



## **SISTER CITIES—AT THE CUTTING EDGE OF ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

**Global Trends Put Sister Cities in Leadership Role**

**The Role of Sister Cities in Economic and Community Development**

**Suggestions for Successful Economic and Community Development Projects**

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## Global Trends Put Sister Cities in Leadership Role

Four major, interrelated trends taking place at a rapid rate in the world today put Sister Cities International (SCI) and its enormous global network of twinned communities at the forefront for facilitating economic and community development at home and abroad:

- **Increased decentralization and democratization.** With the end of the Cold War, there is an accelerating trend toward greater decision-making at the regional, state, and local levels. In China, Russia, America, Africa, Europe, and many other countries/regions, the local identity of communities is being celebrated. Towns and cities want to make their own direct links with communities in other nations for the sake of trade, tourism, friendship, and/or to help internationalize their local communities. These efforts encourage a worldwide perspective and help secure the international contacts necessary to compete in a global economy.
- **Privatization, growth of the non-governmental (NGO) or private voluntary (PVO) sector, and unique public/private partnerships.** At the highest levels of governmental leadership, the voices of municipalities are being heard. In the United States, governors and mayors want fewer un-funded mandates from the federal government, and local governments and community-based NGOs and PVOs worldwide are playing a greater role in international affairs.
- **The revolution in communications and reduced travel time.** There are scores of examples of how high-tech communications technology is shrinking our world and enabling it to become interconnected. Through cellular phones linked to satellite networks, villages in developing countries without electricity can now communicate with any part of the globe; through the internet and e-mail, communities can communicate with one other without the expense, and in some cases, the hardship of physical travel. In addition, reduced travel time and cost make possible the face to face meetings of thousands of people for sister city exchanges or projects focused on education, joint-business ventures, performing arts exchanges, municipal training, and many other topics.
- **Globalization is having an impact on all levels of our society and economy—the nation, state, city, neighborhood, family, companies and individual citizens.** Globalization of our communities and economy is taking place, with its inevitable positive and challenging aspects. New networks and types of interaction lead to creative business partnerships, heart-warming friendships, and meaningful exchanges of ideas that improve our quality of life. On the other hand, exposure to people from other cultures (and new ideas), whether they are guest workers who overstay their visas or legal immigrants, business partners or trade competitors, can also create tensions and apprehension about the future. *SCI, with its enormous global network of citizen groups, local and national governments, and businesses working locally and abroad, is in a unique position to facilitate contacts that make a real difference in people's lives, while also providing companies, citizens and city officials with strategies for how to survive and prosper in a sustainable way in a global economy.*

## **The Role of Sister Cities in Economic and Community Development**

Sister city programs, and the details of their projects, provide irrefutable evidence that sister city links have both positive and long-lasting effects on international development. There are myriad examples of how sister city partnerships are playing a crucial role in economic and community development in both the local and global arena. Here is a brief summary:

- ★ **Increased tourism.** More than 100,000 people travel abroad under the sister cities umbrella, spending more than \$60 million annually on travel and related expenses. Some communities and companies depend on tourism as their main economic foundation, clearly benefiting from the increased business sister city exchanges and projects generate. Fort Worth (Texas), for example, estimates that their sister city programs bring in nearly \$2 million in trade and tourism each year.
- ★ **Reliable business contacts.** Sister city affiliations at the local level, with the added benefit of being a part of an enormous global sister cities network, provide access to invaluable information regarding business projects that succeed in different regions of the world, and contacts for possible joint ventures. This is all part of existing, long-term community partnerships that have established trust, respect and good communication. These are necessary prerequisites for any business partnership to succeed, especially in an international setting.
- ★ **Cross-cultural expertise.** Perhaps you've heard this joke: "What do you call someone who can speak two languages? *Bilingual*. Three languages? *Trilingual*. What do you call someone who can't speak any foreign languages? *An American*."

Unfortunately, this joke has a strong element of truth to it. Hundreds of sister city activists nationwide, however, are helping to gradually break down this stereotype. At the local level, broad-based sister city committees include businessmen and women, teachers, city officials and professors with language and cross-cultural expertise in various regions of the world. At the national level, SCI is in touch with such experts in every state and facilitates networking among them through grant programs, SCI publications, and high-quality conferences, including SCI's Annual Conference.

- ★ **Forums for discussing complex global trade and development issues.** Through local level meetings (community-based or state-wide), as well as SCI's Annual Conference, open forums are provided to bring grassroots volunteers, citizen groups, businesses and organizations together to discuss and find solutions to many complex global issues. These networking opportunities create profitable and long-lasting alliances between different groups as they tackle issues such as urban sprawl, climate change, literacy, public safety, drug and alcohol addiction, and more.
- ★ **Legitimacy: community-wide and city hall support.** Businesses that wish to expand the markets for their products and services, or become involved in the sponsorship of outstanding international projects often face three problems: lack of contacts, insufficient cross-cultural expertise in the target city or region, and lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the international counterpart. Therefore, small business joint ventures, business internships, consulting work, overseas investment, micro-enterprise development, technology transfer or group tours that work through existing sister city partnerships at the local level and through SCI's national office have many advantages. They take place with the official sanction of local government and national level governmental and non-governmental authorities in both countries (legitimacy); they have access to cutting-edge information about the

culture, geography, and language of the target community (cross-cultural expertise); they gain invaluable contacts that can be the crucial element in a project actually getting off the ground (negotiating through bureaucracies, for example); and they take place in an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect, and good communication built up over the years by dedicated citizens and city officials on both sides.

In this way, any economic development projects that are undertaken with the approval of the sister city programs will be more likely to succeed because of the long-term support network that is in place and more likely to be of genuine benefit to both communities, since each side is involved, in terms of energy, interest, and resources, at every step – brainstorming, planning, execution and follow-up.

★ **Improved community and company image.** Sister city programs involve both city hall and the various diverse elements that make up every community, including business people, educators, medical professionals, engineers, ethnic/cultural associations, civic clubs like the Chamber of Commerce, and private voluntary organizations like the YMCA. *Cities throughout the nation, such as Toledo, Tulsa, Louisville and Chicago, have discovered that their very active, high-profile sister city programs have truly put them on the world map; their programs have helped improve their community's image and brought major conferences to their cities.*

A number of sister city programs nationwide were founded as a direct result of economic ties that were created through trade or the building of new factories; the solid sister city programs that grew from these economic ties have helped the companies involved become an integral part of their new communities, improving their corporate image. At the national level, the Reader's Digest Association, Inc. and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation have sponsored cutting edge grant programs administered by SCI for youth exchange that combined cross-cultural learning with community service, thus promoting greater global awareness and the habit of volunteering (community service) among youth worldwide. These programs, as with business internships, also provide young people with the skills necessary to secure good jobs in a global economy.

Sister city programs, which interface with so many different sectors of the community, help bring people together within communities (which also leads to increased business and contacts) while also being a positive force for social change abroad. LaCrosse, Wisconsin, for example, which has a very successful, broad-based affiliation with Dubna, Russia, reports that their "Hands Across the Heartlands" humanitarian assistance campaign, which shipped over 200 tons of food, clothing, and medicine in response to a short-term crisis in Dubna, brought businesses, churches, citizens, and city officials together in both communities who had never worked together before, generating considerable civic pride. "We have emphasized that what we (did) is not charity, but family," reports the LaCrosse-Dubna Sister City Committee.

## Suggestions for Successful Economic and Community Development Projects

- ✓ **Broad-based participation.** Broad-based participation makes project success more likely. The best sister city programs involve a wide variety of citizens and city officials, representing city hall, civic clubs, ethnic/cultural groups, the media, the non-profit sector, small and large business firms, local schools and colleges, the healthcare and engineering fields, and so on. The more democratic and open the process is with regards to discussing and implementing economic development projects, the more support there will be at all levels (public and private sector) to see the project through to a successful completion.
- ✓ **A good balance of realistic thinking and big dreams.** Be realistic—take the time that is needed to do the project right, including adequate time for planning, fundraising, building consensus, troubleshooting, execution and follow-up. But don't be afraid to have big dreams either, like Palo Alto, which took on the ambitious goal of planting 250,000 trees in its heavily deforested sister city, Oaxaca, Mexico, by the year 2000. The multi-faceted project has involved schools, companies, the media, local and national governments, and many volunteers on both sides.
- ✓ **Sustainable development.** Sustainable development refers to the environment and to the impact of development on people's lives. With regards to the environment, the project should meet the test of the Native American saying: "Will it make possible the same quality of clean air, water, and landscape—to the 'seventh generation?'" As for people, will the proposed project help empower those who need help, or make them dependent on outside aid? If new technology is used, is it "appropriate?" Can it be replaced or serviced easily? Does it fit with the cultural traditions and skill levels of the people who will use it? Is the proposed project something people in the target community regard as a priority—or are the ideas, energy, and resources coming almost entirely from outside?
- ✓ **Deep cross-cultural understanding and experience.** The key people involved in promoting, planning and executing a particular project overseas must learn everything they can (and rely on experts as well) about the target culture—history, language, geography, customs, religion, governmental system, and so on. Also, don't expect that words or concepts mean the same thing, even if your counterparts can speak English fluently or you use high-quality translators. Words as simple as "yes" or "understand" may have very different connotations depending on the culture, speaker, and/or timing. Critical concepts such as "economic development," "privatization" or "contract" may have very different interpretations or meanings. *Make sure you are talking about the same things and have the same ideas in mind.*
- ✓ **Listening and two-way learning builds strong relationships.** One development expert once made the comment that Africa has received more advice per capita than any region of the world—yet much/most of this advice and top-down aid has not resulted in progress at the grassroots level. Outside interventions, with regard to new technologies, investment, or training are often needed, but many years of experience have shown that the most critical skill, when working abroad in the economic or community development field, is the ability to *listen* to the "target group" concerning their dreams, vision, abilities, interests and know-how. This is easier said than done; but when it is done correctly, the full support and resources of the community involved will be utilized, greatly enhancing the chances for success. SCI, based on the idea of long-term, broad-based partnerships

which involve educational, cultural, and municipal exchanges in addition to economic/community development projects, is in an ideal position to reinforce the second key element in a successful cross-cultural exchange or project, be it a major joint venture or a sports exchange—an attitude of *two-way, reciprocal learning, based on mutual respect and interest.*

- ✓ **Who benefits? Why? When? In what way? For how long?** Power relationships are a fact of life in all societies. Who has power? Power is not just money, but also access to information, legal rights and authority to make decisions and have them carried out. Even when a given project is very much needed and extremely popular on all sides, there will be some who are jealous or who may in fact actually lose status, money, or power as a result of changes that are made. As much as is possible, make sure that the project that is being contemplated becomes, both in terms of perception and deed, a “win-win” situation for all.
- ✓ **Trouble-shoot.** The best plans and most dedicated of efforts can be undone or nullified, especially when it comes to working in a foreign environment, by lack of attention to critical details such as visas (which can ruin plans for the visit of an official delegation), the safety of participants, or screening of and orientations for those traveling abroad. Other cultural/socio-economic factors (among many) that may cause trouble are rules and procedures for transferring money, small bribes that may be an inevitable part of doing business or attention to hierarchical relationships (Who is in charge? Who has seniority?). Also, what happens if the very supportive mayor is not re-elected, or the key volunteer or investor drops out? Does the project have enough support to survive changes in the political winds or a drop in the value of the currency being used?
- ✓ **“Economic development” is a complex web of interaction.** Successful “economic development,” if it is to truly benefit both communities over the long-term, is a complex web of interactions. New balances of power between the public and private sectors or between different levels of governmental authority may need to be formed. The need for municipal training or business internships to provide the necessary attitudes and skills to work with a new technology or to understand new types of public/private partnership may be called for. Scholarships for low-income or minority groups to provide equal opportunity, including access to resources and important information and/or changes in laws that make it easier for women to participate, non-profit groups to form, or businesses to operate efficiently may need to be enacted. Involvement of a variety of people and organizations so the skills and resources of a cross-section of the community is necessary—city hall, private sector, non-profit (private voluntary sector), individuals, and more should be developed.
- ✓ **A sense of humor, patience, and determination.** There are always surprises in cross-cultural encounters—that’s what makes them fun, frustrating, and/or very rewarding, in the long run. Don’t be surprised if you have to revise the original timetable, include new players after you thought you had an agreement, or even set aside a small amount of money in your budget for greasing the right palms to make sure goods and people move safely and on schedule. If you don’t cultivate patience and a sense of humor, the frustration when working closely with people from another culture can be great. If you are in it for the long term, however, with the right skills and resources, the rewards can be great – and the process itself fun.