



ACTION INSIGHTS

Inter-City Collaboration

When to Partner Up with
Other Cities?

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RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR CITY LEADERS

Inter-city collaborations are on the rise, but what value do they produce for cities? A [study](#) by the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative explores how city leaders can make informed decisions about participation.

Inter-city collaborations (ICCs) have existed throughout history. Before national governments consolidated power, city-states collaborated on security and trade. Today, cities large and small partner up to negotiate waste management contracts, exchange policy ideas, fight a global pandemic, and tackle climate change. By joining forces, cities can achieve economies of scale, learn from each other, solve collective action problems, and amplify their voices on the national and global stages.

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But participating in an ICC is not without costs. City leaders are busy, and their time is a scarce and valuable resource. A [study](#) published in *Global Policy* describes how and why cities collaborate and lays out a framework for understanding the main forms of value ICCs deliver. The findings can help city leaders:

- 1 strategically assess whether joining an ICC makes sense
- 2 leverage the peer-to-peer support that ICC participation can provide
- 3 save money and increase impact by working together.

A Framework for Inter-City Collaboration

Desk review, surveys, and interviews with dozens of city leaders and managers of ICCs in the U.S. and abroad showed that ICCs are widespread, on the rise, and focused on cities' top priorities. Table 1 distinguishes two broad categories. In operational partnerships, cities collaborate to realize growth or cost-saving opportunities via economies of scale. These collaborations can deliver value in the form of regional coordination, shared service delivery, or collective purchasing. In issue-based coalitions, city leaders act collectively to advocate for specific issues. These ICCs promote joint policymaking, learning exchanges, or political movements.

For example, the [Utah Telecommunications Open Infrastructure Agency \(UTOPIA\)](#) is an operational partnership that facilitates shared service delivery. When telecom companies refused to service their area, UTOPIA enabled municipalities in Utah to develop an advanced fiber optic network. [Cities Coalition for Digital Rights](#), on the other hand, is a global issue-based coalition that facilitates learning exchange and helps cities develop policies around access to technology and data security.

A Typology of ICCs

Table 1

	ADVANCE SHARED POLICY GOALS	REALIZE ECONOMIES OF SCALE OR SYNERGY
FORMS	<p>ISSUE-BASED COALITION City leaders collectively act to advocate progress on a specific issue or set of issues</p>	<p>OPERATIONAL PARTNERSHIP Cities partner to realize growth or cost-saving opportunities via economies of scale</p>
TYPES OF VALUE	<p>Joint Policymaking Cities turn commitments into action by scaling effective practices in specific policy domains; often with backbone organizations that co-create and diffuse research</p> <p>Learning Exchange City leaders convene as peer resources to exchange ideas, develop shared perspectives, and explore new collaborations; often coordinated by backbone organizations</p> <p>Political Movement City leaders pledge to protect or advance values important to the future of cities; builds political will for state, federal, or global action on specific issues; may be self-organized or have a backbone organization</p>	<p>Regional Coordination Cities coordinate to address shared economic, transportation, or legislative goals within or across regions; often led by a backbone organization</p> <p>Shared Service Delivery Cities pool their resources to deliver municipal services more efficiently or effectively; usually no backbone organization</p> <p>Collective Purchasing Cities collaborate to magnify their bargaining power in purchasing resources such as water or insurance</p>

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Some ICCs advance strategic priorities that span city limits (e.g., transportation) or require innovation (e.g., broadband access, workforce development). Other ICCs allow cities to lower the cost of services and invest in technology they could not otherwise afford. Still other ICCs allow senior leaders—not just mayors—to learn, network, benchmark, and exchange ideas.

Factors for Success

According to both members and organizers of ICCs, factors for success include shared values, dedicated staff or a backbone organization, and involving city leaders in strategy development. Factors that hinder success include politicization of issues and dependency on the commitment of elected leaders. For example, [C40](#), which began as a climate-change initiative at the Mayor of London’s office, has succeeded in part because it secured independent funding to become its own organization with specialized staff. By contrast, the [Fairfield Five](#), a collaboration of five towns in the suburbs of New York City that worked to draw companies out of the city by showcasing the towns’ assets, had each town designate a staff member and add the ICC to their existing duties. Without dedicated staff, the collaboration ceased.

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Takeaways

Today's city leaders face challenges ranging from inter-generational poverty to climate change, and from public health emergencies to a changing social and political landscape. ICCs give cities the (purchasing) power to punch above their weight, the learning space to create and discover innovative policy solutions, and the organizational vehicle to develop a unified voice in state, national, and global policy debates. On the other hand, city leaders are often stretched thin, and the proliferation of ICCs can add to the stress of competing commitments. Being intentional about joining an ICC, articulating what success looks like and how it will be measured, and recognizing the factors that help and hinder collaborative success can help city leaders determine if becoming a member is in their city's best interest.

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Among other things, city leaders should bear in mind:

Participation in ICCs should be a strategic decision.

Developing a systematic decision framework can help city officials identify what types of ICCs further their agendas and deliver the type of value they seek. Formalizing ICC entry and exit processes within city governments, based on key performance metrics, can make participation less ad hoc and more politically neutral, thereby supporting the long-term viability of ICC involvement. Helsinki, for example, has adopted a strategic method for engaging with ICCs. For narrowly focused issues, they seek out cities of similar size and demographics. To enhance their networks, resources, and influence, they prioritize ICCs with a larger variety of cities.

Peer-to-peer support through ICCs is a big value add.

City officials spoke of the "loneliness of leadership" and the importance of ICCs in facilitating comradery and connection, especially for historically underrepresented people in leadership. The informal collaborations arising from formal networks not only help city leaders feel more supported and understood, but also enable some leaders to make quicker and better-informed decisions in response to emergencies and crises.

Going it alone can be more costly and less impactful.

City leaders described a variety of services made possible and cheaper through ICCs ranging from pension plans for staff to expanded emergency services for constituents. In addition to the potential for cost savings, ICC participation can be a powerful vehicle to amplify a city's voice in state, national, or global policymaking on issues like climate change and economic development.

Further Readings

[“Inter-city collaboration: Why and how cities work, learn, and advocate together”](#)

Global Policy Journal

[“Building Cities’ Collaborative Muscle”](#)

Stanford Social Innovation Review

[“Cross-Boundary Collaborations in Cities: Where to Start”](#)

Stanford Social Innovation Review

[“Design Decisions for Cross-Sector Collaboration: Mini-Case Modules”](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

Action Insights summarize findings from academic research. They offer management and leadership guidance you can put to use in your work, and they link to the underlying studies.

The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, located at the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University, is a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies to equip mayors and senior city officials to tackle complex challenges in their cities and improve the quality of life of their residents.

Launched in 2017, the Initiative has worked with 465 mayors and 2271 senior city officials in 524 cities worldwide. The Initiative advances research and develops new curriculum and teaching tools to help city leaders solve real-world problems. By engaging Harvard graduate students in research and field work, the Initiative supports current city leaders while investing in future generations. The Initiative also advances the field of city leadership through teaching, research, and new curricular materials that help city leaders drive government performance and address pressing social problems.



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