By engaging on the international stage, mayors, county leaders, governors, and other local officials can positively shape global affairs and bring the benefits of foreign policy back home — whether it be attracting greater overseas investment and jobs, exchanging ideas to resolve key community issues, developing a better understanding of their diasporas, or fostering opportunities for constituents to travel and engage globally.

Most U.S. cities and states do not have the resources, staff, or institutional knowledge to effectively engage globally. Moreover, international work may invite scrutiny as it is not yet accepted practice for local leaders to serve their communities through global action.

The U.S. Department of State is helping communities meet this challenge through the Subnational Diplomacy team, which leads the Department’s engagement with local officials in the United States and abroad. Our job is to be local leaders’ “front door” to the State Department, creating a direct link between community leaders who are doing the important, on-the-ground work and Department experts and resources.
For solutions to global problems, look to the local level.

Mayors, governors, county leaders, and other local officials in the United States and around the world are on the frontlines of some of the biggest global challenges — from tackling extreme weather, lowering carbon emissions, and addressing pandemics to creating opportunities for economic development, building equity, defending democracy, and settling refugees.

“Cities are the engines of opportunity and ingenuity in the United States,” said Secretary of State Antony Blinken when he addressed the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 2023, becoming the first U.S. Secretary of State to do so. “They are where challenges tend to emerge first, and solutions are often forged quickest.”

We know that local leaders have solutions and we want to listen to their priorities. To that end, Secretary Blinken appointed me as the first Special Representative for City and State Diplomacy and established the Subnational Diplomacy team in October 2022.

We help U.S. cities and states bring the benefits of foreign policy back home.

My team engages with mayors, governors, and other local leaders to connect them with opportunities to go global.

We focus on what local leaders are most interested in: solving global challenges that impact their residents, creating new jobs by engaging with the world, and finding international opportunities for their young people. For example, my team is working to make the process of identifying trade and investment opportunities more transparent. This year, we organized a webinar on how to best attract foreign direct investment (FDI) that brought together some of the top FDI cities with federal experts.

Additionally, we are raising awareness about exciting opportunities for young people through the Department’s international educational and cultural exchange programs, paid internships and fellowships, and the Virtual Student Federal Service program. We have organized a pilot initiative with 10 U.S. mayors from small, medium, and large cities to help them encourage students in their city to apply to the Gilman program, which enables students of limited financial means to study or intern abroad. We have
participated in over 30 speaking engagements at academic institutions, civil society organizations, and nonprofits to amplify student programs and discuss their benefits to U.S. communities, economies, and citizens. In 2023, we connected with over 1,200 high school, undergraduate, and graduate students.

My team links mayors and governors with overseas counterparts and global networks of cities and regions to exchange ideas that can contribute solutions to some of the world’s most challenging problems. We encourage U.S. local leaders to engage with the Department, providing them with capacity, guidance, and greater connectivity to foreign cities and states. We also provide background briefings for local and state leaders on international engagements, such as global climate negotiations, and we frequently advise those receiving foreign delegations or traveling abroad.

American localities are on the frontlines of navigating climate change, and we aim to highlight the importance of their work to climate policy, while also underscoring how international interactions can both inspire further ambition globally and lead to good learning opportunities for our localities.

As part of our efforts to connect local leaders to international platforms, we organized two briefings on climate and the environment in Fall 2023 — one on plastic pollution in the context of ongoing negotiations for a global plastics treaty and another on global climate negotiations in the lead up to COP28 in Dubai. While in Dubai, we held a public event at the COP28 “U.S. Center” that brought together local U.S. leaders, including several mayors and a governor, alongside top White House officials and private sector representatives, to discuss the importance of local action and ambition in addressing the climate crisis. This fall, we also led the efforts for U.S. participation in a G7 roundtable on subnational climate policy. Furthermore, we helped launch the Cities Forward Initiative. This Initiative, announced at the inaugural Cities Summit of the Americas, pairs U.S. cities with counterparts in Latin America and the Caribbean to facilitate peer learning, build capacity, and implement sustainable projects that benefit vulnerable or underserved communities.

Accelerating progress on all these fronts requires greater capacity for international affairs at the local level. Cities and states often do not have the staff and resources to engage at the international level. Our team serves as the connective tissue between local officials and thousands of regional and functional experts at the State Department. In addition, the Subnational Diplomacy team has launched the Reta Jo Lewis Local Diplomat Program, which stations foreign and civil service officers in U.S. cities and states, where they leverage their expertise to support local offices in their international affairs work.
How does U.S. foreign policy benefit from the international engagement of cities and states?

Local leaders help the Department of State in several ways:

- They provide us with ground truth about the local repercussions of global issues, such as the impact of a conflict on a diaspora, or how the fentanyl crisis is evolving.

- They identify local solutions and innovations that they and the Department can share with communities in other countries, such as green transportation or recycling programs.

- They represent U.S. interests and values when conducting trade missions and attending global gatherings.

- Most importantly, they tackle global issues with us. For example, every time a local leader decides to take action to reduce carbon, that is an international act of solidarity.

By connecting with local leaders, we ensure that the Department incorporates their perspectives and priorities into the Administration’s foreign policy agenda. In 2024, the Department launched the “Assembly of Local Leaders” (ALL), convening mayors, governors, and other municipal leaders to discuss and address the global matters that impact our local communities, such as the climate crisis, public health, foreign investment and economic development. This informs the Department’s work and brings home the tangible benefits of foreign policy to local communities.

In turn, we are finding ways to engage local leaders in the design of foreign policy. For example, for the first time, the Department of State hosted a summit of cities: the Cities Summit of the Americas in Denver, Colorado this past spring. The Summit brought together more than 2,500 people and 250 mayors — 75 from the United States and 175 from elsewhere in the Americas — to discuss local priorities and how to best implement the commitments made at the Ninth Summit of the Americas in 2022.

Working with city networks, international organizations and other partners, and the State Department’s Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA), we created an “ideas festival” as a platform to address urban challenges. Here, under-represented
voices could discuss issues like climate finance and migration on the same stage as prominent figures such as the president of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the mayor of Mexico City.

Local officials and city networks now recognize what the Subnational Diplomacy team can offer and regularly seek advice and collaboration. The team has fielded hundreds of inquiries, often to connect local leaders with experts across the Department to provide insights and advice.

The answers to many shared global challenges begin at the local level. As subnational diplomacy and global engagement at the city and state level grow around the world, my team at the U.S. Department of State will continue to serve as a direct line to local leaders.

*Explore in the Toolkit the companion article: “Here to Help: The Subnational Diplomacy Team’s Services for Cities and States.”*