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GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT, LOCAL BENEFITS:

*A STRATEGIC SUBNATIONAL DIPLOMACY
TOOLKIT FOR CITY, STATE, AND LOCAL
LEADERS*

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INTRODUCTION

Diplomacy from the ground-up: the global engagement of state and local governments

Diplomacy is no longer the exclusive tool of national governments. Cities, states, provinces, and regional governments have emerged as influential actors on the global stage, using their political influence, economic weight, and capacity for innovation to engage internationally and advance their communities' interests. This growing phenomenon, known as "subnational diplomacy" or "state and local diplomacy," creates new layers and opportunities for bilateral and multilateral engagement while amplifying traditional diplomacy. Subnational diplomacy has evolved to be an imperative.

The question for local leaders is not whether they should engage globally—it is how to make this engagement strategic, purposeful, risk-aware, and outcome-oriented.

Why is strategic global engagement essential for state and local leaders today?

1. Economic competition is increasingly local.

Companies do not just choose countries to invest in—they choose specific cities and regions. Mayor- and governor-led trade missions around the world strengthen export bases and attract foreign businesses. Sporting events and cultural vibrancy elevate a region's global profile, attracting job-creating investments and tourism. Distinctive industry advantages and innovation clusters require public-private-academia collaboration at the local level. Strategic partnerships with foreign governments and businesses deliver real results: innovation, factories, and jobs.

2. Global threats hit local communities first. Supply chain disruptions in energy and critical minerals affect local communities and workers. Foreign malign influence and interference specifically target local officials, seek to divide communities, and weaken local trust from within. Cyberattacks target city water systems and local election databases. Extreme weather events and disasters require local responses and coordinated, cross-border approaches. Local leaders need to anticipate these global risks and build partnerships that help them respond effectively. A mayor or governor who knows how peers handled similar challenges is better equipped to protect residents.

3. Addressing global challenges requires coalitions of local problem-solvers. Tested solutions often come from other communities facing similar challenges in fields such as sustainable development, mobility, and housing. Instead of waiting for national governments to

act, local governments can tap into global networks of innovation to solve problems better, faster, and cheaper than those going it alone. Through global coalitions, local governments shape agendas of collective action that often surpass the level of ambitions of national governments. These locally-driven relations based on shared challenges buttress global cooperation.

When approached strategically, global engagement delivers tangible benefits to local constituents while strengthening global cooperation and security. Economic partnerships can go sideways without proper due diligence. Cultural exchanges can become political liabilities if handled poorly.

In today's interconnected world, communities that invest in smart strategic international engagement will thrive. Those that do not will risk falling behind—vulnerable, isolated, and missing opportunities their residents need.

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](#).



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.

⁴ Contribution from Rostock (Germany)

⁵ Contribution from Palmerston North (New Zealand)



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."⁶

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."*⁷

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."*⁸

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."*⁹

⁶ Contribution from Dortmund (Germany)

⁷ Contribution from Carlo Capua, Sister Cities International and Fort Worth, Texas (United States)

⁸ Contribution from Auckland (New Zealand)

⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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

¹⁰ Contribution from Yokohama (Japan)

¹¹ 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 results¹²

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.

¹² Contribution from the Welsh Government (United Kingdom)



BRIEF 1.3. PROVING VALUE: HOW TO MEASURE AND COMMUNICATE THE LOCAL IMPACT OF GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

Tracking the outcomes and impact of global engagement efforts is paramount to inform strategy, address skepticism, and validate the use of resources in the long run. As these benefits are often indirect or delayed, state and local governments must strategically measure and transparently communicate outcomes, such as jobs, investments, trade opportunities, global visibility, and best practices that benefit the community's growth, safety, and prosperity. Over time, stories of impact create a mindset shift about why global engagement is not a nice-to-have but an imperative.

1. The challenge: Why measurement matters

The value of international efforts driven by local governments is not immediately visible to constituents. Directors of international affairs face legitimate questions about the return on investment from global activities. This skepticism comes from various sources—elected officials concerned about spending local resources on international initiatives, department heads competing for limited budget, and residents wondering why tax revenue supports foreign travel. Limited published evidence, inconsistent communications, and negative media coverage further obscure value.

Tracking and demonstrating value are complex tasks due to the following factors:

- **Time lag between activity and outcome:** Cultivating relationships takes time. Investments today have delayed returns and future payoffs.
- **Attribution complexity:** When multiple factors contribute to a win, demonstrating the specific role of an international initiative is difficult.
- **Indirect benefits:** Significant impact and benefits may be felt outside of the community (contribution to progress on global SDG and climate goals, enhanced city reputation) with no economic metrics.
- **Lack of data:** Limited resources for tracking and impact analysis necessitate creative approaches to gathering credible data.

Local governments must fill this gap. "[Global engagement benefits] may take some years to materialize and it can also be difficult to link directly to a specific event or interaction. Then with respect to softer outcomes around relationships and reputation, these can be even more challenging to quantify and place a value on."¹³ See case study below about Scotland's comprehensive framework for measuring impact.

2. Strategic guidance for impact measurement and communication.

Measuring and communicating the impact of international engagement clarifies the value of these efforts. It inspires confidence that global engagement brings benefits. It also helps connect past effort to current gains and prioritize future initiatives.

Tailor messages to what each audience cares about. Different audiences care about different types of value. The benefits of global engagement cut across many areas, such as jobs, investment, trade, visibility, knowledge exchange and best practices. Some of these benefits may be felt directly within the community (such as new water management systems), whereas other outcomes may have indirect benefits felt globally and beyond the community (such as progress on climate goals). Tailoring messages to different audiences is important (what matters is different for citizens, businesses, and elected officials). Across audiences, the key is to connect efforts with gains and demonstrate, for instance, how a business deal stems from relationships cultivated over time through trade missions.

¹³ Contribution from the Scottish Government (United Kingdom)

Conduct regular reviews and public reporting. An annual reporting process on global initiatives helps assess the strategy and strengthen internal alignment, while communicating externally to build trust and support. While tracking and measuring value can be time- and labor-intensive, this is a worthwhile investment.

"[Developing and communicating to the public an Action Plan] is important for constituents to understand how public funds are used to support local values and priorities, deliver benefit to local people, and create opportunities for community members to get involved in the city's global initiatives."¹⁴

Use a wide range of metrics. State, local, and devolved governments can find the right combination of metrics that best captures global engagement (see table 1). For instance, Scotland is developing a new process for measuring value with specific and simple metrics chosen collaboratively between analysts and the network offices, and reported quarterly (see case study below).

Table 1. Common metrics for state and local government-led international efforts

Activity Metrics (Easiest to track)	Immediate Results (Track within 3-12 months)	Medium-Term Impacts (Track within 1-3 years)	Long-Term Outcomes (Track 3+ years)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of inbound/outbound delegations and meetings International events hosted MOU/agreements signed International grants received 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Media coverage value (local and international) Investment inquiries generated Business matchmaking meetings conducted Policy exchanges completed Student and professional exchanges facilitated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foreign direct investment (number of projects and/or amount) Growth in tourism economy International students Export deals facilitated Jobs created or retained through international partnerships New international air routes and transportation links Implementation of policy innovations from partner cities (and associated cost savings) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustained trade relationships Enhanced global reputation, profile, and visibility (measured through rankings, surveys) Long-term sister city or state accomplishments Climate commitments achieved through international collaboration Improved resilience and risk mitigation through international knowledge exchange Community pride and multicultural engagement

Use stories and examples to give color and depth to data points. Specificity and examples matter. For each type of benefit, a collection of stories of impact, specific examples, testimonials, and case studies can support communications. Narratives and rich stories of impact complement quantitative data and often resonate more broadly.

Leverage visual tools and open data platforms to increase the reach and clarity of these benefits. For instance, the [Northern Virginia Regional Commission](#) built a mapping tool based on the city of [Los Angeles](#)'s model to visualize foreign investments in the community and jobs linked to international partnerships.

¹⁴ Quote from Palmerston North (New Zealand)

Insights from the Field



Scotland's measurement of international relations.¹⁵

The process that Scotland is developing allows for its international offices to report quarterly against a small number of simple metrics, chosen collaboratively between analysts and its international offices, that relate directly to objectives in business plans. Each office is provided with a business plan template, aligned with the overarching themes and priorities from Scotland's International Strategy, supporting them to draft SMART objectives. Each office then returns data on a quarterly basis using a reporting template, designed by analysts, to provide a consistent monitoring and evaluation approach. A maximum of four metrics are developed for each business plan outcome/objective—they should be quantifiable, simple, and easy to report against. The data can come from a range of sources e.g. self-reported, partner data and external sources.

Evaluation

- Consider conducting an evaluation as frequently as resources permit (e.g. every 2-3 years).
- The evaluation will make use of the monitoring data that has been gathered.
- This will be combined with qualitative methods such as interviews and case studies, allowing for a mixed-method approach that quantifies what is possible and combines this with the necessary context and more detailed qualitative insights to capture what cannot easily be counted.

Examples of quantifiable metrics (not an exhaustive list)

- Number of companies supported;
- Number of international trade opportunities identified;
- Forecast international sales as a result of team's intervention;
- Number of inward investment projects landed as a result of team's intervention;
- Number of planned total jobs; Number of planned green jobs;
- Number of jobs created/safeguarded paying real living wage;
- Planned R&D investment; Value of planned capital investment;
- Number of applications received for a project;
- Number of events with diaspora organizations;
- Number of engagements with target stakeholders;
- Number of events and engagements to enhance profile and reputation of policy/objective X;
- Number of ministerial/senior leader visits organized or supported including policy/objective X as key component;
- Number of opportunities for knowledge exchange of policy/objective X identified.



How Palmerston North measures the value of international engagement. ¹⁶

To communicate value effectively, our reports are framed with a strong narrative focus, linking activities to the city's broader goals—such as economic diversification, population growth, talent attraction, and global reputation. Case studies, testimonials, and strategic stories of influence and connection are used to illustrate how seemingly small engagements lay the groundwork for larger economic and diplomatic outcomes. This storytelling approach helps elected members and the public understand how international relationships mature over time, and why early-stage efforts—like hosting delegations or engaging in cultural diplomacy—are vital investments in the city's future.

Ultimately, success in global engagement is not always immediate or linear, but when measured through a balanced combination of strategic indicators, activity metrics, and narrative insights, it become possible to track progress, remain accountable, and communicate the long-term value of this work to stakeholders across Palmerston North and beyond.

¹⁵ Contribution from the Scottish Government (United Kingdom)

¹⁶ Contribution from Palmerston North (New Zealand)



BRIEF 2.1. BRINGING THE BENEFITS OF COMPETITION, TRADE, AND FOREIGN INVESTMENT TO COMMUNITIES

Local governments play a key role in economic statecraft. Their global engagement strategies help attract investments, talent, and innovation while supporting job creation and competitiveness. Promoting a region effectively requires evidence-based, targeted, and cross-sectoral initiatives (involving public agencies, academia, and business organizations). At the same time, local governments must support business retention and expansion as they navigate rising global uncertainty, trade disruption, and supply chain volatility.

1. The challenges of competing in a complex global economy.

At the local and regional levels, international economic and business development is often coordinated by a dedicated team and agency, in partnership with the local government's international affairs team, chambers of commerce, and business and trade associations. These partners play a key role in helping businesses manage global risk and seize international opportunities (see Brief 2.2). Global engagement at the local level yields provides measurable economic returns in the community (see Brief 1.3).

But local and regional governments face intense global competition for investment, talent, and market access. As a local government leader noted: *"We are in a tough spot sometimes being put in the position to respond to global and national events where we were not involved and have little to no control over it."*

2. Strategic guidance for international economic engagement.

Evidence-based market prioritization is essential. Successful international economic strategies concentrate resources on markets with the highest potential return. The Brookings Institution's [Toolkit for Market Prioritization](#) highlights prioritization factors including:

- Existing trade and investment flows and relationships.
- Industry sector alignment with local strengths.
- Market growth trajectories in target sectors.
- Competitive assessment of similar regions' success.
- Diaspora connections and cultural affinities.
- Transportation infrastructure and logistics connectivity.

State and local governments, in partnership with their economic development organizations (EDOs), cultivate key relationships with business and diplomatic partners. International economic engagement is most effective when local governments collaborate across sectors. In partnership with EDOs, universities, and private sector stakeholders, local leaders can:

- **Lead sector-specific trade missions.** For example, in 2024 Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt led a trade delegation to Taiwan that explored areas of collaboration in energy, critical minerals, and aerospace including Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) and drones.
- **Host inbound business summits and investor forums.** The Great Okinawa Trade Fair promotes Okinawa as a regional and global logistics and business hub for agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, and food products.
- **Foster academic-industry partnership.** Universities can serve as innovation engines and as anchors for public and private investments.
- **Offer export readiness and internationalization support.** Programs that support small and mid-sized companies enter or expand in international markets directly support job growth and market diversification.

Evaluate risks and assess exposure to market changes. Strong relations and regular dialogue with business leaders and economic stakeholders increase preparedness. Local governments can relay subject matter expertise, including from the national and regional levels, to inform the business community about key risks and opportunities, fostering a shared approach to navigating global market fluctuations (see the example from Calgary below).

Factor in national priorities and security considerations. Increasingly, local economic development strategies must align not only with community goals, but also to incorporate national security and supply chain resilience considerations. This includes:

- **Pursuing “friendshoring” opportunities:** Prioritizing investment attraction from allied countries in critical sectors.
- **Implementing screening mechanisms:** Evaluate sensitive investments or coordinating with national investment review mechanisms. A local government leader shared: *“There are some foreign direct investments (FDI) we don’t want, for instance unfriendly parties investing in critical minerals. This is not necessarily because of the origin of the company, but because of the specific company.”*
- **Compliance with inbound foreign investment regulations:** Awareness about mandatory review processes and national security laws governing foreign direct investments and relations in strategic sectors. *“The (local) lack of awareness about what is ok and not ok to do has led to a complete freeze in relations with a foreign country, including stopping valuable partnerships with university and academic organization,”* shared a European local government leader.

Deliver strategic, consistent, and forward-looking messaging. Economic development leaders play a key role in promoting the importance of trade and global engagement for the local economy. Non-political messaging best channels the importance of international economic initiatives. For instance, Calgary Economic Development focuses its messaging on the importance of trade for the region, intentionally channeling a position of neutrality which *“helps level set the situation and provides a pathway for the future or a mitigation pathway if the tariffs get severe.”*

Invest in the long-term drivers of competitiveness. Local governments that consistently and creatively enhance the foundations for sustained economic growth are best positioned to weather volatility. They can focus funding on talent development, invest in innovation clusters, and create economic diversification funds as countermeasures to boom-bust cycles.

Insights from the Field



When trade uncertainty grows, Maryland can leverage long-standing relationships to convey its commitment to partnerships.¹⁷

For decades, the State of Maryland has been engaging with Japan and South Korea—two of Maryland’s largest trade partners—and continues to deepen these relationships, which are critical to advancing innovation and prosperity in both regions. Maryland Governor Wes Moore conducted his inaugural trade mission to Japan and South Korea in April 2025. The timing of the trip overlapped with changes to the federal government’s industrial policies, including tariff negotiations with the leaders of Japan and South Korea.

While tariff negotiations remain in the realm of the federal government, Governor Moore consistently delivered the message to policymakers, businesses, and diplomats in Japan and South Korea that Maryland remains committed to the mutual success of foreign companies which operate in Maryland, and that our assets of connectivity, highly skilled workforce, and aggressive attraction incentives remain constant.

¹⁷ Contribution from Maryland (United States)



Calgary's rapid response to inform and support businesses facing trade uncertainty.¹⁸

Calgary Economic Development's working relationship with the provincial level enabled the city to benefit from sophisticated GDP forecasting model and gain early access to adjusted projections showcasing potential tariff impacts. This enabled the city to provide specific information on tariff exposure to their business community (e.g. *"yes, anticipated impact to some sectors but only a few sub-sectors, no change to others"*).

Calgary Economic Development also supported the convening of a Mayoral Tariff Working Group to build an open dialogue with businesses and capture community voices on the impact of tariffs. A leader from CED shared: *"Many of us and almost all businesses were trying to make sense of the fast move situation around tariffs so this purposeful initiative helped us all have some perspective that we could then share through the community."*



Calgary's investment fund to catalyze economic diversification.¹⁹

The City Council of Calgary created the Opportunity Calgary Investment Fund, as a CA\$100 million initiative to make strategic investments that diversify and transform the economy. These investments provide capital to fast-growing tech startups as well as projects related to job creation and workforce training programs in priority sectors such as data science, artificial intelligence (AI), clean energy, aerospace, and advanced manufacturing.

Calgary Economic Development has a history of creating pilot projects that are funded by different government levels to address gaps in our community. In all cases we are looking to 'spin' those out to a different organization after the pilot is successful. Many of those have been focused around talent to prepare us for certain sector growth. The Opportunity Calgary Investment Fund was a counter measure against the long history of oil and gas boom and busts. The 2014-2015 downturn almost lasted a decade for us in Calgary so mid-way through the city created this fund to catalyze economic diversification. It has been extremely successful and was just recapitalized to CA\$60 million.



Oklahoma City demonstrates how cities can leverage sports infrastructure and events to drive economic growth and global visibility.²⁰

Oklahoma City (OKC) has developed a comprehensive sports diplomacy strategy centered on strategic public investments and signature events that position the city as an international sports destination. Major sports events bring locals, national visitors, and international tourists to Oklahoma City, generating significant sales and hotel tax revenue. This is especially critical since Oklahoma municipalities rely on sales tax—not property tax—for general operations.

Oklahoma City's signature events and public investments include the following:

- OKC is home to the NCAA Women's College World Series, with the largest softball stadium in the world—earning the title softball capital of the world.
- OKC is also known as the horse show capital of the world, hosting premier equine events.
- The Oklahoma City Thunder is our only major league sports team which has elevated the city's profile globally. Mayor David Holt negotiated a 30-year extension to keep the NBA team here (as the 42nd largest market, 3rd smallest in the NBA). The deal was secured with 71% voter approval of a \$1 billion, publicly owned arena.

¹⁸ Contribution from Calgary Economic Development (Canada)

¹⁹ Contribution from Calgary Economic Development (Canada)

²⁰ Contribution from Oklahoma City (United States)

- Through MAPS (a voter-approved, one cent temporary sales tax), OKC has funded transformative sports infrastructure over the years, including a world-class whitewater course and now a new professional soccer stadium.
- OKC will host whitewater and softball events during the LA28 Olympics, further establishing the city as an international sports hub.

Sports unify the community, build civic pride, and project Oklahoma City as a confident, ambitious, and globally relevant place. The diversity of OKC's sports offerings—basketball, softball, a growing gymnastics scene, neighboring collegiate football, equestrian events—ensures broad appeal and sustained visibility. There is something for everyone in OKC.



How the State of Maryland applies evidence and data to prioritize sectors and markets.²¹

Maryland State Government is uniquely positioned to promote Maryland as a premier destination for global investment and international partnerships because it is asset rich and strategy rich. With a combination of its strategic geographic location, a highly skilled workforce, and robust innovation ecosystems, the Moore-Miller Administration deployed data-driven strategies to assess regional strengths and global market trends to identify key "lighthouse" sectors for economic growth. With these strategic sectors of life sciences, quantum computing, and aerospace/defense identified, Maryland is leveraging its assets in targeted efforts with international investors, researchers, and entrepreneurs to drive long-term economic growth.

Maryland's leadership, in coordination with State Agencies such as those which are part of the Governor's Subcabinet for International Affairs regularly lead trade delegations, host international business summits, and facilitate academic-industry partnerships. These international engagements are tracked and communicated through regular reporting within the Subcabinet for International Affairs.

Furthermore, Maryland's inclusive and collaborative approach—engaging public institutions, academia, and the private sector—creates a fertile environment for sustained global engagement. By leveraging its assets strategically, Maryland not only attracts global investment but also positions itself as a vital partner in solving global challenges through innovation.

²¹ Contribution from Maryland (United States)



BRIEF 2.2. ORGANIZING REGIONALLY ACROSS THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS FOR ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS

Success in global competition requires a combination of public and private leadership locally. The private sector provides state and local governments with crucial expertise, agility, and buy-in that, when aligned with government strategies, can help pivot relationships towards concrete business and economic gains.

1. The challenge: coordinating complex stakeholder networks

Multiple actors must organize locally for economic development, most commonly including the local government's international affairs team, the economic development organization (EDO), marketing and tourism agencies, chambers of commerce, business associations, and research and educational institutions. Successful international economic engagement requires coordination across these organizations that may have their own priorities, capabilities, and relationships. Common coordination challenges include:

- Fragmented policy priorities across multiple agencies hindering major attraction projects;
- Limited information sharing between chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, and political leadership;
- Political turnover disrupting continuity in market and industry priorities;
- Inadequate follow-up mechanisms after international delegations and business development activities;
- Disconnect between cultural relationships and business development opportunities;
- Inconsistent international promotion and brand projection.

2. Strategic guidance for effective economic governance

Leadership coordination is essential. Local leadership must coordinate strategies and initiatives across sectors toward shared economic development objectives while leveraging each stakeholders' strengths and resources.

- **Leverage specialized roles.** EDOs lead broad business development and investment attraction, while elected leaders can support or drive specific opportunities when personal relationships exist or direct interactions are required at the political level. Chambers of Commerce can provide business intelligence, as well as contacts and logistical support for events.
- **Adopt a regional hub approach.** To prevent scattered or siloed priorities that hinder international economic development, leadership must foster a regional hub approach and coordinate among stakeholders around a shared strategy to "sing the same song" as one local leader noted.
- **Coordinate with higher levels of government to validate missions.** Engagement with national or regional government helps justify and validate trade and foreign direct investment missions, providing political cover and resource leverage for local economic development efforts.

Leverage private sector engagement strategically. When brought in by government in trade delegations and strategy, the private sector can help pivot political or cultural relations with foreign partners into business opportunities.

- **Understand business needs and capacities.** Companies with established international contacts require minimal government facilitation but can play a significant role in leading and enhancing trade delegations. Start-up companies and smaller businesses typically require more support for international market access, relationship development, and risk mitigation.

- **Tailor leadership roles to context.** Who leads international business engagement may differ depending on the situation. Anecdotal, a very involved mayor may be well connected in a location and take on a bigger role leveraging contacts. In some cultures, the involvement of a senior political representative is required in business development, particularly in markets where political signals matter. In others, private sector actors may take the lead, supported by government facilitation.
- **Secure business buy-in for international initiatives.** The private sector can provide crucial sponsorship and hosting support for international events and partnerships, infusing business expertise, connections, and buy-in as illustrated by the Festival of Cultures of Palmerston North (see case study below).

Develop systematic follow-up mechanisms. A "non-feedback culture" and inadequate follow-up mechanisms undermine business development efforts and relationship maintenance. After receiving or sending international delegations, local governments must create systematic processes for both following up and understanding outcomes and impact rather than immediately turning to the next opportunity.

Integrate educational and infrastructure partners. Universities serve as gateways through their international offices and overseas presence. Educational institutions provide natural connections for business development, research collaboration, and talent attraction that complement traditional trade and investment activities. Partner strategically with infrastructure Ports, airports, and gateway infrastructure create natural partnerships for international engagement, particularly when these facilities connect regions to global networks through tourism, trade, and transportation links (see case study below). These actors expand the reach, credibility, and effectiveness of global engagement.

Insights from the Field



For Cairns, working with its port, airport, and other gateway infrastructures multiplies international partnership opportunities. ²²

Ports, airports and gateway infrastructure are critical to the economic success of cities like Cairns, Australia. As a tourism and regional hub, Cairns relies heavily on its connectivity to domestic and international markets. Cairns Airport, which is Australia's seventh largest Airport and has direct international flights to the Asia-Pacific region, is vital to tourism and the movement of goods and services, particularly of fresh produce into Asia. Cairns' Port is another key piece of infrastructure connecting Cairns to global networks by supporting defense, cruise ships, super yachts, coastline shipping, and the marine fleet visiting the Great Barrier Reef, with each subsector supporting a diverse supply-chain of local businesses. By fostering effective partnerships with organizations that control key infrastructure, including government departments, businesses and other key stakeholders, cities can work toward greater alignment with long-term priorities to drive sustainable growth and increased livability for residents. Partnerships with key infrastructure can be diverse in nature, they can relate to advocacy, investment, sustainability, international engagement, community safety, and creating awareness of procurement opportunities for local businesses. Wherever there is alignment, there is a potential partnership.



With the Festival of Cultures, Palmerston North connects culture, business, and diplomacy into a strategic platform for international economic engagement. ²³

Each year, Palmerston North celebrates its cultural diversity through the Festival of Cultures—a two-day event that transforms the city center into a vibrant hub of international music, dance, food, and storytelling. This flagship event not only reflects the city's multicultural identity but also serves as a powerful platform for global engagement. Leveraging the festival's visibility and atmosphere of celebration, the International Relations function organizes a two-day diplomatic program to coincide with the event, inviting members of the diplomatic corps from Wellington-based embassies and high commissions to experience Palmerston North first-hand.

²² Contribution from the Cairns Regional Council (Australia)

²³ Contribution from Palmerston North (New Zealand)

Day 1 – Strategic City Tour and Sector Engagement

The first day of the program is focused on economic diplomacy and sector engagement. Diplomats are taken on a guided tour of the city, curated to showcase Palmerston North's key economic sectors,

investment opportunities, and innovation ecosystem. The itinerary includes site visits to leading local businesses, research institutes, agri-tech facilities, education providers, and other key infrastructure. The city collaborates with partner organizations such as CEDA, Massey University, FoodHQ, and local iwi [Māori] and industry leaders to co-design and share hosting responsibility for this immersive experience.

This day is not only about information-sharing but about relationship-building and influence. Diplomats gain insight into the city's competitive advantages, including its skilled workforce, innovation, central logistics location, and readiness for foreign investment and collaboration. The event also serves as a forum for local stakeholders to build connections with international representatives who may influence future trade, education, or research partnerships.

Day 2 – Cultural Diplomacy and Community Engagement

On the second day, the focus shifts to soft diplomacy and cultural exchange. Diplomatic guests are invited to attend the Festival of Cultures' World Food, Music & Dance Day—an iconic event that attracts thousands of attendees and celebrates the city's diverse communities. Here, diplomats are officially welcomed by city leadership in a civic ceremony and have opportunities to meet with community groups, cultural leaders, and international students. The International Relations team collaborates closely with other Council teams—such as Events and Community Development—and partners with the Multicultural Council, bringing their collective resources and expertise to deliver a meaningful experience that allows visiting dignitaries to witness the city's inclusive values in action. This collaborative effort showcases Palmerston North's cultural diversity as a key strength in its approach to international engagement.

This two-day program is more than a ceremonial gesture—it is a strategic tool to position Palmerston North on the international stage, deepen bilateral relationships, and generate interest in future collaborations. The diplomatic program has become a cornerstone of the city's global engagement calendar, offering a high-impact, low-cost opportunity to tell the city's story to influential international audiences and unlock potential economic, educational, and cultural partnerships.



BRIEF 2.3. TRANSFORMING ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES INTO RESILIENCE, ENERGY SECURITY, AND JOB CREATION

From flooding and urban heat to drought and hurricanes, local governments must address the effects of extreme weather events on their communities. Local leaders can take action to increase resilience to these types of events, address their causes, and improve the quality of life of their residents. This brief highlights how local leaders innovate solutions for environmental resilience to benefit their constituents.

1. The challenge: local governments are on the front lines of extreme environmental events.

Environmental disruptions are escalating in frequency and severity, and their effects are having tangible impacts on communities, even changing the viability of local investments and affecting local insurance markets. As no community is immune to these challenges, proactive environmental resilience strategies are essential for economic competitiveness and community well-being. Environmental risks local governments face include:

- Extreme weather events affecting community safety, energy security, and essential services.
- Infrastructure vulnerabilities with cascading risks disrupting economic continuity.
- Financial impacts through investor hesitancy and rising insurance costs in high-risk zones.
- Public health crises from heat waves, flooding, and air quality degradation.
- Supply chain vulnerabilities that impact local businesses, workers, and consumers.

2. Strategic guidance for connecting environmental resilience to global engagement.

Assess and invest in the resilience of critical infrastructure and local public service delivery. Water, power, roads, emergency services, and transport systems need robust planning and systemic evaluation followed by investments to maintain essential services during extreme weather events. Fire stations and hospitals with microgrids, water treatment plants with backup sources, and hardened electric power infrastructure keep communities functioning during extreme weather events while supporting mitigation goals through clean energy integration. These measures not only reduce risk but also attract capital, reduce long-term costs, and support job creation.

Transform environmental challenges into opportunities for innovation. Cities and municipalities drive innovation and generate scalable solutions with global relevance. For instance, the New York Housing Authority, one of the largest real estate owners in the United States, faced the challenge of decarbonizing buildings reliant on individual window units. A partnership with the New York Power Authority and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority created the Clean Heat for All initiative as a public-private design challenge to develop next-generation heating and cooling systems adapted to urban needs. The challenge generated global interest and stimulated domestic clean-tech innovation in window-unit heat pumps.

Build strategic partnerships for scale and impact. Smaller cities can amplify their influence by acting regionally, partnering with local municipalities to elevate their voices and increase their purchasing power. New York led a cohort of municipalities seeking to purchase sustainable, electric construction equipment unavailable in the United States. By creating collective demand, these initiatives have more visibility in the marketplace.

Public-private partnerships create durability. Sustained environmental action requires collaboration across sectors. The Boston Green Ribbon Commission exemplifies how cross-sector partnerships can endure political transitions and drive impact. This coalition of government, business, and civic actors has led the implementation of the City's Climate Action Plan through three mayoral administrations, demonstrating how institutionalized partnership offers durability across electoral cycles.

Local governments can export their environmental solutions through strategic partnerships with the private sector. Building on experience with rapid urbanization and pollution, Yokohama created partnerships across Asia, applying their sustainable urban model to emerging cities facing similar issues. Yokohama's Y-PORT initiative demonstrates how local governments can leverage business development with international environmental cooperation—simultaneously advancing global environmental goals and creating international business opportunities for local firms (see case study below).

Effective communication builds community buy-in for sustained investment in environmental resilience. Local leaders must make global challenges tangible and relevant to their constituents.

- **Lift up resident stories.** Mayors, governors, and other local leaders can strengthen the case for climate action by amplifying lived experiences of residents affected by environmental challenges, connecting global environmental challenges to local community impacts. Increasingly, local governments are establishing youth climate councils to create dialogue with youth climate leaders, ensuring environmental strategies reflect diverse community priorities, as well as expanding the city's ability to reach residents through trusted messengers who can extend reach and credibility.
- **Show concrete wins.** Demonstrate success happening on the ground to build support for continued environmental investment. Sharing stories of progress builds momentum and trust. International events, global campaigns, and networks provide opportunities to showcase local environmental achievements.

Insights from the Field



Calgary's leadership in driving global energy security.

The World Energy Cities Partnership convenes cities that host some of the largest energy companies worldwide. Based on their position as hubs for global energy security, these cities and their mayors use this platform to share best practices, coordinate policy approaches, and facilitate private sector partnerships that strengthen regional energy security while advancing sustainable energy transitions.

The partnership took significant steps forward in 2024, expanding participation during Houston's CERA Week and creating an innovative three-track format at the Stavanger Annual General Meeting (AGM) that brings government, business, and academia together for focused collaboration. As its Vice President, Calgary is implementing this successful model as it hosts the 2025 AGM, with enhanced secretariat resources enabling more purposeful collaboration among member cities.²⁴



The global "Water Fund" of Greater Nancy Metropole.²⁵

As part of its international strategy, Greater Nancy Metropole (France) is actively engaged in international development and solidarity through a global "Water Fund" to increase access to drinking water in communities facing water scarcity. The 2005 French Law Oudin-Santini allows local authorities to allocate 1 percent of their water and sanitation budget to international cooperation projects. In this context, Greater Nancy created a "Water Fund" in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 6. With an annual budget of 100,000 euros, this fund has supported nearly fifty projects since its creation in 2006, enabling over 300,000 people to benefit from improved access to water.

²⁴ Contribution from Calgary Economic Development (Canada)

²⁵ Contribution from Greater Nancy (France)



How Yokohama leverages public-private and city-to-city collaboration to export its urban innovation experience²⁶

Local cities must stand at the forefront of solving both local and global issues. Understanding this, Yokohama City launched "Yokohama Partnership of Resources and Technologies" (Y-PORT), an intercity partnership focused on Asia, more than a decade ago.

The initiative builds on Yokohama's experience during Japan's rapid economic growth, when the city faced accelerated urbanization, pollution, and population growth. In response, Yokohama developed a sustainable urban model centered on pollution control, infrastructure development, and active citizen involvement. Today, this knowledge can provide practical value to many emerging Asian cities facing similar issues and is an essential feature of the Y-PORT initiative.

For instance, Y-PORT supported a partnership between a Yokohama-based recycling company and Mandaue City in the Philippines to co-design a community waste management system. The company built a local recycling facility, while Mandaue led waste sorting campaigns to raise awareness. These efforts have led to annual reductions of 4,700 tons of waste and 3,000 tons of CO₂ emissions. By identifying local needs through city partnerships and dialogue, the Y-PORT initiative fosters participation from businesses and citizens to jointly address local and global challenges.

Another key feature is its linkage with multilateral platforms. The Asia Smart City Conference (ASCC), held yearly in Yokohama, brings together city, government, NGO, academic, and business leaders, largely from Asia, to share best practices for sustainable urban development. In 2023, the Mayor of Yokohama and Governor of Bangkok jointly declared a partnership for urban decarbonization, backed

by all 43 Asian cities which participated in the ASCC. This was a major step toward carbon neutrality by 2050 and built on a cooperative relationship that began with an MoU signed between Yokohama and Bangkok in 2013. The two cities have since collaborated on climate planning, public-private partnerships, and tech exchanges between Japan and Thailand. The 2023 joint declaration evolved into a public-private workshop hosted by both cities in 2024, further boosting business ties. ASCC's multilateral knowledge-sharing has also spurred new city projects.

This case shows how local cooperation can link regional action to global sustainability. Looking ahead, GREEN×EXPO 2027, an international horticultural exposition accredited by the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE), will be held in Yokohama. The event will explore and exhibit future sustainability in nature and society. Toward this, the city is accelerating its local and global efforts.



How Dortmund leverages project-based environmental collaboration to increase the value of its international relationships.²⁷

In 2023, Dortmund together with its UK sister city Leeds participated in the Urban Diplomacy Exchange Project, funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and carried out by "Engagement Global," a center for municipal development cooperation, in cooperation with the Association of German Cities. It allowed for a targeted dialogue and exchange on the topics of social and environmental sustainability within the United Nations 2030 Agenda through meaningful events and offered an additional framework for reciprocal in-person expert missions. In addition to the staff exchanges, the project also involved youth organizations in Dortmund (Jugendring) and Leeds (CATCH).

Why do we engage in these projects? Because they allow us to deepen the existing partnerships, build capacity, create and expand networks, especially in politically challenging times (post-Brexit) and learn from one another on specific topics of the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, such projects offer a more systemic approach towards partnership work. Stakeholder analysis is an important tool to consider in

²⁶ Contribution from Yokohama (Japan)

²⁷ Contribution from Dortmund (Germany)

preparation for such projects to ensure interest and commitment from both sides.

Another example of a successful thematic collaboration and staff exchanges is Dortmund's project partnership with Pittsburgh, USA on sustainable food systems and food security that was made possible in 2022 through the IURC (International Urban and Regional Cooperation) Program funded by the EU. It helped intensify the partnership with Pittsburgh and created a good basis for further professional exchanges ([including in-person visits in spring 2022](#)), that resulted in the incorporation of suggestions from Pittsburgh into the current implementation of Dortmund's climate action plan "[Climate Air 2035](#)" with regard to agriculture and nutrition, given Pittsburgh's pioneering expertise in the area of food security.



Cairns' Smart Green Economy²⁸

Cairns is a tropical city nestled between two UNESCO listed World Heritage sites – the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics Rainforest. Due to its unique location, Cairns and the region of Far North Queensland have sought to establish themselves as leaders in Australia's Smart Green Economy. This initiative leverages the region's unique environment and expertise to support the following:

- Economic growth and creation of 'new' employment opportunities.
- Low carbon and nature positive economy.
- Economic resilience and security.
- A resilient and thriving natural environment.
- Vibrant and prosperous communities.
- Innovation and entrepreneurial opportunities.
- Indigenous business, traditional knowledge systems, and pathways to employment.
- Climate mitigation, adaptation and resilience.

Project overview:

Launched as a multi-stage strategic planning and feasibility study, the Cairns Smart Green Economy project aims to channel global growth in green technologies and practices to generate local economic, social and environmental outcomes. The initial situational analysis identified the region's unique value proposition which then allowed the concept to be further refined and stakeholders to be consulted. Three key opportunity areas were identified through these initial stages:

- Net zero energy systems – By investing in solar, wind, and other renewable sources, Cairns aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote sustainable energy consumption.
- Circular economy activation – Focusing on sustainable consumption and production, this cluster seeks to minimize waste generation and optimize resource use.
- Biodiversity and carbon markets – Leveraging Far North Queensland's rich natural heritage to explore opportunities in biodiversity and carbon markets.

Strategic alignment and collaboration:

The project was designed to align with, and support the implementation of, several endorsed strategy positions of all three levels of government. The success of the Smart Green Economy project to date is due to collaboration. Key partners include local, state and federal government representatives, universities, industry bodies, airport, port, and natural resource management organizations, with many of these organizations forming the project working group and co-contributing to initial project costs.

Impacts and achievements:

Although this project intends to set up the region for long-term success, there have been some notable achievements and progress of key projects aligned with the opportunity areas of the Smart Green Economy initiative. A series of case-studies showcasing this progress, such as Sustainable Aviation Fuel, Reef Credits, and a biodiversity credit scheme can be found [here](#).

²⁸ Contribution from Cairns Regional Council (Australia)



BRIEF 3.1 GUIDELINES FOR INFORMED ENGAGEMENT WITH FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS WITH CONFLICTING OR HARMFUL INTERESTS AND MOTIVES

Engagement with foreign entities can bring benefits when properly conceived and conducted. However, when dealing with foreign governments that have conflicting or harmful interests, local communities face risks. Increased due diligence and vigilance enable local governments to avoid pitfalls and common areas of concern when engaging with foreign officials and affiliated partners that are adversarial in their interests and motives.

1. The challenge: managing power asymmetries in subnational engagement.

As local governments increase their global engagement, they may be exposed to foreign actors seeking to exploit these channels to negatively influence and interfere in local governance. Foreign governments and their intermediaries may seek to influence or pressure local governments in other countries, exploit economic or other dependencies, or undermine other countries' national-level policies (see side box 1).

State and local governments must understand the contexts and risks before engaging internationally. This is especially important when dealing with countries that are strategic competitors, have authoritarian governments, or present significant power asymmetries. These governments often use a top-down approach to subnational diplomacy, leveraging the local level to advance their interests in a way that may conflict with host country policies and values. Understanding these risks helps local officials calibrate their approach, mitigate potential harm, and evaluate whether opportunities exist for beneficial exchanges in areas such as investment, trade, tourism, and education.

China represents the largest-scale practitioner of top-down subnational diplomacy characterized by three key features.

- i. **Local-national relationship:** Organizations like the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and other United Front Work Department-affiliated entities present themselves as civil society organizations, but function as extensions of the Chinese Communist Party. China's Military-Civil Fusion strategy blurs the distinction between commercial, academic, and security interests. China's provincial and municipal governments operate within a hierarchical political structure; though local leaders do have some autonomy, subnational diplomacy in China is managed in a much more top-down way than is typical in federal democracies like the U.S.

Understanding foreign influence and interference on a threat spectrum:¹

Most governments engage in **foreign influence** to increase their global appeal, promote their values and culture, and shape local perceptions and decisions in other countries. Foreign influence encompasses legal and transparent "soft power" activities, including diplomatic outreach, cultural promotion and education exchanges, or public advocacy.

Foreign malign influence differs in its intent as it uses tools of soft power to advance narratives or shape public opinion in a way that undermines domestic politics and communities in the host country.

Foreign interference represents another threat level as it uses covert, deceptive, coercive activities and other tools of "sharp power" to disrupt democratic processes, create societal divisions, or advance interests contrary to those of the host country.

Foreign influence and interference may be difficult to identify as they take place in a **"gray zone"** of actions deliberately designed to remain below thresholds that would trigger clear responses—often deniable, incremental, and integrated into legitimate activities.

¹ Diana Fu. "Distinguish Foreign Influence from Foreign Interference," In *Getting China at Home*, edited by Jessica Chen Weiss. Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, February 2025.

- ii. **Asymmetric partnerships:** China's provincial or municipal entities often have resources, authority, and political backing far exceeding those of their foreign counterparts, creating structural imbalances in negotiations and agreements.
- iii. **Transactional approach:** Chinese engagement typically operates on transactional principles, with benefits provided in exchange for specific concessions or actions often related to issues deemed politically sensitive, including ties with Taiwan and human rights. Economic incentives, including the realization of investment projects, may come with implicit condition or be withdrawn to exert pressure. Despite these challenges, local governments can exercise caution and their own leverage in these relationships. They can clearly communicate about their values and conditions, including being upfront about expectations regarding human rights improvements or cooperation on issues like countering fentanyl production.

2. Strategic guidance for risk-aware international engagement.

Establish clear engagement protocols before entering international relationships.

- Develop clear criteria for evaluating potential foreign partnerships and define what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable terms of engagement.
- Conduct thorough due diligence to know who you are meeting with. Research prospective partners' background and affiliations.
- Vet the source of funding for proposed initiatives or sponsors of travel. Funding linked to foreign governments should generally be refused for travel or accommodation of your local political leader or delegation.
- Develop a simple risk assessment framework for international engagements. Rate potential partnerships across key risk factors (e.g., transparency, reciprocity, alignment with local priorities, legal or reputational vulnerabilities) to guide decision-making.

Practice proactive engagement to shape relationships on terms beneficial to your community.

- Maintain control of the engagement agenda rather than accepting predetermined frameworks: negotiate engagements on your own terms and decide what you seek from a partnership (e.g., cultural exchanges, education, FDI).
- Keep agreements specific rather than nebulous. Specific memoranda of understanding can be more useful as opposed to broad and unspecific twinning arrangements). Craft precise language with clearly defined scope.
- Establish expectations early. Emphasize transparency, honesty, and reciprocity when engaging with foreign governments. Don't blindside counterparts on sensitive issues—upfront and clear communication is more effective.

Prepare for and resist pressure.

- Don't accept agreement language contradicting your values or policies (e.g., on Taiwan, human rights, and the protection of minorities). Use your leverage and impose your conditions.
- Refuse quid pro quo pressure. Don't be pressured to change a stance or to criticize national policy in return for investment or other benefits.
- Create scenarios and use serious games to identify blind spots and think creatively about risks.
- Develop response protocols for potential pressure tactics rather than reacting ad hoc. Be prepared for assertive, forceful, but non-binding communication from foreign officials, including from embassies.

Build a diverse network of advisors and consult with national security officials when appropriate.

- Widen the circle of country advisors to diversify voices informing international partnership decisions. Develop relationships with diverse representatives from diaspora communities and avoid overreliance on individuals who claim exclusive representation of community perspectives.
- Establish relationships with academic institutions or think tanks that specialize in foreign policy to access research, historical context, and expertise when evaluating potential partnerships.
- Consult with peers when vetting foreign organizations. Leverage networks for shared intelligence and experience.
- Maintain regular communication with relevant national government agencies (e.g., on export controls, research integrity and security, inbound and outbound investment screening, keeping untrusted vendors out of critical infrastructure, etc.). Consult with national security authorities when partnerships raise concerns.

Safeguard critical assets, information, and people.

- Develop secure policies and protocols for the use of technology during international travel, especially phones and computers.

- Exercise caution regarding cooperation in areas requiring heightened scrutiny, such as technology transfer, defense, critical infrastructure, and specialized manufacturing.
- Maintain control over official communications and media engagements. Proactively negotiate the terms of media engagement and issue your own press releases.
- Avoid making blanket and generalized statements about foreign countries that could stigmatize diaspora and heritage communities living in your region.

By developing these capacities, state and local governments will be better positioned to navigate on their own terms the increasingly complex landscape of subnational diplomacy worldwide.

Acknowledgement: This brief draws from the experience of local governments and the expertise of Dr. Sara Newland of Smith College and former Visiting Senior Fellow at the Truman Center, and a representative of the U.S. Department of State's Office of China Coordination. This brief also draws from a 2025 Truman Center report on "[American Cities in a Changing US-China Relationship](#)" authored by Dr. Sara Newland and Dr. Kyle Jaros.



BRIEF 3.2. COUNTERING RUMORS AND PROPAGANDA AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

State and local governments must be prepared to respond to sophisticated information operations designed to erode trust, create division, and undermine governance and democratic values. These campaigns exploit existing tensions, target vulnerable populations, and often overwhelm limited local resources. With preparedness and effective communication, local government can build trust, anticipate risks, and preserve information integrity.

1. The challenge to address: propaganda and foreign malign influence target local levels

Foreign actors and affiliated networks have increasingly targeted subnational governments and communities as part of broader propaganda campaigns. These efforts can impact local governments across issue areas such as:

- **Urban planning:** claims that "15-minute cities" is a concept aimed at authoritarian state control.
- **Sustainability:** conspiracism related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Public health:** propaganda eroding trust in science and institutions, fueling vaccine hesitancy in communities.
- **Migrant communities:** scapegoating migrant or diaspora communities as the cause of broader social and economic challenges.
- **Gender equity and diversity:** gender-based and misogynist propaganda is often used against women in positions of power.

This list of themes is non-exhaustive but understanding common targets and sources of propaganda can assist in anticipating threats and developing response strategies.

State and local governments must differentiate risks in their information environment between:

- Deliberately false or misleading content created and distributed with the intent to deceive or cause harm. For example, an individual sharing information they know is false to undermine a political opponent.
- False information shared without malicious intent, often through misunderstanding or error. For example, someone sharing inaccurate health information on social media without understanding it is false or misleading.

This distinction matters as false information can take hold in local communities through non-malicious sharing and amplification. Once spread widely, debunking false information can be very challenging.

The negative impacts of false information are tangible and can include:

- Political backlash disrupting essential services and policy implementation.
- Scapegoating vulnerable communities can lead to violence or harassment.
- Erosion of public trust in local institutions and democratic processes.
- Polarization among community members over manufactured controversies.
- Confusion about emergency services during crises.

Propaganda has complex sources and vulnerabilities complicate responses:

- Foreign actors seeking to destabilize democratic institutions. These may be state- and non-state-driven.
- Increasingly, domestic actors relay and amplify divisive narratives for electoral advantage.
- Algorithmic amplification through social media for engagement over accuracy.
- Declining trust in public institutions as messengers.
- Artificial intelligence and emerging technologies as a force multiplier for foreign information operations at scale.

2. Strategic guidance for preserving information integrity and building trust.

Effective responses to propaganda require building trust in institutions and within the community. Multisectoral and multilevel partnerships increase preparedness, especially as there is often limited coordination of responses to foreign propaganda and interference between the national and local levels. Community engagement and outreach are critical to understanding and mitigating the spread of propaganda. Local governments must invest in communication expertise to monitor social media, plan and craft straightforward, accessible and verified information and counter false narratives. Subnational diplomacy networks are valuable avenues to share best practice responses.

State and local governments can deploy counter measures at different stages:

Stage	Focus	Activities
Before	Pre-emption and early detection	<p>Improve media literacy and critical thinking through investments in longer term public education campaigns and digital media literacy information.</p> <p>Increase the frequency of communication and availability of verified information, especially in anticipation of potential propaganda operations around key events such as major policy announcements and elections.</p> <p>Establish regulatory frameworks for combatting propaganda. This must be done in partnership with other levels of government that often have responsibilities for key areas of regulation such as media and technology. Local input is, however, critical to ensuring these frameworks attend and respond to city-level experiences.</p>
During	Containment and debunking	<p>Fill the information vacuum: as soon as a propaganda campaign becomes evident, prepare and deploy rapid response communications with targeted clear, comprehensive, and factual information.</p>
After	Recovery and debunking	<p>Craft counter narratives: corrective messaging involves the use of robust data and "sticky facts" combined with storytelling and personalized communication techniques. Understanding local communities and how and where propaganda is spread can help inform these communications strategies.</p> <p>Support those affected: provide psychologically safe places and support services for those impacted by propaganda.</p>
At all stages	Local outreach and monitoring	<p>Community outreach programs deepen understanding and (re)build trust across communities. Direct people-to-people engagement can help organizations understand when and how false information is spreading and respond through targeted outreach to impacted groups. For instance, the city of Leeds (United Kingdom) ran a series of local "Brave Space Café" (see case study below).</p> <p>Social media analysis: monitoring social media discourse related to local issues helps identify content and accounts linked to foreign propaganda on key topics and events.</p> <p>Landscape mapping: sources of propaganda often use repeat tactics and narratives. Identifying and mapping the landscape of repeated relays of propaganda within local communities can help understand the media they use to communicate and the groups they engage with.</p>

Insights From the Field



Dortmund leverages international city networks and partnerships to tackle divisive rumors.²⁹

For Dortmund, preserving information integrity is another important aspect when it comes to supporting democratic values. Since 2023, the International Relations team in Dortmund established a working group together with the Communication and Press Office as well as the Municipal Situation Center to tackle falsehoods, recognizing it as a threat to democracy and social cohesion. Dortmund is investing resources into capacity building and international exchanges on the topic of fabricated information through such networks as German Marshall Fund, Melbourne Centre for Cities, as well as through peer learnings from the partner cities, such as Leeds.



Community engagement in Leeds (United Kingdom) to address the roots of mistrust and build resilience against rumors.³⁰

In 2024, Leeds City Council's International Relations team co-ordinated a partnership project between our Migration Team and [Camden Council](#), to tackle the rumours and misunderstandings that can drive wedges between communities, and lead to hostility. The project was funded by the Council of Europe's [Intercultural Cities Programme](#).

During the course of the project, the UK experienced a summer of violent disorder, much of which stemmed from the types of rumour and falsehoods we were aiming to tackle. This was the backdrop in which we ran a series of local "Brave Space Café" sessions in communities and with communities to explore some of these issues and equip people with the confidence to address them.

For many people, opportunities to quietly contrast their ideas with those who think differently are shrinking. This has made our work feel even more important and urgent, not just within the UK but also in other countries where similar disorder has arisen.

We recognised from the start that we could only make this sort of project meaningful if we worked hand in hand with partners with deep roots within our local communities. In Leeds, these were [Chapel FM](#) and [LS14 Trust](#) and they helped recruit local people to participate.

This project has provided a test bed for regular honest and effective intercultural discussions. The sessions have been seen as a clear example of good practice in community engagement, and a model that can be reflected upon and learned from going forward. The sessions gave us an opportunity to dig deep into the roots of mistrust and rumours between communities. Participants welcomed the opportunity to have a range of 'elephant in the room conversations' which fostered a deeper understanding, empathy, and solidarity among participants.

The sessions have equipped participants with knowledge, resources, and a renewed sense of responsibility to advocate for and support marginalised individuals within their communities. The collaborative environment has strengthened community ties and created a network of allies committed to promoting inclusivity and equality.

We were grateful to benefit from the wealth of expertise within the Intercultural Cities Network, especially the [Spanish city of Bilbao](#), who developed a network of anti-rumour community ambassadors, and produced the [Intercultural Cities guidelines on tackling rumours](#), who joined us in a webinar to share their learning with us.

Acknowledgement: This brief draws from the experience of local governments leaders, the expertise of Dr. Daniel Pejic of the University of Melbourne, and the Disinformation in the City: Response Playbook.³¹

²⁹ Contribution from Dortmund (Germany)

³⁰ Contribution from Leeds (United Kingdom)

³¹ Trijsburg, I., Sullivan, H., Park, E., Bonotti, M., Costello, P., Nwokora, Z., Pejic, D., Peucker, M. & Ridge, W. (2024) Disinformation in the City: Response Playbook. The University of Melbourne.



BRIEF 4.1. LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS WITH DIASPORA AND MULTIETHNIC COMMUNITIES FOR GLOBAL TIES AND RESILIENCE

Local governments with strong, trusting relations with their diaspora and multiethnic communities are best positioned for impactful global engagement. These connections can enhance global economic and diplomatic ties, while strengthening local cohesion and resilience to foreign interference. Informed collaboration with foreign embassies and consulates at home can further improve community engagement and amplify cultural and economic benefits.

1. The opportunity: tapping the potential of diaspora and community connections.

Local governments possess valuable international assets in their diverse populations. Diaspora and multiethnic communities carry both local knowledge and expansive international networks that can strengthen a region's economic competitiveness, cultural vibrancy, and social cohesion. Deep relations based on culture and heritage create the foundations for long-term diplomatic and economic benefits.

Bristol, United Kingdom demonstrates this potential with over 90 spoken languages and 185 countries of birth. The city's International Strategy, Bristol Global City, focuses one of its four strategic outcomes on global connections of its international diaspora, recognizing how international communities link Bristol to the world while creating opportunities in culture, business, and education (see case study below).

Local governments can also tap their own diaspora in other countries to enhance their international connections and cohesion. For instance, Okinawa leverages Okinawans living overseas by convening the Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival every five years to celebrate the roots and the achievements of this community in service of industry, peace, and culture worldwide. Similarly, Scotland recognizes that *"international relations are fundamentally about relationships. (...) The Scottish Government has long believed that better engaging our diaspora—family and friends of Scotland globally—can not only benefit Scotland economically and enrich our culture but also improve Scotland's connections and reputation."* (see case studies below).

2. Strategic guidance for diaspora and community partnership development

Build trust through regular and dedicated engagement. Successful engagement with diaspora communities starts with trust and listening. Building direct and diverse links through meetings and structured consultation enables the identification of specific needs. For instance, Bristol convened representatives from 20 communities in a Diaspora Dialogue Group to discuss how government offices could support their communities. This engagement unearthed specific requests, as well as ideas for business development and cultural events (see case study below).

Acknowledgment complex histories. Memorial work strengthens long-term trust, as illustrated by the efforts from the Bristol Legacy Foundation (see case study below). Beyond acknowledgement, Scotland introduced equality objectives in its international diaspora engagement explicitly addressing historical injustices of its colonial legacy and involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. When supporting community celebrations of cultural holidays and historic figures, local governments should apply consistent, transparent criteria across communities.

Recognize different perspectives within communities. Avoid treating any single organization or individual as representing an entire diaspora community. Ensure varied engagement within communities rather than treating them as monoliths and apply consistent support across all communities.

Develop diaspora partnerships with clear purpose, whether you are seeking to advance:

- Cultural enrichment: arts programming, educational exchanges, heritage festivals and cultural identity preservation.
- Economic development: talent retention, trade connections, investment attraction, tourism promotion.
- Diplomatic outreach: strengthening sister city/state relationships, facilitating official visits and bilateral cooperation.
- Policy development: international perspective on local challenges, technical expertise.
- Social cohesion: community integration, anti-discrimination initiatives, cross-cultural dialogue.

Support diaspora representatives as global ambassadors and connectors. Diasporas and their representatives can champion ideas and opportunities overseas through their existing networks and links that go beyond civic and institutional avenues. This role can even be formalized by designating honorary or official envoys as done by Maryland and Bristol (see case studies below). State, local, and devolved governments can support their diaspora worldwide by funding projects that increase its visibility, reputation, and connections, as illustrated by the Scottish Connections Fund.

Leverage consular relationships strategically. Consulates can be useful partners for state and local governments in supporting diaspora engagement and events, celebrations, and commemorations. These relations also create a diplomatic multiplier effect, with consular representatives serving as information conduits to both their governments and local diaspora communities. For instance, Bologna, Italy developed an innovative model for diaspora engagement centered on regular dialogue with consular representatives. The city hosts webinar calls providing updates on municipal policies and economic issues, with focused attention to issues relevant to specific diaspora communities. Honorary consuls may not have direct immediate contact with home country officials, but they are influential champions of cultural and economic goals.

Effective engagement with embassy and consular partners on diaspora issues requires appropriate boundaries. State and local government should exercise vigilance on political matters and establish clear protocols for official interactions. If not managed properly, collaboration with embassies and consulates can create foreign interference risks (see Brief 3.1. on Guidelines for engaging with foreign governments).

Insights from the Field



Maryland's model of Citizens Ambassadors.³²

Maryland's leaders throughout the past several decades have known that one of Maryland's most important assets is its diverse constituency. The Governor's Office of Community Initiatives (GOCI) is the State of Maryland's lead agency for diaspora engagement. GOCI houses several ethnic and cultural commissions that serve as advisory bodies to the Governor and state agencies, representing the diverse communities within Maryland.

Additionally, the Office of the Secretary of State maintains the Sister State Program and international business advisory councils, under which community members serve as "citizen ambassadors" to advance the State's interests. The members of these volunteer bodies devote their skills and high-level connections to the staff, who then perform due diligence to assess opportunities. Additionally, several members of the Maryland General Assembly, the state legislature, are part of the diaspora community as well, bringing their own connections to the benefit of Maryland.



Increasing Scotland's influence and reputation worldwide with the Scottish Connections Fund³³

A key element of the Scottish Connections Framework is the Scottish Connection Fund. The Scottish Connections Fund aims to promote increased visibility or connectivity between Scottish diaspora communities outside Scotland, or with Scotland itself. It offers funding to individuals

³² Contribution from Maryland (United States)

³³ Contribution from the Scottish Government (United Kingdom)

and organizations around the world to take forward new and innovative projects, that will help to bring together Scotland's diaspora and promote Scotland's reputation and interests. All projects align to the aims and objectives of the Scottish Connections Framework.

After a pilot round in 2023-2024, the Fund attracted 65 proposals in 2024-2025 from organizations across six continents. Eleven projects were selected through a competitive process and receive funding to a total of £49,997.

The successful projects reflect Scotland's wide range of international links, including themes of language and heritage, music, education, and business. Successful projects include the promotion of the Gaelic language in Taiwan, the inclusion of Scottish literature in German schools, the promotion of Scottish traditions in Florida, USA, Nova Scotia, Canada, and Sao Paulo, Brazil, and an ["Africa Scotland Business Network's Future Leaders Business Network."](#)



How Bristol leverages the connections of its international diaspora for local cohesion and global appeal³⁴

Bristol's International Strategy, [Bristol Global City](#), has one of its four strategic outcomes focused on the global connections of its international diaspora: *"international communities link Bristol to the world, creating a vibrant, cohesive and welcoming city, and bringing opportunities for culture, business and education."*

Three very different strands of work that support resilience and global connections through working with diaspora are highlighted here:

- Diaspora dialogue group: Supported by British Council Funding, and working with Bristol's Black South West Network, Bristol's former Deputy Mayor convened an international diaspora dialogue group with representatives from across the community to seek views on where the city could collectively build stronger links on culture, education and business. Examples of recommendations included mapping out existing festivals to see where there could be increased diaspora elements supporting opportunity to link and connect overseas including film festivals, tech festivals as well as music and street art, promoting overseas examples of successful diaspora investment among others, and involving diaspora representatives in UK government trade and business delegations overseas.
- [Bristol's International Ambassadors](#): each year three international Ambassadors are selected, including representatives from international diaspora, to champion Bristol's interests and opportunities overseas through their existing connections and links that go beyond civic and institutional links, e.g. we have a former boxing Commonwealth Champion, a robotics entrepreneur, artist and DJ making the most of their connections for the city across various global continents.
- Bristol City Council is an institutional partner of [Bristol's Legacy Foundation](#) who were set up to amplify the voices of African Heritage Communities through culture, education and public space initiatives and memorialization and legacy programs. International roundtables have been held by with cities overseas in Europe, USA, Caribbean and Africa who have similar organizations and program to share best practice and establish links.



How Welsh culture and heritage can drive meaningful diplomatic and economic outcomes.³⁵

The Welsh diaspora continues to be a powerful asset in international engagement. A notable example is Dr. Martha Hughes Cannon, originally from Llandudno, who emigrated to Utah in the 1850s and went on to become a pioneering physician, suffragist, and the first woman Senator in the United States. Her legacy was recently honored with a statue in the National Statuary Hall in Washington, DC. This became a springboard for renewed ties with the Utah State Government,

³⁴ Contribution from Bristol (United Kingdom)

³⁵ Contribution from the Welsh Government (United Kingdom)

opening new avenues of cooperation in nuclear energy and FinTech. It is a testament to how culture and heritage can drive meaningful diplomatic and economic outcomes.

Through strategic planning, cultural storytelling, and a commitment to values-led diplomacy, Wales has made significant strides on the world stage. Wales has shown that international impact does not depend on size, but on a clear strategy, unity of voice, and the power of shared values.



Okinawa long-lasting solid ties with Okinawa's overseas community and related-initiatives.³⁶

Okinawa is one of the largest prefectures whose ancestors emigrated to North and South America. Our first emigrants went to Hawaii more than 100 years ago. It is now thought that there are about 420,000 Okinawan descendants overseas. Our ties are strong based not only on our shared history and culture, but on the spirit of mutual assistance and warmhearted relations. This expanding network of Uchinanchu (Okinawans living overseas) culminates at the Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival. Held about every five years, we welcome over 7,000 overseas participants from the U.S. Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina among others. We hope this network will continue to expand and that Okinawan identity will be passed down to the next generations.



How Scotland harnesses diaspora relations for local cohesion and global connections.³⁷

Scotland is an open, connected and outward-looking country with a long history of intellectual, cultural and economic exchange. Scotland's diaspora and our Scottish Connections are an extension of Scotland itself. Recent research suggested that upwards of 40 million people worldwide consider themselves to have Scottish heritage.

We initially commissioned an independent literature review [report](#) into effective diaspora networks and engagement in other countries, with recommendations on how learnings could be applied to Scotland—this was published in December 2021. Further [independent qualitative research](#) was then published in October 2022. The tangible recommendations provided by this research helped develop the Scottish Connections Framework and drive a global engagement plan to reach out to our diaspora. [The Scottish Connections Framework](#) was published in April 2023 and outlined a cross-cutting approach to diaspora engagement. Taking a **broad definition of diaspora**, we aim to strengthen and expand Scotland's links and networks with Scottish people living elsewhere in the world, those with Scottish heritage, people who have previously lived in Scotland, including alumni; and those with a professional, business, cultural or other links to Scotland.

As part of our commitment to everyone with Scottish connections, we launched **digital resources** to help people with Scottish links be better connected than ever before. Two digital tools are available to help people join our [#ScottishConnections community](#). Registration is available both for organizations and for individuals.

Anyone around the world can [subscribe](#) to a **Newsletter** as a member of Scotland's international community to receive regular communications on what's of interest to each individual – whether that's news from Scotland or local activity. We provide community information, whether individuals are part of our heritage diaspora, want to connect with Scottish business or education, or want to hear more about our arts and culture.

A [Community Directory](#) brings together worldwide Scottish organizations and groups into one handy list which includes heritage organizations, arts and culture groups, alumni and student groups, business networks, organizers of Scotland-themed events, like Highland Games, and any other organization that helps to celebrate Scotland. The Community Directory is regularly updated and [new registrations](#) are welcome.

³⁶ Contribution from Okinawa (Japan)

³⁷ Contribution from the Scottish Government (United Kingdom)



BRIEF 4.2. TOMORROW'S LEADERS: FOSTERING GLOBALLY ENGAGED CITIZENS THROUGH YOUTH EXCHANGES

City, state, and other local governments must play a key role in broadening youth access to international opportunities. Collaboration with schools, universities, and civic organizations to expand youth exchanges provides benefits in the long run by building the next generation of engaged leaders, creating mutual understanding across countries, and nurturing lasting international connections.

1. The value of investing in globally fluent leaders.

International youth engagement yields many benefits, including:

- **Policy innovation:** Embedding young people's perspectives and ideas in discussions with local governments representatives strengthens policymaking and ensures that solutions to urban challenges consider youth needs and vision. For instance, local governments have increasingly established youth climate councils to create dialogue with youth climate leaders, ensuring environmental strategies reflect diverse community priorities, including those of younger generations.
- **Leadership development:** Youth programs develop future leaders with global fluency, experience, and networks. These programs can also create long-term ambassadors for communities that often go on to champion international partnerships. Future decision makers build cross-cultural understanding through direct experiences (see the example from Nancy, France below).

2. Considerations for international youth programming.

Integrating youth exchanges into existing partnerships deepens international ties. Local governments report that youth exchanges strengthen and help activate international partnerships. Nancy's Summer Internship Program demonstrates how to maximize existing partnerships. The city takes advantage of close links with its twin cities Karlsruhe, Newcastle, Padua, Lublin, and Kanazawa to operate an annual month-long program exchanging students. Interns gain exposure to municipal governance while improving language and professional skills (see case study below).

The cultural and academic initiatives underpinned by international youth programs benefit long-term economic and workforce development. These programs can build human capital and support international career development for participants by including language immersion, skills training, and hands-on experience in corporate or government spaces (see case study below).

Successful programs leverage institutional partnerships to limit the need for additional government staff and resources. As youth programs are often unfunded, local governments should seek to co-deliver programs with school and universities, which provide student recruitment support and academic credit mechanisms, or NGOs which can provide program management expertise and international network access. In France, programs receive support from the Franco-German Youth Office as well as the European Union. In New York City, the NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs launched in 2015 the NYC Junior Ambassadors program (NYCJA) which leverages the United Nations (U.N.) as a resource for seventh graders so that they understand their role as global citizens and can engage with the U.N. and its mission. This program benefits from the support of the U.N., the U.N. Foundation, NYC agencies, and U.N. member states. This approach requires building relationships with national, international, and regional funding organizations.

Insights From the Field



How Nancy deepens sister cities partnerships through youth exchange programs.³⁸

Nancy takes advantage of its close links with its twin cities in order to set up an annual month-long **Summer Internship Program**, exchanging students aged 18-25 with its twin cities including Karlsruhe (Germany), Newcastle (United Kingdom), Padua (Italy), Lublin (Poland) and Kanazawa (Japan). Interns get the opportunity to work in municipal services to enable them to improve their knowledge of the French language, to discover another way of life and another culture, as well as to understand the functioning of French local authorities and institutions. Interns are assigned specific tasks and participate fully in the life of the department they work in.

What makes Nancy's Summer Internship Program a success?

Each edition has a specific theme so that students learn to defend their values and get an insight into other cultures and ways of thinking. Participants provide a report at the end of their internship, and, back home, act as ambassadors of Nancy upon returning home, thus encouraging future engaged citizens. Evaluation documents such as a list of selection criteria, end-of-course survey, course certificates, various feedback from trainees, films, and internship agreements can help to secure a serious evaluation of the impact of this measure, highly appreciated by young people who capitalize on this initiative throughout their lives.

Who manages the program?

This is an originally Franco-German program led by Nancy and Karlsruhe that has been expanded to other twin cities of our cities. The respective international relations services select the students they send to the twin city and build the host program in their own city. This includes finding services likely to host an intern, organizing the leisure program, visits, thematic meetings, preparation of an end-of-stay show, and assistance with writing a logbook that brings together all the beautiful experiences lived in Nancy, leaving a beautiful record each year.

How is the program financed?

The City of Nancy provides a budget for costs related to hosting students. Transportation costs are borne by the students themselves. For German and French students, the Franco-German Youth Office supports this exchange financially. For other countries, no such structure exists.



Dortmund's youth engagement³⁹

Dortmund's long-standing partnership with Buffalo, New York exemplifies its commitment to youth exchanges. The Buffalo-Dortmund Youth Ambassador Program has been running for decades, allowing students from Dortmund to spend several months in Buffalo, participate in local schools, and engage in cultural and recreational activities. The program is reciprocal and is supported by both municipalities as part of the official city partnership.

Youth engagement is also considered when organizing or attending international events and planning delegation visits. At the 2025 Eurocities Annual Conference in Braga, a youth representative of Dortmund took part in the "Young City Shapers" program that is offered in addition to the official conference program. It allows the inclusion of young people's perspectives and ideas in discussions with the city representatives and local politicians. The aim is to ensure that solutions to urban challenges consider the needs and visions of young people.

³⁸ Contribution from Nancy (France)

³⁹ Contribution from Dortmund (Germany)

Another example is DORTBUNT, a yearly city festival, that among other aspects provides the opportunity to showcase good practices from Dortmund such as the sustainable transformation from

its industrial past to innovation. Partner cities are always invited to such milestone events. It is beneficial to consider various groups of interest including political actors, technical experts, but also youth representatives. This year an additional side program for young delegates from the partner cities has been organized by the "Respect Office" of the Department for Youth Welfare, providing a platform for a multilateral and multinational exchange under the theme "Echoes of Freedom". The City of Dortmund also provides limited funding for various projects and initiatives, including youth exchanges that are linked to strengthening city partnerships.



Youth professional skills training and leadership at the core of the cooperation strategy of French region La Réunion in the Indian Ocean and Southern Africa⁴⁰

Youth professional skills training and leadership are key drivers of the cooperation strategy of the French island of La Réunion in the Indian Ocean and the region of Southern Africa. To strengthen co-development and integration in its surrounding area, the regional government of La Réunion supports youth volunteer programs run by France Volontaires, a French government organization that sends volunteers to countries around the world. These programs allow young people from La Réunion to gain international professional experience in areas such as culture, sustainable development, and economic cooperation. Recent graduates get the opportunity to apply and develop skills while serving communities in the Indian Ocean and Southern Africa, such as Madagascar, Mauritius, and Tanzania. The program also trains and prepares a future generation of regional cooperation leaders and practitioners. La Réunion Region has established a partnership agreement with France Volontaires, which has set up a local office in La Réunion to develop this exemplary program.

Since 2004, 341 young people from La Réunion have benefited from this experience, including 245 with co-financing from La Réunion Region. This initiative, integrated into French and European international development policies, is co-funded by the European Union, the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, and La Réunion Region through the EU Interreg Indian Ocean funding program.

⁴⁰ Contribution from La Réunion (France)

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Symposium on Strategic Subnational Diplomacy (January 2025)

On August 12, 2024, Meridian International Center received a grant from the U.S. Department of State to implement a Symposium on Strategic Subnational Diplomacy in partnership with the Truman Center and the Melbourne Centre for Cities. The convening took place on January 15 and 16, 2025 at Meridian International Center in Washington, DC. On January 25, 2025, Meridian was instructed to suspend work on the grant. The suspension was lifted on March 6, 2025. On June 5, 2025, the grant agreement was terminated.

Participants in the Symposium on Strategic Subnational Diplomacy included:

AUSTRALIA

Linda Dawson, Western Australia
Sam Doyle-Wiaczek, Cairns
Emma Gowling, Australian Capital Territory
Jordan Walsh, Embassy of Australia

CANADA

Chris Brown, Calgary
Blair Hudyma, Saskatchewan
Kirsten Kazlauskas, Embassy of Canada

Catherine Labonté, Québec City
Leslie Teramoto, British Columbia

FRANCE

Frédéric Blanc, France
Bruno Chiaverini, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes
Verena Denry, Nancy
Thibaut Lespagnol, Embassy of France
Céline Papin, Bordeaux
Gilles Théodora, Réunion

JAPAN

Takao Aharen, Okinawa
Yasushi Aoyama, Aichi
Tomoko Nakamura, Embassy of Japan
Masa Nishikawa, Yokohama
Yuuya Shirakawa, Sendai

GERMANY

Dr. Deniz Alkan, Saarland
Hinduja Farah, Germany
Michael Hasper, Embassy of Germany
Markus Heilig, Hamburg
Elisabeth Schwarz, Embassy of Germany
Ivana Stijelja, Rostock
Martin van der Pütten, Dortmund

ITALY

Anna Lisa Boni, Bologna
Alessandra DeSantis, Embassy of Italy
Valentina Parisi, Sicily
Gianluca Saba, Genoa

NEW ZEALAND

Dani Caudwell, Whakatāne

Tao Chen, Auckland

Martin Cudd, Christchurch

Gabrielle Loga, Palmerston North

UNITED KINGDOM

Tom Bacon, United Kingdom

Charlotte Bell, Embassy of the United Kingdom

Kathryn Gosling, Scotland

Karen Murgatroyd, Leeds

Shelley Nania, Bristol

David Warren, Wales

UNITED STATES

Carlo Capua, Sister Cities International

Emina Ibrahimovic, Indiana

Alexandria Liu, Maryland

Michael Lore, Maryland

Pierre-Olivier Lugez, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

LEWIS LOCAL DIPLOMATS

Ben Moore, San Diego, California

Jeff Lodermeier, Kansas City, Missouri

Tim Liston, San Antonio, Texas