



Understanding the Pre-partnership Stage in Subnational International Cooperation

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Abstract

The growth of Decentralized Development Cooperation (DDC) has encouraged local governments to engage more actively in international cooperation. However, existing paradiplomacy literature has primarily focused on the governance and implementation of established partnerships, while the processes preceding partnership formation remain underexplored. This article examines the pre-partnership stage in subnational international cooperation through a comparative analysis of the Yogyakarta–Gyeongsangbuk-do and Kedah–Fujian partnerships. The study employs a qualitative comparative case study based on in-depth interviews and document analysis. The findings identify three interrelated processes in partnership formation: defining local development needs, evaluating partner suitability based on strategic fitness and resource complementarity, and coordinating institutional actors before formalizing cooperation. More importantly, the cases reveal distinct institutional pathways through which these processes unfold. In Yogyakarta, an existing sister-province relationship provides an institutional platform, but specific cooperation programs emerge through negotiation among local governments, communities, and an intermediary organization. In Kedah, federal technical agencies more strongly mediate partner identification by linking sectoral development priorities with prospective international partners and providing institutional validation. These findings show that partner selection in paradiplomacy is not an automatic consequence of existing international ties or opportunities but a deliberative institutional process whose organization varies across governance configurations.

Keywords *Paradiplomacy, Pre-Partnership Stage, Regional International Cooperation, Local Governments, Comparative Case Studies*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, local governments have become increasingly important actors in global development through their participation in Decentralized Development Cooperation (DDC). The shift from donor–recipient relations toward more equal partnerships has expanded opportunities for inter-city and inter-regional cooperation as mechanisms for policy learning, knowledge exchange, capacity building, and multi-stakeholder collaboration in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (OECD, 2023, 2025). Reflecting this trend, the OECD reports that the volume of DDC increased by 61% between 2015 and 2023, giving local governments greater opportunities to establish international cooperation with partners that match their development priorities (OECD, 2025). This growth not only expands opportunities for international cooperation but also allows local governments to choose from a wider range of potential partners that align with their development needs and priorities.

However, expanding cooperation opportunities does not necessarily lead to effective partnerships. Evaluations of city-to-city cooperation identify persistent challenges, including weak goal alignment, limited institutional capacity, inadequate interagency coordination, and insufficient monitoring and evaluation (OECD, 2023, 2025). In Indonesia, many international cooperation

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agreements remain at the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) stage or result in only ceremonial activities with limited development impact ([Alkatiri & Abdullah, 2025](#); [Nadya et al., 2023](#); [Prawitno et al., 2022](#)). These findings suggest that successful paradiplomacy depends not only on managing partnerships after they are established but also on selecting partners that align with local development needs from the outset.

Various studies have explained why local governments pursue international cooperation, how forms of paradiplomacy develop, and the factors that influence the governance and implementation of partnerships once cooperative relationships are formed ([Eppler et al., 2024](#); [Kovacikova, 2025](#); [Kuznetsov, 2015](#); [Mori, 2023](#)). However, attention to the process that precedes partnership formation remains relatively limited. The paradiplomacy literature has not discussed much how local governments move from simply having access to international networks to identifying one partner among the available alternatives. The process includes identifying development needs, tracing alternative partners, evaluating competency suitability, and selecting partners. Decisions at this stage can affect goal alignment, competency matching, and the likelihood of successful implementation of cooperation in the next stage.

This study examines the pre-partnership stage of subnational international cooperation through a comparative analysis of the Yogyakarta–Gyeongsangbuk-do and Kedah–Fujian partnerships. Specifically, it addresses three questions: (1) what processes constitute the pre-partnership stage; (2) how local governments identify and evaluate prospective international partners; and (3) how governance arrangements shape these processes across different institutional contexts. By addressing these questions, the study seeks to explain how local development needs translate into partner-selection decisions before formal cooperation is established. In doing so, it shifts analytical attention in paradiplomacy from why local governments engage internationally and how established partnerships are governed to how international partnerships are formed in the first place.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Paradiplomacy: From International Engagement to Partnership Formation

Paradiplomacy was initially understood as subnational governments' involvement in international relations outside state diplomacy, driven by increasing regional autonomy ([Duchacek, 1990](#); [Michelmann & Soldatos, 1990](#)). The development of globalization, decentralization, and multi-level governance then shifted this understanding. Paradiplomacy is now seen as a development instrument that allows local governments to obtain investment, knowledge, technology, policy learning, and various international resources through sister cities/provinces, transnational municipal networks, international forums, and other forms of cooperation ([Acuto & Leffel, 2021](#); [Eppler et al., 2024](#); [Kuznetsov, 2015](#); [Lecours, 2008](#); [Mori, 2023](#)). Thus, the paradiplomacy literature has provided a broad explanation of local governments' motivations to build international relations, the forms of cooperation that are developing, and the governance and implementation of partnerships.

However, greater access to international networks does not automatically lead to concrete partnerships. Local governments must evaluate various partner options and select the most suitable one based on their development needs, the characteristics of potential partners, and the collaboration opportunities they seek to pursue. Although these decisions shape the direction and potential success of international cooperation, the paradiplomacy literature still explains more about why local governments establish international relations and how partnerships are managed once formed, while the process that precedes partnership formation has received relatively little analytical attention ([Eppler et al., 2024](#); [Grønnestad & Bach Nielsen, 2022](#); [Mori, 2023](#)). This gap

underscores the need to examine partnership formation through the lens of how organizations select partners before building collaborations.

Interorganizational Collaboration: Understanding Partnership Formation

In contrast to the paradiplomacy literature, which focuses more on the motivation and implementation of cooperation, the interorganizational collaboration literature views partnership formation as the outcome of a strategic selection process rather than an automatic consequence of collaboration opportunities. [Gulati \(1998\)](#) and [Ring & Van De Ven \(1994\)](#) explain that organizations first evaluate potential partners before deciding to work together. The process considers strategic fit, resource complementarity, institutional compatibility, and the parties' ability to coordinate effectively ([Bryson et al., 2015](#); [Das & Teng, 2000](#)). Thus, partnership formation is understood as a decision-making process that determines whether a collaborative relationship is worth building.

Examining partnership formation also matters because it shapes subsequent collaboration. Interorganizational collaboration studies suggest that incompatibility between partners, weak alignment of objectives, and inadequate coordination arrangements can create implementation difficulties ([Ansell & Gash, 2008](#); [Emerson et al., 2012](#); [Provan & Kenis, 2008](#)). From this perspective, decisions made before formal cooperation—particularly identifying needs, assessing partner suitability, and establishing coordination arrangements—provide important foundations for subsequent collaboration. This does not imply that pre-partnership processes alone determine partnership outcomes, but it highlights why the formation stage deserves analytical attention rather than being treated merely as a preliminary step before implementation.

Reconsidering the Pre-partnership Stage in Paradiplomacy

The literature on paradiplomacy and interorganizational collaboration focuses on the stages of forming international cooperation. Paradiplomacy explains why local governments build international relations, how forms of cooperation develop, and how partnerships are managed after formation ([Eppler et al., 2024](#); [Kovacikova, 2025](#); [Kuznetsov, 2015](#); [Mori, 2023](#)). In contrast, the interorganizational collaboration literature views partnership formation as a process that precedes collaboration and involves identifying needs, evaluating potential partners' alternatives, and making decisions ([Bryson et al., 2015](#); [Das & Teng, 2000](#); [Gulati, 1998](#); [Ring & Van De Ven, 1994](#)). Thus, these two bodies of literature complement each other in explaining the stages of forming international cooperation between local governments.

Building on this synthesis, this article views the formation of international cooperation among local governments as beginning not when a formal partnership is agreed, but at a pre-partnership stage. This stage includes local governments identifying development needs, exploring and evaluating potential partners, and determining which partners best align with regional development priorities. Through an analysis of the Special Regions of Yogyakarta–Gyeongsangbuk-do and Kedah–Fujian, this article shows how these stages unfold in two governance configurations and how the variety of actors, coordination mechanisms, and decision-making processes shapes the formation of international cooperation among local governments.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine the pre-partnership stage of subnational international cooperation. A multiple-case design enables systematic comparison across governance contexts and helps identify recurring and contrasting patterns across cases ([Eisenhardt, 1989](#); [Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007](#); [Yin, 2013](#)). Two cases were purposively selected: cooperation between the Special Region of Yogyakarta and Gyeongsangbuk-do, and between Kedah and Fujian. The cases were selected because both involve subnational

international cooperation oriented toward local development but operate through different governance arrangements, enabling comparison of how partner identification, evaluation and selection, and institutional coordination unfold across institutional contexts.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis. Informants were selected purposively for their direct involvement in or knowledge of the initiation, coordination, local decision-making, or implementation of the cooperation. In the Yogyakarta case, we interviewed seven informants: the Head of Bleberan Village, two staff members of the Village-Owned Enterprise (Badan Usaha Milik Desa/BUMDes), three mushroom farmers involved in the Saemaul program, and the head of the Global Saemaul Indonesia Foundation (YGSI). In the Kedah case, we interviewed three Kedah State Government officers involved in developing and coordinating the Kedah–Fujian cooperation. Documentary materials included Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), planning documents, activity reports, and official government publications related to forming and developing the two partnerships. Documents were selected for their relevance to reconstructing the initiation of cooperation, partner identification, evaluation and selection, and institutional coordination before formalization.

The data were analyzed thematically following [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). Within-case analysis was conducted first to reconstruct how each partnership developed, followed by cross-case comparison to identify similarities and differences in partner identification, evaluation and selection, and institutional coordination. Interview accounts were compared with documentary materials to assess consistency across sources and to reconstruct institutional processes. Documentary evidence was treated as complementary rather than as independent verification of interview accounts, since official documents may reflect institutional perspectives. To reduce interpretive bias, the researchers distinguished institutional accounts from their own analytical interpretations during within- and cross-case analyses. The researchers obtained ethical approval for this study from the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM), Universitas Pembangunan Nasional “Veteran” Yogyakarta (Approval No. 1137/UN62.21/PG.01.00/2026). All participants provided informed consent before the interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Identifying Local Development Needs before Partner Selection

The findings identify local development needs as a central component of the pre-partnership stage, though needs identification does not necessarily precede initial contact with prospective partners. Rather, the two cases reveal distinct pathways through which local development needs connect to international cooperation opportunities. In Yogyakarta, an existing sister-province relationship provided an institutional platform for subsequently identifying and negotiating specific development needs and cooperation programs. In Kedah, sectoral development priorities played a more direct role in identifying a prospective partner through a federal technical agency's recommendation. These differences suggest that needs identification and partner identification are interrelated processes rather than a fixed temporal sequence.

This pattern is evident in the Yogyakarta–Gyeongsangbuk-do cooperation through the Saemaul program. According to an interview with the Global Saemaul Indonesia Foundation (YGSI), the economic empowerment program was not predetermined by the Gyeongsangbuk-do Provincial Government or the Saemaul Foundation. Instead, YGSI discussed the village's local needs and economic potential with the village government. Grace Majestyka explained that, at the initial stage, the village government had not yet identified a specific commodity to develop. YGSI therefore proposed alternatives based on its prior program experience, and the program was determined through consultation with the local government. As she explained:

"When we first started the program there, we asked the village government what they wanted to develop. But the village government itself is still not too sure and does not know what commodities to develop. From YGSI's offer to the government, we shared our experience in mushroom cultivation. Do you think that if we develop this business model in Nanggulan, in Wijimulyo, it is acceptable or not? And after the village government approved, finally we developed mushrooms there." (Grace Majestyka (YGSI), In-depth Interview, Yogyakarta, 2026).

The interview shows that needs identification is not a one-way process in which either the local government or the international partner independently determines the program. Instead, local actors and the intermediary organization articulate specific development needs through dialogue, combining local socioeconomic conditions with the experience and competencies available through the Saemaul program. The choice of mushroom cultivation therefore illustrates an alignment process between locally articulated needs and the competencies available within an existing international partnership. This finding is consistent with collaborative governance scholarship that emphasizes joint problem definition in shaping the direction of collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). In Yogyakarta case, therefore, needs identification operates within an existing international relationship rather than necessarily preceding it.

The Kedah–Fujian case reveals a different pathway. Interviews with Kedah State Government officers indicate that fisheries and ecomarine development were identified as regional priorities, and the federal Department of Fisheries played an important role in linking these priorities to a prospective international partner. Fujian was recommended for its relevant experience and expertise in the marine and aquaculture sectors. At the planning stage, proposed cooperation also required input from technical agencies and federal authorities to assess its alignment with sectoral needs and the applicable regulatory framework (Muhammad Shazwan Hafiz Zukri, Kedah State Government Officer, In-depth Interview, Kedah, 2026).

Taken together, the two cases do not support a single sequence in which needs identification invariably precedes partner identification. Instead, they show that local development needs and international partnership opportunities align through different institutional pathways. In Yogyakarta, this alignment occurs within an existing sister-province relationship and is mediated by consultation between YGSI and local actors. In Kedah, sectoral priorities provide the basis for a federal technical agency to recommend a prospective partner with relevant expertise. What is common across the cases, therefore, is not the temporal order of the process but the need to align local development priorities with competencies available through international cooperation.

Identifying and Evaluating Prospective International Partners

The findings indicate that partner identification, evaluation, and selection are distinct yet closely related processes within the pre-partnership stage. Partner identification concerns how prospective partners enter consideration, while partner evaluation assesses their suitability relative to local development priorities, relevant competencies, and available resources. Partner selection is the decision to pursue cooperation with a particular prospective partner. The two cases reveal different mechanisms through which these processes unfold. Nevertheless, in both cases, the suitability of prospective partners is assessed by the alignment between local development priorities and the competencies and resources they can provide, underscoring the importance of strategic fit and resource complementarity in partnership formation (Bryson et al., 2015; Gulati, 1998; Ring & Van De Ven, 1994).

In the Yogyakarta–Gyeongsangbuk-do case, an existing sister-province relationship established in 2005 provided the institutional platform for subsequent cooperation. However, this prior relationship did not automatically determine the specific form of cooperation. The suitability of the Saemaul program was assessed against local development needs and implementation

conditions. Grace Majestyka explained that implementing the Saemaul program in Indonesia could proceed only after an official request from the recipient local government and an assessment based on Official Development Assistance (ODA) criteria, including development needs and the potential for successful implementation. In addition, the program focus was adapted to local conditions and prior implementation experience (Grace Majestyka, YGSI, In-depth Interview, Yogyakarta, 2026).

The Yogyakarta case therefore distinguishes between the existence of an institutional relationship and the evaluation of a specific cooperation opportunity. While the sister-province relationship provides access to cooperation opportunities, the form of cooperation is further assessed based on the relevance of the partners' experience and competencies to local development needs. In other words, what is matched is not simply two local governments, but the development needs and competencies each party brings to the cooperation. This finding adds to paradiplomacy studies of sister-city and sister-province relations by showing that an existing institutional relationship does not eliminate the need to evaluate the substantive fit of a particular cooperation initiative. As [Gulati \(1998\)](#) suggests, prior relationships can facilitate access to resources and knowledge, while their relevance to a specific collaboration still requires assessment.

A similar process is evident in the development of tourism in Muntuk Village. Before preparing the master plan, YGSI and Korean experts conducted field surveys and interviews with the local government and community to understand preferred development directions. The consultations indicated community interest in developing village tourism, and the master plan was subsequently oriented toward the tourism sector rather than being unilaterally determined by the Korean side (Grace Majestyka, YGSI, In-depth Interview, Yogyakarta, 2026). This case further shows that evaluating an existing international partnership involves assessing how the partner's expertise and cooperation opportunities can be adapted to locally articulated priorities.

Evidence from Bleberan Village further illustrates evaluation at the local implementation level. The village government assessed local potential, agricultural conditions, and the need to develop new economic activities to attract younger community members (Bambang Fajrudin, Head of Bleberan Village, In-depth Interview, Yogyakarta, 2026). The team then discussed program alternatives and selected mushroom cultivation as an activity suited to local conditions. This process indicates that evaluation within the cooperation extended beyond the international relationship itself to the suitability of specific programs for local implementation. The resulting program therefore reflected an alignment between local development conditions and the experience and expertise available through the Saemaul cooperation, rather than a unilateral transfer of a predetermined program.

The Kedah–Fujian case reveals a different mechanism for partner identification. Fisheries and ecomarine development were identified as strategic development priorities in Kedah, and Malaysia's federal Department of Fisheries played an important role in linking these priorities to a prospective international partner. The Department recommended Fujian for its relevant experience and expertise in the marine sector. Thus, unlike Yogyakarta, where cooperation opportunities arose within an existing sister-province relationship, Fujian entered consideration through a recommendation from a federal technical agency. When asked why Fujian was considered a suitable partner, a Kedah State Government officer explained:

"We also got advice from the Department of Fisheries in Fujian. Department of Fisheries Malaysia advised that Fujian is a suitable district in China for us to visit for marine... we went there based on advice from the Federal Department of Fisheries." (Aisyah Syarifah (Kedah Local Officer), In-depth Interview, Kedah, 2026).

The subsequent evaluation of Fujian's suitability was tied to Kedah's sectoral development priorities and its need for external expertise. A Kedah State Government officer explained that Kedah is among Malaysia's major fish-producing states, and that further development of the

fisheries sector requires expertise not fully available locally. Fujian's experience in marine and ecomarine development was therefore considered relevant to this capacity need. As the officer explained: "... Kedah among the states that produce the most fish... fisheries also contribute a lot to the country, so we see that this can be developed, but we need expertise from outside... The Department of Fisheries does advise us to study by going to study with Fujia." (Aisyah Syarifah (Kedah Local Officer), In-depth Interview, Kedah, 2026). The two interview accounts therefore reveal distinct functions in the partner-matching process: the federal Department of Fisheries facilitated partner identification by recommending Fujian, while Fujian's sectoral expertise provided the substantive basis for evaluating its suitability.

These findings indicate that sectoral competence was an explicit criterion in evaluating Fujian as a prospective partner. The correspondence between Kedah's need for external expertise in fisheries and ecomarine development and Fujian's relevant experience illustrates strategic fit between local development priorities and prospective partner competencies. This also reflects resource complementarity, whereby cooperation provides access to knowledge, expertise, or resources not fully available locally (Bryson et al., 2015; Das & Teng, 2000; Gulati, 1998). Thus, in the Kedah case, partner evaluation can be understood as assessing whether a prospective partner's competencies match an identified local capacity need.

The comparison reveals distinct institutional pathways for identifying and evaluating prospective partners and cooperation opportunities. In Yogyakarta, an existing sister-province relationship provides an institutional platform for cooperation, and subsequent evaluation assesses whether the programs and competencies available through that relationship align with local development needs and implementation conditions. In Kedah, a federal technical agency directly mediates partner identification by recommending a prospective partner based on sectoral expertise, and evaluation assesses the correspondence between that expertise and Kedah's development priorities. Despite these differences, both cases demonstrate the importance of strategic fit between local development needs and the competencies available through international cooperation. What varies, therefore, is not the relevance of strategic fit but the institutional pathway through which prospective partners and cooperation opportunities are identified and evaluated (Das & Teng, 2000; Ring & Van De Ven, 1994).

Selecting International Partners through Institutional Coordination

The findings show that decisions to proceed with international cooperation are not made by a single organization but emerge through coordination and validation processes among multiple actors with different authorities and functions. Beyond identifying development needs and evaluating prospective partners and cooperation opportunities, the pre-partnership stage also includes institutional mechanisms that ensure cooperation complies with technical, administrative, legal, and policy requirements. This finding extends the interorganizational collaboration literature by demonstrating that coordination begins during partnership formation rather than only after collaboration is established (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Provan & Kenis, 2008).

For the Special Region of Yogyakarta-Gyeongsangbuk-do, the sister-province relationship since 2005 has served only as an entry point for cooperation. After the Yogyakarta Government proposed the Saemaul Program, the provincial government proposed several villages for the Saemaul Foundation and the Saemaul Indonesia Global Foundation (YGSI) to survey. Location selection considered not only economic potential but also the readiness of village institutions, including the presence of BUMDes, a culture of cooperation, community participation, and the capacity to implement programs. As stated by the Head of Bleberan Village:

"... many of the region's proposals... the condition is that there are already BUMDes, the culture of cooperation still exists, the carrying capacity of the community is ready, the participation is high..."

We were finally chosen." (Bambang Fajrudin (Head of Bleberan Village), In-depth Interview, Yogyakarta, 2026).

The findings show that the location selection resulted from coordination among the Village government, the provincial government, YGSI, and the Saemaul Foundation. In this process, YGSI serves as an intermediary that conducts field assessments, evaluates institutional readiness and community potential, and aligns local governments' needs with the Saemaul Foundation's program requirements. These actors connect institutions by integrating each party's information and interests into collaborative decision-making (Bryson et al., 2015; Emerson et al., 2012; Williams, 2002). This arrangement gives local actors a substantive role in assessing program feasibility and implementation readiness, rather than limiting their involvement to implementing a predetermined cooperation program.

A distinct coordination mechanism emerged in the Kedah–Fujian case. After identifying ecomarine development as a priority, Malaysia's Department of Fisheries recommended Fujian as a partner for its sectoral expertise. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Secretary's Office, the Legal Advisor, and relevant technical agencies then coordinated to assess the proposed cooperation's legal, technical, administrative, and environmental feasibility. The validation process also depended on the funding source: projects financed by the federal government required central approval, whereas state-funded initiatives allowed greater decision-making flexibility. Consequently, coordination ensured that the proposed partnership aligned with both development priorities and institutional requirements.

Although the coordination mechanisms differed, both cases shared the same underlying logic. In Yogyakarta, coordination involved the sister-province framework, YGSI, and local governments, whereas in Kedah, federal institutions mediated coordination through technical recommendations and cross-agency validation. In both cases, partner selection emerged from coordination among multiple actors to align local development needs, partner capacities, and institutional requirements. The following section examines how different governance arrangements shape these coordination mechanisms.

Governance Arrangements in the Pre-partnership Stage

The findings show that both cases include a pre-partnership stage but differ in their governance arrangements. Rather than reflecting differences between federal and unitary systems, variation in the pre-partnership stage stems from how authority is distributed, coordination is organized, and partner-selection decisions are made. This finding aligns with the multi-level governance perspective, which explains policy processes as the product of interactions among interdependent actors operating across multiple levels of government (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; OECD, 2022).

In the Special Region of Yogyakarta, the pre-partnership stage is marked by a relatively horizontal governance structure. While the provincial government facilitates sister-province relations, district and village governments, local communities, and the Global Saemaul Indonesia Foundation (YGSI) identify development needs, select program locations, and prepare activities. As an intermediary, YGSI links local development needs with the Saemaul Foundation's requirements through field assessments, communication, and evaluation. This arrangement offers substantial opportunities for local actors to participate in partnership formation from the pre-partnership stage (Bryson et al., 2015; Williams, 2002).

The Kedah State Government identifies development priorities, but identifying and evaluating prospective partners and institutionally validating proposed cooperation involve the Department of Fisheries Malaysia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Secretary's Office, Legal Advisors, and other technical agencies. Thus, forming a partnership depends not only on the state

government's decisions but also on vertical coordination that integrates technical, legal, administrative, and policy considerations before formalizing cooperation.

A comparison of the two cases shows that these governance arrangements produce different pre-partnership mechanisms. In DIY, the process involves more collaborative coordination among local governments, intermediary organizations, and local communities. In Kedah, federal technical institutions mediate coordination more strongly through recommendation and validation functions. Consequently, the Yogyakarta arrangement provides greater scope for local participation and adaptation, whereas the Kedah arrangement places greater emphasis on institutional and regulatory validation.

These findings show that differences in state structures or the distribution of formal authority alone do not sufficiently explain variation in the formation of international cooperation among local governments. The comparison therefore highlights how governance arrangements shape interagency relationships, coordinate various interests, and integrate technical considerations into decision-making. Thus, the pre-partnership stage can be understood as a governance process involving coordination across levels of government and organizations before an international partnership is formalized.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that the pre-partnership stage of subnational international cooperation involves interrelated processes of identifying development needs, identifying and evaluating prospective partners and cooperation opportunities, and coordinating institutional decision-making before formalizing cooperation. Comparison of the Special Region of Yogyakarta–Gyeongsangbuk-do and Kedah–Fujian reveals that these processes do not necessarily follow a fixed sequence but operate through different governance arrangements. In Yogyakarta, an existing sister-province relationship provides an institutional platform through which local governments, communities, and intermediary organizations evaluate and adapt cooperation opportunities. In Kedah, federal institutions more strongly mediate partner identification and validation through sectoral recommendations and cross-agency coordination. Thus, partnership formation is a multi-actor governance process whose institutional pathway varies across governance contexts.

Theoretically, this study extends paradiplomacy literature by shifting attention from the motivations and implementation of cooperation to the process preceding partnership formation. It shows that governance arrangements—including the distribution of roles, coordination mechanisms, and decision-making processes—better explain variation in partnership formation than the federal-unitary dichotomy alone. By conceptualizing the pre-partnership stage as a core component of paradiplomacy governance, this study provides a framework for understanding how local development needs are translated into international partnerships. Future research should examine this framework across different forms of paradiplomacy, policy sectors, and national contexts to assess its broader applicability.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is limited by the small number of cases and the uneven maturity of the two partnerships, which constrain the assessment of implementation outcomes. Future research could examine a larger sample of subnational partnerships to test whether pre-partnership governance arrangements and coordination mechanisms are associated with subsequent partnership outcomes.

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