



A collage of directional signs pointing in various directions, overlaid with large, colorful, abstract geometric shapes. The signs include destinations like Abu Dhabi, Perth, Huelva, and Nice, along with distances and years. A central sign features a logo for "SISTER CITIES" and "U.S. OF HOUSTON TEXAS".



2019

HOUSTON



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2019 Annual Conference Impact Report

Sister Cities International (SCI) hosted its annual conference in Houston, Texas in July focused on the theme “Cities Mean Business.” Pre-conference events included an all-day U.S.-China Mayors’ Summit and an all-day Africa Forum, held at Texas Southern University. A range of interactive sessions and round-tables explored the conference theme from the perspectives of SCI’s program areas: Trade and Investment; Community Development; Youth Leadership; and Arts and Culture. Parallel to the Conference, we hosted our Youth Leadership Summit at Rice University. The Annual Conference also included mini-summits on U.S.-Mexico, and U.S.-German relations. Reflecting on the 2019 Annual Conference, several key themes emerge from panels and discussions. Uniting these themes is the principle of innovation, which is a core element infused into all SCI initiatives.



Raising Global Awareness of the Sister City Network

Sister Cities International includes a number of country and regional representatives who guide the network's thinking and interest in key geographies where the network is robust, or where there is opportunity for expansion. Geographical focus allows programming to be tailored on a community-needs basis. The 2019 Annual Conference explored several key geographies including:

China

- o The United States and China share 157 sister city relationships, an increasingly strong and vibrant partnership. The two nations share similar strategic interests, especially around economic opportunities. 2019 marks the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries, a reminder of what is possible when we set aside differences and advocate for cooperation.
- o SCI hosted the Fourth U. S. – China Mayors' Summit in Houston. The Summit encouraged closer ties and collaboration between the two nations. 165 citizen diplomats, including 124 Chinese mayors, diplomats, and business leaders attended the all-day Summit.
- o These discussions highlighted the desire to increase collaboration and cooperation at the community and citizen levels. Panelists noted the importance of sub-national programming, stressing that it can be more efficient than national policy in meeting local needs, with a direct and tangible impact on citizens. Furthermore, sub-national and people-to-people relations create durable, long-lasting bonds. Another point of emphasis was enacting holistic development strategies. Such strategies promote improved quality of life by recognizing the interconnection of economics, culture, technology, and the environment.

The African continent

- o The African continent is ripe for expanded partnerships and programming, with the United States and other Global Members. SCI's unique approach to cultural exchange can help raise awareness about the diversity and depth of cultural heritage across the African continent and the United States.
- o To foster closer relations with the continent, SCI hosted its first ever Africa Forum where speakers included the Goodwill Ambassador for the Pan-African Parliament; Consuls General and Honorary Consuls General from Angola, Egypt, Ghana, and Ethiopia; and the Director of the U.S Commerce Service/Houston-U.S. Department of Commerce. These experts discussed potential partner organizations, and approaches to building new Sister City relationships.
- o Three Elders were given awards for their lifelong service: Ambassador Cynthia Perry from Houston; Prince Kwame Kludjeson from Ghana; and Boubker Mazoz from Morocco. These Elders are wonderful examples of how thinking globally and acting locally can produce profound change.



Mexico

- o The United States and Mexico have a longstanding relationship. They share 168 sister city relationships, the single-highest between two nations in SCI's network.
- o The US-Mexico Mini Summit was an overwhelming success, panelists discussed key issues such as trade, immigration, cultural exchanges and higher education opportunities.
- o The activities of Thursday's Youth Leadership Summit were dedicated to celebrating Mexican culture and heritage.
- o Many Mexican citizens attended the Conference, including Raul Quintana Cuevas. Every year since 2015 Mr. Cuevas has taken a "Bike Ride for Peace" from his home town of Tlalnepantla, Mexico to Wichita, Kansas. The journey of 1,500 miles has encouraged closer relations between the two communities.

Germany

- o In 2018 and 2019, SCI is collaborating with Wunderbar Together, an initiative of the German Government which celebrates the U.S.-German relationship. The United States and Germany share 100 sister city relationships that have developed since SCI's inception. These close ties are supported by, and continue to build bilateral relations.
- o To foster continuity in programming, SCI hosted a U.S.-Germany Mini Summit. The German Summit included two sessions, one focusing on economic development, the other on culture and developing community-level relationships.
- o Panelists discussed the robust business relationship between the two nations, and the benefits from collaboration between institutions of higher education and trade schools, which often lead to better outcomes for citizens and businesses alike.



Japan

- o United States and Japanese relations are extensive. Sister City relationships between the two countries are robust, with 162 twinings, the second highest in the network.
- o The U.S.-Japan relationship is of strategic importance as it facilitates student programs, cultural exchanges, and business development. The United States – Japan relationship demonstrates the power of continuity, from the SCI Texas – Japan Leadership Symposium in March, to highlighting Japan during the Youth Leadership Summit. Continuity improves the stability and strength of long-term relations.
- o SCI's collaboration with TeamUp is providing funding for two one-year one-time grants that were awarded to U.S.-Japan sister cities: Hot Spring, Arkansas / Hanamaki and Tyler, Texas / Yachiyo. The grants were awarded to develop higher education student mobility by creating new, or enhancing existing partnerships between colleges and universities.





To take on the challenges of today's world, SCI has identified several new areas of engagement:

Resilience and Building Local Communities

- o Resilience is the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and systems within a city or community to survive, adapt, and thrive no matter what kind of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience.
- o SCI is dedicated to promoting community resilience through sustained community relationships and networks, environmental initiatives, and sustainable economic development.
- o Imbuing resilience into existing and prospective programs allows for holistic development for all communities involved. Increasing trust through network building in turn creates community cohesion and lays the foundation for peace and understanding.



Engaging Next Generation and Mid-Career Professionals

- o In order to maintain its position as the premier global network of Citizen Diplomats, SCI introduced initiatives to encourage the participation of next generation and mid-career professionals. These individuals bring expertise, professional networks, and new ideas to the Sister Cities network.
- o Leveraging these assets will help members diversify their programming goals, structures, and prospective partners.
- o SCI's renewed focus on mid-career professionals comes with an emphasis on continuity and inclusiveness. Introducing a seamless transition from youth-oriented programming to the leadership roles held by older generations is necessary for sustaining SCI's impact.
- o The value of mentoring and promoting meaningful volunteerism was a key dimension of this discussion. It included thinking of ways to engage underserved populations who may be interested in public service and citizen diplomacy, but may not have immediate opportunities to participate.



Disinformation

- o The advent of the internet and unbridled access to information has had a number of positive effects on society; however, in recent years these channels of information have become a hotbed for disinformation and media manipulation.
- o Tackling this issue requires a multi-faceted strategy that relies heavily on people-to-people networks. These networks foster trust and constructive discourse, while organizing people around common goals. Youth outreach on issues such as safe technology use, and source reliability are important, while utilizing the technological skills of the younger generation.

Human Trafficking

- o Human trafficking has become an increasingly serious issue for many cities across the globe. Factors within different communities, including rates of poverty and political instability, have a direct effect on human trafficking rates.
- o Cities are developing multi-layered approaches to tackling this issue. Efforts include engaging the local Health and Safety Department to help identify trafficking that occurs in the restaurant industry, training health professionals to recognize signs of human trafficking, and creating a dedicated recovery and rehabilitation process for victims.
- o Along with institutional engagement, educating youth and other citizens about how human traffickers approach potential victims, and how to identify victims is necessary for prevention and reduction.

Two Worlds Meet: Global Awareness Diplomatic Panel

- o Although SCI focuses on citizen diplomacy, linking citizen diplomacy to official public diplomacy efforts is necessary to create change, while sustaining citizen diplomacy programs.
- o To highlight this intersection, former Ambassador to Qatar, Mr. Chase Untermeyer moderated a Friday morning plenary panel consisting of consuls, and high-level diplomats from China, Japan, Russia, Ghana and Germany.
- o Citizen diplomacy creates a base from which official diplomacy can be conducted. The emphasis on personal connections and friendships allow strong, informal bonds to form. Upon forming these bonds, new business, cultural, and youth opportunities can be explored. Engaging official diplomacy can legitimize these efforts, and the expertise of career diplomats can aid in program design and effectiveness.
- o Citizen diplomacy is important as it addresses local needs and interests. In turn, official diplomacy can be adjusted, along these lines, to better serve the needs of communities.



"Cities Mean Business"

Promoting Arts and Culture

- o Art and culture are central to expanding cross-cultural understanding and peace. Art acts as a universal language and vehicle for cultural interaction. Moreover, art and culture pave the way for economic and youth programming. SCI recognizes and promotes the power of the arts in all facets of programming.
- o Art and culture are the foundation of the community. Through them, communities share common values and aspirations. The arts represent a unique opportunity to bring communities together and share similarities and differences within them. Furthermore, communities are dynamic and arts and culture reflect and respond to this dynamism.
- o Arts and culture festivals preserve traditional culture and techniques. These festivals provide a source of revenue for folk artists, while pushing their craft into the public consciousness.
- o The Arts engage all ages, cultures, and ethnicities. The arts also allow for dialogue on tough issues.



Stimulating Business and Trade

- o Business and trade is a core part of SCI programming and is an important consideration for member communities. Much like programming in other areas, SCI encourages comprehensive and sustainable economic development.
- o The Fourth U.S.–China Mayors' Summit centered on sustainable development. Panels and discussions covered a wide range of topics, including innovation, smart cities, Sister-Port relationships, educational exchanges, and how to energize sister city relationships.
- o At the Annual Conference, sessions on Dynamic Cities and Entrepreneurs helped outline strategies for cultivating innovation and entrepreneurship in cities of various sizes. Promoting education and emerging industries, while advocating open communication between city governments and entrepreneurs lays the foundation for innovation.
- o SCI recognizes unconventional ways of promoting economic development, through sports and e-sports. Sports exchanges encourage tourism, engagement with a variety of age groups, while also building teamwork and leadership skills. E-sports refers to electronic sports, or video games, and in recent years, it has become \$1 billion industry in the United States. E-sports can bring revenue to a community in much the same way that a traditional sporting event or exchange does, with the added ability to reach a wider audience due to the medium.



Inclusive Programming: Youth and Underserved Populations

- o Promoting world peace through individuals and communities requires reaching out to all people, regardless of ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, and geography.
- o The YLS agenda focused on hands-on skill development for youth delegates around entrepreneurship, STEM, innovation, diplomacy, and leadership. 132 students from six countries attended YLS from July 16th-19th. The YLS agenda focused on hands-on skills development for the youth around entrepreneurship, STEM, innovation, diplomacy and leadership. In addition to these informative sessions, cultural presentations exposed students to a variety of cultures. NextGen programming is vital to sustaining citizen diplomacy while giving NextGen members the skills they need to navigate the world.
- o Building off events at the 2018 Annual Conference, more sessions highlighting Women's leadership and the unique challenges faced by women leaders. The "Sports Diplomacy" panel highlighted efforts to involve girls and women in basketball and other growing sports. Our Women Mean Business panel explored the unique challenges faced by women leaders in the private sector.

Serving our Members

Sister Cities International is nothing without our members, and the Annual Conference is an opportunity to offer multiple avenues of support to our members.

- o This year, SCI is launching the new City Connection Marketplace, to redefine how cities, communities, and individuals form relationships. The Marketplace reaffirms the concept of multilateral connections, a network, rather than bilateral connections. The Marketplace encourages the formation of multiple points of contact and interaction, increasing communication quality, program quality, and program efficiency.



- o SCI expanded the Annual Conference "How-To" series, adding more topics and sessions. Overall, this year's "How-To" track focused on providing integrated and comprehensive support to members. The sessions touched on recruiting and training volunteers; demonstrating value to politicians; doing city self-assessments; engaging young professionals and NextGens; exploring tools for small cities; preparing students for foreign exchanges, fundraising and event planning; initiating relationships with local businesses and non-profits; and using social media.
- o SCI's State Representatives play a crucial role in connecting members and facilitating communication from the national office. Twenty-two Representatives attended the Annual Conference, an ode to their dedication and hard work in cultivating the Sister City network.

Celebrating a Legacy of Peace

SCI is honored to continue the legacy of peace created by President Eisenhower, with the participation of three Presidential families in the 2019 Annual Conference:

- o President George W. Bush, former Sister Cities International Honorary Chairman, engaged with Roger-Mark De Souza, SCI's President and CEO, in a "fireside chat" which covered the importance of having a global perspective, decision-making, and the inseparability of citizen diplomacy and international relations.
- o Merrill Eisenhower Atwater, CEO of People-to-People International and grandson of President Dwight Eisenhower, gave a keynote address to Conference attendees. In his speech, he argued that citizen diplomacy and being globally aware are civic duties.
- o SCI presented Kathleen Kennedy Townsend with the 2019 Eisenhower Peace Prize, for her dedication to promoting mutual respect, peace and understanding in her work. She emphasized the importance of SCI's mission, adding that SCI's "bipartisan commitment to working across cultures, languages and countries...is the best way to build more peaceful and productive societies."

Our Path Forward: Service-oriented and Member-driven

Key events inspired by field engagement and regional conferences



- o To promote closer bilateral ties, inspire programming, and form partnerships, we are hosting a U.S. – Mexico Summit in El Paso and Ciudad Juarez in February 2020 which serves as a continuation of the 2018 U.S. – Mexico Summit in Guadalajara, and the U.S. – Mexico Mini Summit at the 2019 Annual Conference.
- o We will host a second conference in the U.S. – Japan Leadership Series. The conference, which will take place in Tokyo in November 2020, will aim to strengthen the relationships build at the 2019 Texas – Japan Leadership Symposium.



Documenting our impact: Storytelling

- o We strive to show how our work affects individuals, communities, and countries. By learning from our members and telling their stories, we can show the pivotal role SCI plays in forging peace and stability.

Diversifying our network

- o We are engaging new countries and regions to expand our network geographically.
- o We are placing new emphasis on NextGen outreach and youth engagement in order to address future global issues.
- o At SCI, we believe that diversity, equity and inclusion are the only way to achieve our mission. Thus we are looking to expand our volunteer base, by bringing in people have traditionally not been involved in SCI.

Serving our members

- o We rely heavily on our members at SCI. As such, we are aiming to add several new member services, including raising awareness about grant opportunities, member spotlights, and providing members with best practices.
- o Citizen diplomacy, like public diplomacy, is influenced by ongoing global issues. We are tracking ongoing issues and events, responding to them, and addressing them in real-time through the established relationships and expertise in our network.
- o Because our members are so important, we want to learn from them. We are analyzing what members are doing, what has, and has not worked in programming, and how members create relationships within their communities.



Thank you for your support for our honored guest



Thank you for your support and partnership



中华人民共和国驻休斯敦总领事馆
CONSULATE-GENERAL OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA IN HOUSTON



Stephen T. Quigley

Elizabeth and Hank Pitcher

Yasuhiko and Akemi Saitoh

Our Impact



Leveraged the support of over



who led more than 2,000 sister city events in the United States

Trained



ages 14-18
at our annual
Youth Leadership Summit

Created approximately



Involved more than



Provided over



Allowed over



to network in person at
our annual conference