



For over half a century sister city relationships have been avenues for the exchange of arts, culture education, and expertise, and have helped form lasting bonds of friendship between U.S. citizens and people from around the world. While organizations initially focused on these areas, in recent years sister city programs have expressed more interest in incorporating economic development into their sister city programs. For local communities, sister city relationships are an international bridge for businesses to expand and help spur growth, as well as increase communication between citizens and raise the profile of their city as an international destination. Engaging in economic development activity, whether through trade delegations, import and export initiatives, or business partnerships, does not mean giving up the important cultural, educational and social activity upon which these relationships have been built. Instead it complements your other activities by including another part of civic life, helps provide a tangible benefit for your community, and can be a milieu for even more cultural, educational, and social activities. By expanding the scope of your work you are broadening the base of support for your sister city relationship as well as playing a more active role in the economic health of your community and in your sister city.

The role of a sister city organization is, at its heart, to act as a **facilitator** and **convener**. Sister city organizations can bring together members of a community, including representatives from local government, business, education, and industry sectors to nurture relationships that are mutually beneficial for all participants as well as both cities. You do not need to be an expert in international trade or economic exchange—your job is to start the conversation and include the people that are the experts. Business cannot be forced, and once potential partners are brought together you must have faith that they will use their expertise to evaluate any potential opportunities and make deals if it's in the best interest of each community.

Business ventures and trade do not preclude the goal of sister city programs—**“to promote peace through mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation—one individual, one community at a time.”** Many of the activities that sister city organizations already perform, whether cultural festivals, municipal exchanges, art exhibit exchanges, or delegation visits, already bring economic benefit to communities. We hope that the following document will encourage you to seek the mutual benefit that economic development **provides, and help your sister city program utilize your city's citizens and resources to deepen the ties between you and your sister cities.**



GETTING STARTED

You do not need to be a businessperson or trade guru to help your sister city organization incorporate economic development into your work. With some basic internet research and phone calling you can **begin to build the network and knowledge you'll need to get started.**

The following three steps—identifying partners, reaching out, and setting up a meeting—are meant to assist you in finding the right people in your community and bringing them together to discuss how you can collaborate on new or existing activities. Remember, your job is to facilitate this meeting and bring people together in a constructive and purposeful way, not to negotiate international trade deals.

IDENTIFYING YOUR PARTNERS

If you hope to efficiently and productively adopt economic development as one of your sister city organization's core activities you would be wise to first take stock of your city's ROPE: Resources, Organizations, Projects/Plans, and Events.

Once you understand which individuals and groups exist in your city that can provide knowledge and resources, your organization will be better positioned to not only pursue business and trade activity, but also to expand the base of your membership to involve new sectors and individuals. **Expanding your membership in this way can increase your organization's exposure to people who could play an important role in business and trade activity in the future.**

The best way to collect information on your ROPE is to brainstorm with your fellow sister city members. **Most contact information for organizations can be found online. Start with a few "linking pin"** organizations and ask about other organizations who you might get involved with. Keep in mind though that with larger organizations (like universities or municipal governments) there may be multiple **departments you should talk to who normally don't communicate with one another. For these types of organizations we recommend reaching out to more than one contact.** Remember that you are always more likely to get information about an organization, program, or event if you have been referred by a trusted source. Start with the Chamber of Commerce for local business and economic development contacts, your local library or tourism office for cultural groups/events, your school board and/or university, as well as the mayor's office and municipal office for economic development. Check



organizational websites for events, programs, and links, but remember that there is most likely some information you won't be able to find on the internet, and you will need to eventually reach out directly.

We recommend starting a spreadsheet with contact information or other relevant information divided into the four areas described below. Please note however that while some resources may have contact information, others (like your climate) will not, but should still be noted since they may be something that will inspire a new type of exchange or be the milieu for a new project.

RESOURCES

In the context of this toolkit, Resources refers to your city's tangible and intangible properties which may attract visitors or businesses and which make your community unique. They might include:

- **Natural Resources-** Things like parks, waterways, nature preserves, and other aspects of local geography form the backbone of your natural resources. Your climate, whether you live in Arizona or Minnesota, should also be considered a 'resource'. These sorts of resources can lead to economic development in a number of ways. They may attract tourists or nature enthusiasts. You may help your local government save money by doing an exchange centered on best practices in watershed/forestry management. You may have joint university research projects focused on your local ecosystem, or dealing with challenges related to your climate.
- **Landmarks and Man-made Structures/Areas-** Make note of any historical neighborhoods, monuments, or other landmarks which have significance for your community. This may also include semi-natural areas like a port, gathering or pedestrian areas like a town square or boardwalk, or event sites like sports fields or amphitheaters.
- **Institutions-** While the next section will discuss organizations which have a specific interest in economic development, your community most likely has a number of other institutions which you'll want to make note of. These may include cultural institutions like libraries, museums, cultural centers, theaters or cinemas, and civic groups like Rotary Clubs, environmental groups, and historical clubs, among others. Other prominent institutions include sports teams, universities and high schools, student groups, prominent restaurants, or any other group that you feel enhances the quality of life in your community.



ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to the institutions you've identified as 'resources' for your community, you should compile a list of organizations which have an explicit interest in promoting economic development in your community, such as:

- **Chamber of Commerce:** This association of businessmen and businesswomen promotes business activity and commercial interests within a community through partnerships with local businesses or other organizations. These associations provide a variety of programs and services for members to facilitate economic growth and cooperation. Chamber of Commerce members often meet to discuss and attempt to shape policy that relates to the business and overall economic climate of their region or community. This association can quickly and directly connect your sister city organization to the major business leaders in your community, as well as use its regular meetings to poll for businesses interested in increasing their foreign trade. You can locate your local chamber by searching online or visiting the U.S. Chamber of Commerce [directory](#).
- **Convention and Visitors Bureau:** These organizations promote a community as a tourist destination, convention site, location for special events, or vacation area. They share information about local lodging sites and businesses, sightseeing locations, dining destinations, and other highlighted features of its city. They can often provide your sister city organization with information about several sectors of your community and can also inform your sister city of characteristics and features unique to your city that might attract more foreign business.
- **City Economic Development Office:** Many if not most cities have an office to plan and develop the city's economic activity and value. This office is responsible for facilitating, promoting, and ensuring community and economic development. It identifies and fosters opportunities, secures funding for economic development activities and programs, and assists businesses and individuals with establishing economic projects that promote the community. If you are wondering where to focus in economic development, this office may help you identify existing plans or initiatives.
- **Manufacturer/Trade Associations:** This may be a network of local businesses that operate in a specific sector, whether it is manufacturing, farming, retail, or service related. These associations are founded and funded by similar businesses in a city or region to provide support, expertise, resources, and advocacy. These associations provide a direct link to business sectors in the community that may get involved in a sister city relationship. Reaching out to trade associations, as opposed to specific businesses, helps you avoid accusations of



playing favorites and may help garner widespread support. As part of their mission many associations aim to bring opportunities to members, and as such they have a vested interest in new programs or opportunities, like sister city programs or international trade.

- **Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs):** These groups are designed to give small businesses tools they need to ensure successful growth in a community. They can act as liaisons to local business owners who may want to get involved with your sister city discussions. To find your local SBDC you can visit their association's website [here](#).
- **Business Incubators:** These are startup initiatives aimed at giving new small businesses a fighting chance in their market by giving them the competitive advantage of discounted services and resources. Local business incubators will also have strong ties to successful small businesses in your city.

PROJECTS AND PLANS

Rather than trying to develop your own strategy for economic development you should try to take advantage of programs and plans that may already be in place.

- **Municipal Economic Development Plans:** Many cities develop multi-year economic development plans with specific goals, metrics, partners, and strategies. This type of plan is **most commonly developed, unsurprisingly, by a city's office for economic development.** This will give you an idea of what sectors the city is trying to help grow, what partners they are enlisting, where they are allocating resources, etc. As you try to convince the city to put more effort and resources into your sister city program it will be helpful if you can point to initiatives where you see your organization getting involved, rather than trying to encourage the city to adopt a new initiative.
- **University Initiatives:** Most universities have multi-year plans for expanding their courses, learning opportunities, and partnerships. Do they have particular goals for enrolling international students? Are they expanding the places that they offer study abroad? Do they have structured internship programs you can take advantage of?
- **Exchange Programs:** In addition to university study abroad programs, many high schools and civic groups have their own exchange programs, often tied to language instruction. You might also check with local faith-based groups which do service-oriented travel.
- **Corporate Social Responsibility/Business Exchange:** Many corporations have corporate social responsibility programs that allow employees to donate their time and expertise to worthy



causes, sometimes through international travel. They may also host employees from international offices or send their own employees abroad to develop skills or build contacts.

- **Hospitals:** Some hospitals and clinics perform medical missions abroad, along with training programs for nurses and doctors.
- **International Visitor Programs:** The U.S. State Department sends thousands of international visitors to cities around the U.S. every year through various exchange programs. Contact your local World Affairs Council or Center for International Visitors to see what programs and activities they may already have in place.

EVENTS

Most of the nonprofits, private organizations, and municipal bodies mentioned in the previous sections hold scheduled events which your sister city program may get involved in, including:

- **Festivals:** Music, art, film, and cultural festivals are some of the most common events that sister city programs participate in. Remember to include festivals held by faith-based groups, business associations, cultural associations, or other local institutions.
- **Holidays:** Most cities have special events associated with federal and state holidays throughout the year. Consult with your municipal government about these events, as well as local historical associations.
- **Sports Events and Tournaments:** Local sports events, whether associated with high schools, universities, or private clubs, may be attractive to international partners, or be a place where you can add value from your sister city program.
- **Conventions:** Consult your local convention and visitors bureau or hotel association to learn more about conferences or conventions coming to town.
- **University Events:** Universities often have fairs for various organizations, as well as events aimed specifically at international students.

OUTREACH

Contacting potential local partners will begin the discussion of economic development and exchange. Your sister city organization's job is to 1) help inform others in the community about your sister city program and 2) start a conversation among these partners. **Your initial call should NOT be to ask for a commitment or request a space/role for your organization**, rather, your goal should be to gather background information on your city's businesses, institutions, and revenue generating events and programs.



After doing initial research online to gather contact information you should prepare for initial outreach. We recommend developing a one page informational sheet for your program if **you don't already have** one. This should include:

- A list of your current sister cities
- Mission Statement/brief description of your goals
- Highlights from recent programs
- Contact information

While you will be explaining most of this to your contacts over the phone you want to provide them with something they can distribute around the office that will present your organization accurately. You can use Sister Cities International's [resources](#) on sister city programs to give them an overview of what sister cities are, our history, and the general types of activities that can be done.

We recommend using a script to help organizations and individuals (especially if multiple members of your program will be making calls). During your call you should include:

- Brief (1-2 min) overview of what sister cities are and what your local program does
- Mention that you are just doing initial outreach to local organizations to let them know about your activities and make contact
- Ask about any activities or programs they do with an international focus
- Ask about any community/public events
- Let them know that you may follow up with them in the future about opportunities to collaborate
- Make sure you confirm who should be the appropriate contact, and get a name, phone number, and email address
- Send a follow up email thanking them for their time and providing informational documents on your program

Before you set up future meetings with any of these organizations you will want to organize and review any information you received from them, particularly **any programs and plans**. As an organization you'll want to make note of which institutions, goals, sectors, and events seem most opportune.



SETTING UP A MEETING

Once you have contacted all of your key partners, the next step is to bring them together. It is very important to make a strong first impression in the initial meeting (in fact, one might argue that making a strong first impression is the real goal of an initial meeting). Be ready to answer specific questions about your sister city organization and your goals.

You do not want to have a sprawling meeting with representatives from a dozen different organizations. Start small, and focus on organizations with a specific economic development focus. You can have additional meetings later with potential **cultural partners or educational partners**, but as you're orienting your organization for economic development it might be best to first talk with those in the field. You also do not want every member of your organization as a participant in the meeting. **Those attending don't** need to hear testimonials from over a dozen of your members. There should be an official spokesperson for your organization to speak on your behalf, and you may have one or two other members of your leadership, but this should not be **considered an "open meeting" of your organization**. **Since no major decisions should be made during this initial meeting** you won't have to worry about your representative making commitments on behalf of the organization.

Make sure all participating parties are clear about the goals and purpose of the meeting. You are not making an "ask," you are convening a **brainstorming conversation to generate interest and ideas**. Prepare a clear, concise agenda to present to all participants prior to and during the meeting. The agenda should include:

- Start and end time
- List of attendees/invitees
- Order of discussion topics
- Planned time for open discussion

We recommend that, at a minimum, your discussion topics should include 1) a discussion of your current activities that other organizations/individuals can participate in and/or incorporate economic development; 2) a discussion of any of their programs/plans in which your sister city organization can participate/add value; 3) ways attendees think that you can incorporate economic development into your activities/partnerships. Please remember that you are unlikely to get any hard commitments out of this first meeting. Your main goal is to begin the conversation, build relationships, and help spread the



word among local leadership about your sister city activities. Your meeting should last no longer than an hour and a half.

Be prepared to show business leaders how a sister-city partnership can be beneficial to local businesses as well as the community as a whole. It can be helpful to provide examples of the kinds of activities that other sister city organizations around the country have engaged in, to illustrate some of the possibilities. The role of your sister-city organization during this meeting is to *facilitate discussions among leaders in your community*, not necessarily to develop projects by yourself and pitch them to others. When presented with the sister city model, most people, whether in business, education, arts, **municipal government, etc.** will first think “What type of exchange would /do in a sister city program?” Your role is to educate them about sister cities, spark their interest, help them as they develop ideas, solicit feedback and ideas, and support their inclusion in your program.

Although the goal of this meeting is to convene a brainstorming session among the various community partners that attend, it is always a great idea to *designate a meeting facilitator to guide the discussion*. This person can be a sister city member or anyone familiar with your program but it should be someone who has a background in business or municipal government. An experienced individual will help keep the meeting focused and productive and give your sister city organization added credibility to those in attendance. This may be a retired businessperson, a representative from municipal government, or some other individual with substantial leadership experience. Ideally it is someone that can speak knowledgably about both sister cities and business. Remember that during the meeting it is not always productive to simply propose various ideas or activities and ask individuals to **participate; most will be reluctant to make hard commitments, and once a person gives you a hard “no” it’s difficult to go back and pursue their involvement.**

NEXT STEPS

Your meeting should guide you in your next steps. These may include:

- Determining which organizations or institutions are enthusiastic about the sister city model
- Answering questions from local organizations about your sister city partners, what sort of contacts you have abroad, and what your goals are
- Identifying existing events by participants where your organization can be integrated quickly or easily, or where you can promote the sister city organization to the community



- Developing a permanent or ad hoc committee from interested attendees to help incorporate economic development into sister city activities, whether for a particular partnership or across all sister cities
- Having attendees attend regular sister city meetings, or participate in your upcoming events
- Determining general goals **for your sister city's economic development activities**
- Creating a report/minutes to provide to your local government about the meeting, participants, purpose, and future plans

Some organizations may not be as interested in sister cities; you should focus on the ones that *are*. Arrange one-on-one follow up meetings with organizations with which you identified possible areas for collaboration. Some attendees may be willing to serve as ad hoc advisors or experts for your sister city organization, even if they do not want to take a leadership role.

Remember: incorporating economic development into your sister city program is not just about doing a few activities; it is about expanding the infrastructure of your program. This means new people, new plans, and new considerations. Do not expect to have activities ready after a day, a week, or even a month. This is the first step in the process of building a new limb of your program, and like most program areas you will have to start small and grow over the years.

In future toolkits Sister Cities International will highlight different types of economic development your program can pursue, how your organization can help structure trade delegations, and university partnerships for economic development. Be sure to also visit **Sister Cities International's Members** section on its website for templates associated with this toolkit as well as other helpful resources. If you have any questions or comments please contact us at membership@sistercities.org.

