



BRIEF 1.1. CREATING A GLOBAL ROADMAP THAT BENEFITS CONSTITUENTS

Many local governments lack an international engagement strategy. Without one, they may miss growth opportunities, increase vulnerabilities and reputational risks, and waste limited resources and bandwidth. Beyond the document, the process of developing an international strategy based on evidence and collaboration helps ensure international initiatives remain purposeful, targeted, and outcome-oriented.

1. The challenge: The lack of an international plan comes with a cost.

Today's environment demands strategic global engagement. Global forces—from trade disruptions to extreme weather events and from demographic shifts to changing migration patterns—increasingly shape local realities. Yet many state, local, and regional governments lack the strategic framework to navigate challenges effectively and capitalize on international opportunities. The cost of operating without a plan include:

- **Reactive posture:** Without a proactive strategy and defined goals, a local government may be constantly responding to inbound requests rather than pursuing opportunities aligned with local priorities.
- **Resource drain:** Time, attention, and budget get spread thin across disconnected initiatives, often duplicated across departments, without a cohesive vision or measurable impact.
- **Missed opportunities:** Foreign investment, talent pipelines, and other global gains slip away to better-prepared competitors.
- **Vulnerability to external forces:** The local community remains unprepared for global disruptions. The local government is exposed to operational and reputational risks.

2. Strategic guidance to build a global roadmap.

Start with a structured assessment to reveal the community's existing assets, capabilities, and connections (see table 1). Compiling existing information may not require commissioning new research. Local governments can use evidence and data from partner organizations: economic development departments often have data on trade and FDI relationships; tourism offices track visitor origins; universities track international partnerships.

Table 1. Inventory of existing assets, capabilities, and connections.

Economic foundations	Key industries, major employers, export sectors, origin of inbound foreign investment, destination of outbound foreign investment
Cultural and community connections	Diaspora communities, immigrant populations, and other cultural ties to specific regions/countries
Innovation strengths	Universities, research centers, distinctive civic or nonprofit organizations
Existing international relationships	Sister city or state ties, trade office presence, institutional connections and partnerships, including from previous political cycles
Institutional capabilities	Staff bandwidth, funding for international affairs, resources within government and partner organizations

Besides data-driven planning, local teams must also remain opportunistic and responsive to new developments. For instance, Dortmund, Germany recommends dedicating time for monitoring global trends and for scouting funding opportunities.

Connect international ambitions to local priorities and needs. The strategy must demonstrably advance locally defined goals. Successful international engagement can support:

- Economic development and trade objectives
- Infrastructure and service delivery improvements
- Workforce development needs
- Sustainability targets
- Social inclusion priorities

Stay targeted, with a realistic number of priorities. A common pitfall is attempting to engage too broadly or pursuing high-profile partnerships without clear local benefits. Instead of taking on more relationships than can be meaningfully maintained, local governments need to balance aspiration with realistic resource assessment. Resources will always be limited—concentrate them where they can deliver tangible results. Success comes from depth over breadth. Focus on:

- **Shared policy priority:** High-impact, sector-based partnerships that advance a defined policy priority.
- **Economic complementarity:** Foreign markets with the strongest potential for foreign investment or trade.
- **Cultural ties:** Geographic areas with deep cultural or diaspora connections.

Coordinate across government to prevent siloed or misaligned international activities. Global engagement must be coherent across departments, aligned with executive leadership, and integrated into the administration.

- **Executive buy-in matters.** Securing visible mayoral, gubernatorial, or executive backing signals credibility and commitments to internal and external stakeholders.
- **The governance structure may depend on the government's culture.** Some local governments benefit from a centralized international affairs office tied to the executive cabinet. Others might employ an interdepartmental working group or rely on an external committee (e.g. a sister cities association).
- **Coordination is key to implementing partnerships.** Ultimately, the activation and long-term durability of international partnerships require political champions to transfer ownership of the relationship to the technical staff. Strong collaboration and information-sharing between the international affairs team and leaders from issue-specific bureaus or secretaries enable follow-through implementation of activities (see case study below from Maryland).

Involve external partners to expand and inform partnerships. Broadening ownership of international engagement beyond government helps expand capacity, credibility, and durability.

- **Create structured advisory mechanisms for business, academia, and community input.** These mechanisms of dialogue and coordination build long-term relationships and trust within the community. For instance, in 2025, the Mayor of Calgary created the Mayor's Tariff Advisory Group with more than a dozen businesses and four business associations, enabling a two-way dialogue on how to manage trade uncertainty.
- **Align with national priorities where appropriate.** Through a dialogue with their national government, local authorities can explore alignment in goals and strategies. For instance, Palmerston North benchmarks its goals against New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's policies to *"ensure that international relations strategy is not just aspirational but strategic, focused and aligned with both national and global trends. (...) Building trust [with our stakeholders] was essential, as it laid the foundation for developing an effective and inclusive strategy—one that brings everyone along and ensures meaningful, shared outcomes."*¹

Maximize limited resources. International Affairs are often run with no or limited resources. For instance, the International Relations team of the Auckland Council is a lean two-person unit: a Manager and an Advisor. Despite its small size, the team manages over 20 city and regional partnerships, focusing on initiatives that support Auckland's economic, environmental, and cultural priorities. An infrastructure for action with no or limited staff can use the following principles:

- **Small but strategic:** Focus on a few high-impact partnerships and engagements that are tightly aligned with immediate priorities or where strong relationships already exist.
- **Leverage institutional partners:** Collaborate with economic development organizations, businesses, think-tanks, and other partner organizations to co-design initiatives, share responsibilities for hosting delegations, and plan exchanges. Universities and chambers of commerce often have existing international capacities.
- **Digital diplomacy:** Virtual meetings can maintain relationships without requiring international travel.

¹ Quote from Palmerston North (New Zealand)

- **Joint efforts:** Collaborate regionally with other jurisdictions where appropriate (e.g. joint trade offices, shared representation).
- **Use networks:** National networks as well as international ones provide knowledge bases and resources.

Insights from the Field



An International Strategy for Wales to promote growth and a distinct identity.²

The Welsh Government launched its first International Strategy in 2020 to stimulate economic growth, promote a distinct Welsh identity, and position itself as a globally responsible nation. Though ambitious in scope, the initial implementation of the strategy was disrupted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly limited international engagement by both the International Relations officials at the Welsh Government's Cardiff headquarters and its network of 20 international offices across 11 countries.

Despite strategic disruption, the Welsh Government's evidence-based response to the pandemic – which often diverged from UK Government policy – attracted international attention, opening many avenues for engagement. This approach unexpectedly enhanced Wales's profile, highlighting its devolved governance model and distinct policy. As international activity resumed post-pandemic, Wales emerged with a stronger global presence.

The Welsh Government adopts a deliberate and strategic approach to hosting visits from diplomats and international partners, ensuring each engagement aligns with strategic priorities and the interests of the visiting country. These visits provide a platform to showcase Welsh strengths – in areas such as cyber security and language planning – and to foster international collaboration in priority sectors. A particularly strong area of interest has been the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act*, which made Wales the first country in the world to legislate for the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Visits also align with trade and investment priorities, helping to forge new partnerships, drive economic growth, and showcase Welsh strengths in priority growth sectors such as compound semiconductors, renewable energy, and the creative industries. These visits help raise Wales's international profile and attract investment into these sectors.



Maryland's Subcabinet for International Affairs as a mechanism to coordinate, align, and deepen international partnerships.³

In 2001 the Governor's Subcabinet for International Affairs was established by Executive Order to develop and execute the State of Maryland's International Strategy. Chaired by the Secretary of State and now with membership of the Lieutenant Governor, Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, Environment, Higher Education, and Transportation, and the Adjutant General of the Maryland Military Department, the Subcabinet is designed as a powerful tool to convene the State's leaders on a regular basis to align and cross-pollinate the State's International Strategy.

While the Subcabinet was formed in 2001, it was not until the current Moore-Miller Administration, with leadership from Secretary of State Susan Lee and deliberate dedication from the Lieutenant Governor, agency leaders, and their staff, that the Subcabinet developed a written International Strategy and engaged in regular communication. Guided by the specific goals and mission articulated in the 2023-

² Contribution from the Welsh Government (United Kingdom)

³ Contribution from Maryland (United States)

2027 Moore-Miller Administration Strategic Plan for International Affairs, the Subcabinet under the Moore-Miller Administration works across State Government efficiently and in partnership with one another. Furthermore, implementing regular, defined reporting and communication tools allows the Subcabinet to leverage the expertise of partner agencies through engaged working sessions, helping Maryland maximize its collective resources and pursue high-impact global opportunities.

This whole-of-government approach is a key feature of Governor Moore's "Resource Rich, Strategy Rich" toolbox to address capacity gaps and ensure Maryland's global engagement is focused, responsive, and high-value, guided by a strong coordinating body and with buy-in from the State's leadership.



Rostock's approach to addressing capacity gaps.⁴

Planning and setting priorities are crucial. At the end of each year, the city administration develops a plan for international activities for the following year, based on the available budget, human resources, priorities outlined in its Guidelines, and special occasions. For example, the Guidelines emphasize partnerships with Baltic Sea Cities and European Affairs. However, due to a valuable partnership with Raleigh, North Carolina, a project was planned for the current year involving an exchange trip to the USA for three colleagues from the administration, focused on three Sustainable Development Goals (11, 16, and 17). Most costs are covered through federal funds as part of the Urban Diplomacy Exchange program. To bridge capacity gaps:

- If financial resources are lacking, the administration applies for external funding (e.g., federal/state funds, trusts, international organizations, or embassies).
- While priorities are set and initiatives designed internally, implementation often includes NGOs, schools, and other stakeholders — such as in youth exchanges, school partnerships, informational events, concerts, or Europe Week.
- If resources are insufficient for a priority activity, its frequency may be reduced rather than canceled (e.g., held biennially instead of annually).
- Online events and webinars are organized when appropriate, and certain topics may be addressed solely through public relations efforts, such as social media posts or official statements from the Mayor.



Palmerston North leverages external resources creatively.⁵

Palmerston North's International Relations team consists of two full-time staff members where 75% efforts go into global engagement and 25% go into supporting the international education sector. The city taps into external funding opportunities, including New Zealand government sources, public diplomacy grants from embassies and high commissions in Wellington, and international programs.

To further enhance capacity, Palmerston North established a Global Ambassador Programme and student internships in partnership with local tertiary institutions. These interns play a valuable role in supporting major public events and international activities, providing practical support where additional manpower is needed while gaining hands-on experience in subnational diplomacy.

"Insights from the Field" case studies appear as written contributions from local governments and organizations with minimal editing for clarity and consistency. Each case study is attributed to the contributing jurisdiction.

⁴ Contribution from Rostock (Germany)

⁵ Contribution from Palmerston North (New Zealand)

About this Toolkit: Strategic guidance based on experiences from the field.

State and local leaders receive visiting foreign delegations, opportunities for international partnerships, and pressure to engage globally—but no clear guidance on how to do it right. This Toolkit provides that strategic guidance, building upon the insights and best practices from a group of innovative city, state, and regional government leaders from nine countries: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States

The result is a practical guide organized around the core challenges local leaders face most often. It provides strategic guidance to:

- Build an international strategy that serves community's priorities while avoiding common pitfalls (Briefs 1.1, 1.2, 1.3)
- Manage relationships that create economic opportunities and jobs (Briefs 2.1, 2.2, 2.3)
- Navigate security threats and potential risks (Briefs 3.1, 3.2)
- Turn international connections into influence and resilience (Briefs 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)

Each brief includes specific steps and real examples from local leaders, experts, and practitioners. If you're using this Toolkit to apply an innovation locally or have questions or suggestions, [please fill out this short survey](#).