How Cities Can Drive International Development Cooperation

Mannheim, a city of 320,000 people, is remarkably diverse. Forty-five percent of the city’s residents are immigrants or the children of immigrants, with roots in 167 different countries. In 2019, Mannheim started using the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a North Star to guide its long-term transformation and measure its progress. Over 2,500 residents and local stakeholders provided input in the city’s process to localize the SDGs and develop a mission statement. One of the seven strategic goals included in Mannheim’s mission statement is a commitment to international cooperation. The support of residents drives the city’s international work, especially development cooperation projects.

Mannheim benefits just as much from its development work as its foreign partners. Global problems are local problems, and the city faces similar challenges to its partners, from flooding to unemployment. By working with other communities to address these shared problems, Mannheim’s municipal experts return to their desks at City Hall with new ideas and perspectives. This enables them to develop better local solutions in Mannheim and to better serve residents.

Summary:

- City diplomacy is not exclusive to megacities. Cities like Mannheim, in southwest Germany, have the world in their DNA. They often turn to their peers and city networks to exchange expertise and lessons and solve shared urban development challenges.

- Development cooperation is a cornerstone of Mannheim’s global engagement strategy. Building on its transformation from an industrial to a green city, and with financial support from the German Federal government, Mannheim cooperates with cities around the world to create a more sustainable future. Cities anywhere can learn from Mannheim’s model to engage in and benefit from city-to-city development cooperation.
In recent years, Mannheim has used its local expertise to implement over a dozen development projects in nine countries. This work is steered by the city’s international team, led by a dedicated municipal development coordinator, in concert with technical experts from across the city administration.

Examples include:
1. Mannheim’s municipal water experts worked with local officials to build a drainage system to reduce flooding in El Viejo, Nicaragua. Initial estimates suggest that 30,000 homes, as well as public infrastructure, are now better protected from flooding. Furthermore, the system has reduced local public health risks associated with standing water.
2. Mannheim’s city planning, geo-information, and citizen engagement experts helped develop public spaces in Chișinău, Moldova and Chernivtsi, Ukraine.
3. Mannheim built an education center for women in Kilis, Türkiye, for both Turkish residents and Syrian refugees. As a result, every year, over 400 women complete vocational training, attend language courses, and receive counseling.

Not only do these projects improve quality of life in local communities, they build long-lasting partnerships between Mannheim and its partners. Through this work, city administration has learned it is critically important to select the right projects from the beginning. To this end, the municipal development coordinator makes sure projects meet the following criteria (based on the mission statement and a resolution on local development cooperation passed by Mannheim’s City Council):

1. There is funding available for the project.
2. There is capacity within City Hall to run the project, both in the international department and among the technical experts who will be involved.
3. The project requires expertise from Mannheim, not only financial support.
4. There is political support from the partner city for the project.
5. The city prioritizes projects with cities with which they already have relationships or where residents already have personal connections.

**How Mannheim secures buy-in and political support locally**

One element central to the success of these cooperation projects is the political support of city leadership, especially the mayor. The city’s international department makes a concerted effort to include the city’s political leadership in these projects, through regular updates and site visits.

Although the city administration’s work is based on the goals enshrined in Mannheim’s mission statement, the international department makes it a priority to secure the explicit political support of the City Council for these cooperation projects. To this end, the department drafted a resolution that outlined an action plan for local development policy. They used this resolution as an opportunity to define local development cooperation—and its scope—as well as the structure of the city’s work. Mannheim’s City Council adopted the resolution, with support from across the political spectrum. Since the resolution was passed, the international department has adopted a proactive approach to communication, delivering
regular reports to the Council about its progress. The department has received positive feedback from
Council members about this outreach. This approach ensures that Council members see themselves as
partners in the department’s efforts and allows the city to coordinate help quickly when partner cities are in
need.

How Mannheim coordinates with civil society

The city administration also recognizes the importance of working closely with civil society and immigrant
communities to ensure the work reflects the interests and priorities of residents. To accomplish this, the
city’s coordinator for development cooperation established Mannheim’s Roundtable for Local
Development Policy. The Roundtable is composed of civil servants, representatives of civil society
organizations, City Council members, and representatives of the city’s Immigrant Advisory Council.
Members of the Roundtable approach their work from different perspectives. One of the group’s first
orders of business was to develop a shared definition of local development cooperation. City officials have
found this shared understanding to be an extremely helpful starting point for cooperation with civil society.

The Roundtable meets regularly to discuss ongoing and potential projects. One of its central goals is to
build on the efforts of civil society actors, and develop connections between civil society in Mannheim and
its partner cities. The city uses these connections with civil society to establish projects that reflect the
interests and connections of residents. For example, Mannheim began work in Kilis, Türkiye after Mannheim
residents originally from the region informed City Hall about the challenges the city was facing as a result
of the Syrian civil war. These personal connections strengthen the city’s work and ensure its international
activities are aligned with the interests and priorities of its residents.

Not only does engaging civil society and immigrant communities benefit the implementation of
development projects, it helps the city administration build connections with these local communities. In
creating local participation processes, the international department builds trust in the city administration
and increases transparency regarding international projects for residents.

How Mannheim funds its work in partnership with the German Federal Government

In recent years, the German Federal Government has increasingly recognized the power of local
development cooperation. The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has
made funding available for municipal development cooperation projects. Mannheim has applied for and
received both project funding and salary support for a project coordinator at City Hall.

Although this is the main source of funding for the city’s development cooperation work, this type of
funding often requires months of grant writing and planning. Sometimes, the city administration needs to
react quickly to crises in partner cities, like after the earthquake in Türkiye or Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In
both of these cases, the connections the city had already built through its projects enabled Mannheim to
raise funds for relief from residents and local organizations. To date, the city has raised €434,000 in aid for
Ukraine and €140,000 to support partners in Türkiye.
The city has also made funding available in the municipal budget for development cooperation projects. In response to the war in Ukraine, Mannheim’s City Council allocated €1,000,000 to provide help not only to Chernivtsi, the city’s partner in Ukraine, but also to partner cities welcoming refugees from the war. With these funds, Mannheim is providing equipment for schools in Bydgoszcz, Poland; winter clothes and food in Chișinău, Moldova; and municipal utility vehicles and buses in Chernivtsi, Ukraine.

**Challenges and the importance of selecting the right projects**

These projects are complex. One of the biggest challenges the city administration faces is political instability in partner municipalities, which can lead to changes in leadership and project personnel. Mannheim’s international department has learned the importance of shoring up political support in partner cities at the beginning of projects. Mannheim first encourages municipal councils in partner cities to pass resolutions committing to project goals and, when possible, co-financing. This ensures that the work can endure any political changes. Mannheim’s international department also recognizes that everyone involved in the project needs to remain flexible, so they plan projects and timelines in a way that accounts for potential challenges.

**A Final Word**

With each project that Mannheim implements, the city builds its understanding of how to put its municipal know-how to use, and how to harness the support of local residents and civil society. Municipal experts bring new ideas and inspiration home with them, allowing the city to serve its residents more effectively. Mannheim and its partners build personal connections between communities lasting long after the project is completed. This is at the heart of what makes these projects so sustainable and unique.

Local development cooperation projects can have a global impact because they are rooted in deep and personal connections and long-term commitments. City-to-city cooperation is already an accelerator of sustainable development globally. National governments and development agencies have much to gain from harnessing the urban development expertise and openness to collaboration of cities.

__This City & State Diplomacy Toolkit compiles a collection of case studies and how-to briefs to support the international engagement and global initiatives of local actors. These short, digestible, and practical briefs are written by local practitioners, city and state leaders, and experts based on their direct experience. If you’re interested in learning more about this brief or wish to connect with the Truman team, please fill in this short survey."

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