Water Management System
		Kuching	680	1. Smart Traffic Management System 2. Integrated Flood Management System
Myanmar	Lower middle	Nay Pyi Taw	925	1. Affordable Housing Development 2. Creation of Country’s first International University
		Mandalay	1,200	1. Traffic Management System 2. Solid Waste and Waste Water Treatment System
		Yangon	5,200	1. Historic Downtown Preservation and Revitalization 2. Geospatial Information System for Urban Planning
Philippines	Lower middle	Cebu City	923	1. Integrated Intermodal Transport System 2. Control System for Traffic and Disaster Response
		Davao City	1,700	1. Public Safety and Security Command Center 2. Intelligent Transport and Traffic Systems
		Manila	1,800	1. Traffic and Disaster Response Command Center 2. E-Finance System Enhancement
Singapore	High	Singapore	5,600	1. Integrated E-Payments Platform 2. National Digital Identity System
Thailand	Upper middle	Bangkok	8,300	1. Transport Hub Expansion in Bang Sue Area 2. Smart Transportation System in Phaholyothin Area
		Chonburi	215	1. Smart Energy Grid 2. Smart Waste Management
		Phuket	400	1. Big Data Analytics Platform for Infrastructure 2. Big Data Analytics Platform for Public Safety
Vietnam	Lower middle	Da Nang	1,000	1. Control Center for Emergency Response 2. Data Center Enhancement
		Hanoi	7,600	1. Intelligent Operations Center 2. Intelligent Transportation System
		Ho Chi Minh City	8,200	1. Integrated Operations Center 2. Integrated Emergency Response Center

Source: Based on Pattanapanchai and Nimmanphatcharin (2019), Ludher et al. (2018), and World Bank (2022).

resources provides the complementarity that is needed for effective problem solving. This said, the cohort seems to be at least tacitly oriented by the challenges that face middleweight cities from countries that are seeking to graduate to the upper-middle-income threshold. With few exceptions, like, for instance, Banyuwangi’s Digital Skills for Youth Initiative and Nay Pyi Taw’s Affordable Housing Development, the majority of the projects focus on “hard” (as opposed to “soft”) infrastructure. Projects also span the “smart” and “sustainable” dimensions of urban planning. For example, the initiatives being piloted in Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore all focus on the for-

mer, while those being rolled out in Brunei Darussalam and Lao PDR focus on the latter.

3.3. Nonhierarchical Multi-Stakeholder Decision-Making Process

Common across all post-hierarchical organizations and initiatives, and perhaps the most intuitive of the four experimentalist features being considered here, ASCN is characterized by the commitment of multiple actors to participate in a polyarchic decision-making process. This is about “engaging diverse and capable stakeholders such as

citizens, government officials and businesses...in decision-making and oversight of how the city plans, utilizes and manages its resources,” as is defined “dynamic and adaptive multi-stakeholder governance,” one of the two aforementioned urban systems that ground ASCN’s operational framework (Ludher et al., 2018, p. 13). While the horizontal pivot to city-level multi-stakeholder regimes is normatively present by design, the destabilizing and autonomy enhancing potential of network governance is being narrowly operationalized by ASCN as city government initiated collaboration along two axes: namely, the fostering of tangible projects in cooperation with private-sector solution providers and the catalyzing of funding and technical assistance from ASEAN’s external partners.

Key to ASCN’s bet on smart technologies is collaboration with some of the pacesetter companies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, such as Alibaba, Amazon, Hitachi, Huawei, Mitsubishi, Qualcomm, and VIETTEL. These public-private partnerships highlight the growing sway of stakeholder capitalism in SSC and regional integration. They also raise valid concerns about the risk of capture of local government and public policy by business interests. Though research has shown that, in addition to rent-seeking by the private sector, fruitful public-private collaboration is also stymied by the lack of public sector capacity to engage private actors and coordinate a coherent public sector response (Fernández-Arias et al., 2016). This is why if ASCN is to be successful, ASEAN members will need to ensure the participation of a vibrant public sector that can foster “symbiotic”—as opposed to “parasitic”—stakeholder partnerships (Mazzucato, 2021).

In addition to heavyweight information technology companies, ASEAN external partners, too, have enthusiastically embraced ASCN. Initiatives include: ASEAN-Australia Smart Cities Trust Fund, ASEAN-China Leaders’ Statement on Smart City Cooperation, European Union’s Smart Green ASEAN Cities Project, Japan Association for Smart Cities in ASEAN, Republic of Korea-ASEAN Smart City Development Cooperation Forum, and the United States-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership. In an age where security and welfare issues are increasingly interlocking through, for instance, the specters of techno-authoritarianism and surveillance capitalism, this appeal of smart cities as a mechanism for promoting both SSC and triangular cooperation needs to be considered in light of the geo-economic “superpower marathon” between China and the United States as well as the aspirations of “rising” regional—middle—powers in the shift toward the Indo-Pacific (Brown et al., 2020).

3.4. Diagnostic Monitoring of a Portfolio of Projects

ASCN currently lacks a system of continuous monitoring and evaluation grounded in peer review for revising rules and practices, a pivotal feature of experimentalist governance. The latest discussion around a monitoring and evaluation framework that took place in August of 2021

during the Fourth Annual ASEAN Smart Cities Network Annual Meeting held remotely from Hanoi was framed in the conventional as opposed to the diagnostic sense.

Conventional—or accounting—monitoring aims to determine whether a goal has been met or a rule followed, like, for instance, whether a recipe of reforms has been duly implemented or a best practice has been effectively replicated. As the backward-looking evaluation of outcomes, the focus of conventional monitoring, then, is on the one-time choice of winners (sectors, industries, etc.) with the aim of fine-tuning strategies (Kuznetsov & Sabel, 2017).

By contrast, diagnostic—or problem-solving—monitoring refers to a forward-looking procedure where projects are evaluated with the aim of detecting and correcting errors in and through the process of implementation. “To generate the project implementation experience,” Kuznetsov and Sabel (2017, pp. 66–67) maintain:

One first needs to translate and transform a strategy into a portfolio of real sector projects, that is, create a “proof of concept” for the strategy. Next one needs to test this proof of concept by implementing the portfolio of first mover projects.

In other words, as the management of “self-discovery” (Hausmann & Rodrik, 2003), diagnostic monitoring operationalizes the experimentalist mode of governance—that recursive process of provisional goal setting and revision based on learning by a plurality of stakeholders—through the micro-level testing (piloting), modifying, and scaling up of real sector projects.

Understanding social reality, from this Hayekian perspective (Hayek, 1968/2002), implies grappling with it through micro-level projects and experiments. Indeed, “arms length information from micro—and aggregate-level constraints is no substitute for the real-time knowledge of micro-level details and constraints revealed in projects and experiments” (Kuznetsov & Sabel, 2011, p. 7). Driven by a plurality of local and place-based knowledge that is not accessible to the centralized technocratic planner, this problem-solving potential from below does not, however, remain tacit or stylized as is the case with other post-hierarchical forms, like commons governance and adaptive management (de Búrca et al., 2014). Rather, diagnostic monitoring needs to be institutionalized by a mission-oriented and entrepreneurial public sector that seeks to foster Schumpeterian investments in innovation (Mazzucato, 2021).

A public sector entity with the mandate to coordinate, in partnership with business and civil society actors, capacity-enhancing experimentation by assembling a portfolio of real sector projects and monitoring this portfolio through diagnostic procedures has been dubbed a “Schumpeterian development agency” (SDA). SDAs emerge in an attempt to overcome the limitations of the more traditional Weberian, top-down and principal-agent bureaucratic units (Brenzitz & OrNSTON,

2014; Kuznetsov & Sabel, 2017). Closely linked to fostering advanced technologies, these self-discovery agencies have also provided a framework for “new” industrial policy, understood as the search for capacity-enhancing connections to the global economy (Kuznetsov & Sabel, 2011). Furthermore, they have been deployed to think about environmental regulation and a good jobs economy, both understood as interventions that aim to “create an information exchange regime that induces the local actors to cooperate to contextualize solutions while enabling them to benefit from the pooled experience of others, and visa versa” (Rodrik & Sabel, 2020, p. 12).

To date, the administrative and organizational discussions around ASCN’s roll out have focused on establishing reporting mechanisms and identifying cross-pillar channels within the ASEAN architecture (Ludher et al., 2018). Such an approach stifles the integration of diagnostic monitoring. To fully leverage ASCN’s experimentalist potential there needs to be a pivot from a traditional bureaucratic approach to one that casts this initiative as an SDA-like unit tasked with discovering across member states scalable and replicable real sector projects in the area of smart and sustainable urbanization. That is, in other words, ASCN would be tasked with fostering SSC—regional integration, if one prefers—from the city-level up.

4. Conclusions

The disruption of the post-war international order has tended to be framed in terms of the specters of Thucydides’ Trap, illiberal capitalism and catastrophic climate change. Yet deepening polycentrism and growing organizational diversity is also creating new opportunities in the field of development across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This article drew on experimentalist governance scholarship to assess the new modalities of SSC that have emerged in this context of increasing learning by doing and heterodoxy. Due to its locally-informed problem solving and its participatory and deliberative elements, experimentalist governance is normatively promising. The article argued that growing pluralism and the exploration of novel ideas and directions is not enough; and that greater effort needs to be made to leverage these opportunities through the intentional design and implementation of experimentalist governance frameworks across the Global South. Focusing specifically on the intersection of reinvigorated regionalism and the proliferation of city-to-city partnerships, it considered the potential and challenges of framing SSC as a process of collective learning in and through which developing countries discover their own development paths by attempting to take to scale urban living laboratories. At a theoretical level, it sought to apply an experimentalist governance lens to the proliferation and diversification of South–South initiatives. At the practical level, it sought to identify design principles for rolling out more effective SSC.

I conclude by returning to the two questions that were posed at the outset. The first question was: Are there South–South initiatives that display the features of experimentalist governance? The exploratory research this article is based on found that there are currently no SSC mechanisms that display all features of global experimentalist governance. There are, however, three promising initiatives: IADB Cities Laboratory, ADB Future Cities Program, and the ASEAN ASCN. A case study of ASCN revealed that this initiative is oriented by a broad and open-ended framework, the delegation of discretion to lower-level actors, and multi-stakeholder decision-making process. However, it currently lacks a key experimentalist feature, namely, the diagnostic monitoring of a portfolio of projects, a forward-looking procedure for detecting and correcting errors in and through the process of implementation. The case study also showed that experimentalist city-to-city partnerships can be effectively orchestrated by an existing Southern regional institution using the model of an SDA.

The second question posed at the outset was: In what ways does a South–South perspective shed new light on experimentalist governance? As a theory of transnational governance, experimentalism has largely been cast in terms of the problem of re-embedding liberalism. The focus has been on destabilizing entrenched forms of authority through democratic renewal and on managing collective action problems. The paradigmatic issue areas—technological innovation and new industrial policy—have taken as given the basic coordinates of economic globalization and the development paths of the high-income countries of the Global North. A South–South perspective broadens the experimentalist governance lens by attempting to tackle the challenges facing low- and middle-income countries, given the legacies of colonialism and dependency. In this context, experimentalism is expanded as it seeks to discover pro-poor solutions that could effectively address deep-rooted inequalities and persistent informality. As such it serves as a key corrective to the post-development approach to SSC—as a mechanism for discovering alternative, “de-Westernized,” paths to modernity.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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