



BRIEF 1.2. BEST PRACTICES FOR PURPOSEFUL SUBNATIONAL DIPLOMACY AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

State and local governments should focus on building international partnerships that are purposeful, outcome-oriented, and mutually beneficial. Sustained and productive programming requires the involvement of local partners and organizations in the community.

1. The challenge of inactive partnerships or unfocused partnerships.

"Zombie partnerships" that exist primarily on paper as ceremonial agreements and that lack substantive ongoing collaboration consume limited resources, create unrealistic expectations, and divert investment from more productive relationships. The visible and hidden costs of inactive partnerships include:

- **Strategic confusion:** Unclear criteria for partnership success or sunset.
- **Administrative burden:** Staff time spent maintaining and managing symbolic relationships rather than pursuing productive ones.
- **Opportunity cost:** Resources diverted away from more strategic or results-driven collaboration.
- **Reputational risks:** Perception among partners and constituents that international engagement lacks impact.

2. Strategic guidance for active and meaningful partnerships.

Use a structured and tiered approach to differentiate partnerships. Different partnerships require different management strategies and resource commitments.

Type	Description	Level of formality and lifespan	Examples
Sister city and state partnerships	Official agreements approved by the governing body requiring sustained institutional commitment	Formal Not time-bound	Fort Worth, Texas manages nine sister cities relationships, including Nimes (France) and Trier (Germany) with robust programming including youth exchanges, protocol training, and business networking opportunities.
Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs)	Project- or sector-specific partnerships or statements of intention not always requiring full governmental approval	Less formal Usually time-bound	In 2024, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt signed an MoU with the Minister of Economic Affairs of Taiwan to enhance trade and investment opportunities between Oklahoma and Taiwan in aerospace and energy.
Grant-based projects	Funded partnerships with multiple cities around specific objectives	Time-bound	Funded initiatives around specific issue areas, such as the International Urban and Regional Cooperation-IURC (European Union), and the Cities Data Alliance (Bloomberg Philanthropies).
Networks and coalitions	Engagement through international municipal associations and organizations	Formal membership Usually by renewal	Regional cross-border networks: i.e. Union of the Baltic Cities, Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative. Thematic network: i.e. Mayors for Peace, UNESCO Creative Cities Network, Strong Cities Network, C40 Cities, ICLEI. Global network: i.e. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Global Parliament of Mayors.

Prioritize specific project-based collaboration. International partnerships that are based on exchanges or joint action to address specific issues often lead to more tangible benefits.

"Investing resources into the research of international best practices applicable to one's own location as well as investigating and applying for thematically relevant cooperation opportunities (national, EU, international) increases the chances of meaningful international engagement."

Stakeholder analysis is an important tool to consider in preparation for such projects to ensure interest and commitment from both sides. Dortmund engages on projects on urban sustainable development with Leeds (UK) and food security with Pittsburgh (USA) because they allow to deepen the existing partnerships, build capacity, create and expand networks, especially in politically challenging times and learn from one another on specific topics of the UN 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, such projects offer a more systemic approach towards partnership work."¹

Integrate business and community partners into activities. Robust international engagement and delivery of outcomes require broad-based involvement and resources of external partners:

- **Businesses:** Help turn partnerships into trade, investment, and workforce opportunities (see Briefs 2.1 and 2.2).
- **Universities and schools:** Advance educational and youth exchange and global learning (see Brief 4.2).
- **Cultural and civic organizations:** Enrich public diplomacy through sports, the arts, and mutual understanding (see brief 4.3.)

*"The most successful sister city partnerships are those treated not as symbolic gestures but as living, evolving relationships. They require structure, creativity, and community-wide involvement—but when done well, they forge global connections that enrich local life and build lasting bonds across borders. **The key is moving beyond ceremonial agreements toward sustained, mutually beneficial relationships rooted in real-world collaboration.**"*

*Programs that involve local schools, universities, libraries, and chambers of commerce make partnerships real to the community. Cities should regularly send and receive delegations, hold virtual exchanges, and build youth programs. For example, co-hosting an international film festival or launching a global student leadership academy can energize engagement and deepen ties."*²

Prioritize time-bound partnerships with clear deliverables. A leader from Auckland, New Zealand noted that *"traditional sister-city ties often need a lot of funding and resources. With global uncertainty making long-term commitments harder, short-term and focused partnerships offer a more flexible and effective approach."*³

Assess and review the performance and relevance of partnerships regularly. A regular strategic review of all international programs, including sister city and sister state partnerships, ensures that they remain active and aligned with ongoing priorities. Over time, partnerships and relationships should evolve with your community's needs. Regular assessments of performance and relevance prevent resource waste on inactive relationships while identifying opportunities to scale or shift to productive ones.

*"Maryland currently has 21 Sister States in 18 countries, with the first Sister State established in 1980. Through the decades, some of these Sister States have yielded tangible, sustainable results. Others have languished. The Office of the Secretary of State is conducting a review of Maryland's Sister States, using specific areas of review, to assess the efficacy of the Program. This comprehensive review of the program is essential to ensuring the Sister States Program is optimized and aligned with the State's priorities and strategic plan."*⁴

¹ Contribution from Dortmund (Germany)

² Contribution from Carlo Capua, Sister Cities International and Fort Worth, Texas (United States)

³ Contribution from Auckland (New Zealand)

⁴ Contribution from Maryland (United States)

Insights from the Field



The value of trust and long-term relationships in time of crisis: the sister cities relations of Yokohama and Odesa.⁵

Even in times of crisis, when conventional supply chains may fail to function adequately, sister cities can play a pivotal role by leveraging their unique channels to maintain communication and open alternative routes for delivering essential supplies. Yokohama and Odesa, sister cities since 1965, have built a relationship of trust over the decades, including receiving donations from Odesa following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011.

In 2022, as the invasion by Russia began, fundraising efforts quickly spread among Yokohama's citizens, and mayors of both cities held a video conference shortly thereafter. Responding to a direct request from Odesa's mayor, Yokohama provided support including mobile water purifiers and cold-weather gear through public-private cooperation. Even as the war has continued, Yokohama has sustained its support. In 2023, a delegation from Odesa, led by its mayor, visited Yokohama and signed a Memorandum of Cooperation for Sustainable Urban Development, agreeing to work together on the reconstruction and restoration of infrastructure facilities. Under this memorandum, rehabilitation work of a kindergarten building in Odesa is underway and discussions for further cooperation are ongoing. In this way, the sister city relationship has evolved into a flexible and enduring framework for collaboration even in times of crisis.



The importance of reciprocity and in-person exchanges for Rostock's international engagement.⁶

Rostock benefits from international cooperation. Professional exchange, EU-funded projects, cultural exchange, networking between business and science as well as international meetings between citizens contribute to Rostock's sustainable growth and provide insights into other cultures and structures. Rostock learns from its peers as well as supports the more challenged cities and discuss future goals. Apart from city development, an important part of the city's initiatives is directed to promote peace and democratic values, global engagement, social openness as well as culture of remembrance.

The following programs and initiatives give life to Rostock partnerships:

1. youth projects and exchange visits, projects with senior citizens, delegation visits, organization of events - often with sister cities and NGOs as stakeholders on one of the goals of the United Nations Agenda 2030 (e.g. youth participation, promotion of democracy and peace, environmental protection, capacity building)
2. professional exchange with colleagues or study tours, very often on urban planning, development, mobility, climate change and digitalisation; joint development projects (on all levels of engagement, often financially supported by state organizations or foundations, e.g. supporting the City of Bizerte to construct a composting plant and a utility company)
3. joint actions as a part of membership in networks, celebration or honouring specific international days, actions or anniversaries (e.g. actions to foster a culture of peace and remembrance, action against death penalty, action against nuclear weapons, promotion of democratic values, fight against racism and extremism)
4. ceremonial and diplomatic correspondence, exchange of invitations to city celebrations or festivals (e.g. Hanse Sail Rostock).

City partnerships and international work can only thrive through active exchange in person during visits and over joint projects. In many cases, the intensity of cooperation evolves over time due to political circumstances, change in human resources, or lack of mutual interest. Rostock leaders are aware that some

⁵ Contribution from Yokohama (Japan)

⁶ Contribution from Rostock (Germany)

partnerships will remain inactive. Therefore, Rostock works on the principle of “reciprocity” and sustainability—a city partnership is a mutual form of cooperation, and both sides need to show interests for the exchange and give their contribution to the partnership.



Wales's approach to bilateral relationships is rooted in culture with tangible results⁷

The Welsh Government maintains bilateral relationships with regions and nations around the world, often rooted in historical or cultural ties. These agreements help turn goodwill into action, supporting the delivery of priorities.

One such relationship is the partnership with the Regional Council of Brittany in France, now into its third decade, which is built on a common Celtic heritage. What began as a cultural exchange has grown into a dynamic collaboration spanning cyber security policy and collaboration on floating offshore wind projects—delivering tangible benefits for communities in both regions.

Another example of a successful bilateral is the partnership between the Welsh Government and the Government of Kerala, which was formalized during the Welsh Government's “Wales in India” year, part of a series of annual initiatives to strengthen ties between Wales and countries around the world. This collaboration has resulted in the recruitment of 250 qualified healthcare professionals to work in NHS Wales.

⁷ Contribution from the Welsh Government (United Kingdom)

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](#).