

A Foreign Policy for America's Local Governments: The Northern Virginia Model

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In a July 14 article in the Atlantic, President of the Carnegie Endowment and former Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns argues for a reinvented U.S. foreign policy that connects a just domestic policy and a strong foreign policy. He writes: "American foreign policy must support domestic renewal at home..."

Such a new foreign policy at the national level requires reinvention of how U.S. local governments engage internationally. Frankly, the present approach failed. It relies on an obsolete business model of cultural diplomacy and trade and investment promotion that is ill-suited for the post-COVID-19 world where more responsibilities for meeting economic and social challenges fall on the shoulders of local governments. City and county governments must plan global engagement strategically.

Local governments are more vulnerable than ever to the effects of global warming, energy grid

vulnerabilities, pandemics, and global trade and investment uncertainties. The perfect storm of economic crisis, social unrest, and COVID-19 reveals that most U.S. cities and counties lag far behind many foreign counterparts in education, social inclusion, infrastructure maintenance, renewable energy, and public health. As global connectivity tightens and public demands on services from local governments grow, re-formulating international engagement to meet the new challenges by learning from foreign counterparts is an absolute necessity – not an option.

Larger cities in the U.S. can staff full-time international offices. But, rarely is their work planned or executed in problem-focused, goal-oriented contexts. Few local governments apply filters to prioritize the international partners with whom they work, or identify local issues that global engagement can address. Because part of the international work is often supported by U.S. State Department exchange programs or USAID

development assistance, the image of international work at the local level is that of an arm of U.S. soft power projection.

The reform of local international engagement must start with a focus on how global engagement can strengthen localities' core responsibilities and obligations to deal with present and future local challenges. What is the best structure for local international engagement that encourages transfers of technical and policy lessons from abroad to help U.S. localities meet domestic challenges? It begins with setting priorities for local governments' global affairs. Local legal, political, regulatory, and fiscal realities must shape this international engagement. Localities struggle with an overwhelmingly complex universe of international partners and choices. These include whom to work, the issues, and goals on which to focus, or how to operate. For example, it means looking for ways in which wastewater treatment systems in U.S. cities might economically reduce nitrate emissions. They could draw lessons from Copenhagen or adopt green infrastructure stormwater strategies from Berlin.

For over 20 years, the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC), a regional council of governments representing the 13 localities and 2.5 million people of Northern Virginia, has practiced a unique model of global strategic interaction. This approach is framed around three core elements.

- 1) **NVRC prioritizes only transfers of policy and technical innovations from abroad for adoption in the communities of Northern Virginia.** NVRC's International engagement must lead to a defined or aspirational environmental, economic or social outcome that benefits Northern Virginia's localities. At present, NVRC avoids development assistance and works
- 2) **NVRC filters potential international partners** based on a) pioneering countries with practical lessons to offer Northern Virginia communities and b) economic interconnectedness – specifically foreign direct investment and trade from these countries in Northern Virginia. While imperfect, NVRC draws from state-level (and increasingly, local-level) trade and international direct investment metrics to determine which countries to engage. Existing economic data suggests countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Canada, and Sweden as the nations with the most substantial commercial ties to localities such as Fairfax County or Arlington County. Also, the same countries invested in Northern Virginia have local entities that outperform communities in Northern Virginia in priority areas such as infrastructure, education, and social capital.
- 3) **NVRC relies on its regional academic, commercial, research, and civil society partner organizations to assist with the transfer and adoption process.** Global knowledge transfer at the local level is complicated. It requires the sustained convening of technical and policy experts, elected officials, and practitioners to assess how lessons from overseas can suitably be parked into the unique regulatory, legal, cultural, and technical conditions of Northern Virginia. For this, NVRC regularly turns to its governmental members, research institutions such as

George Mason University, Virginia Tech University, commercial organizations such as Dominion Energy or NGO's such as the Local Energy Alliance Program (LEAP). Such partners assist with the formal search, evaluation, and testing of lessons from overseas into Northern Virginia.

For two decades, NVRC's application of this international model has transformed Northern Virginia's approach to global engagement. Using partnerships in Germany as an example: Bike and pedestrian trail planning in Fairfax has been informed by work in Stuttgart. NVRC helped Arlington County adopt solar energy photovoltaic programs from Bottrop. It helped frame stormwater management programs in the City of Alexandria by drawing lessons from Hamburg and Berlin. Workforce training lessons in Fairfax County and public health practices related to the COVID-19 crisis in Falls Church have been influenced by work in Esslingen and Kiel.

Looking ahead, NVRC will improve its international model to strengthen the region's climate, equity, and economic development priorities in light of the stresses surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic crisis. Climate-resilient strategies such as "green mobile lounges" and "green walls" from Ludwigsburg will be evaluated for potential adoption in Fairfax County and Alexandria. Copenhagen's work to reduce nitrate emissions from wastewater treatment plants, Frankfurt's energy-efficient building designs for data centers, Berlin's food waste mitigation measures, and stormwater-modeling from Stuttgart will be among the priorities for the 2020-2021 period.

NVRC also will sustain work with Virginia Tech and Fairfax and Arlington counties in a precedent-setting effort to map the origins and volume of

foreign direct investment within each localities' boundaries. In Arlington County alone, Germany and Switzerland have invested approximately \$500 million (75% of all foreign direct investment in the County). Moreover, in light of growing attention to social inequality and justice, NVRC aspires to learn lessons concerning the interpretation and memorialization of wounded landscapes from cities such as Berlin and to share them with localities such as Alexandria and Leesburg.

Global events will impact local governments in dramatic and unanticipated ways, as the COVID 19 pandemic has shown. Cities, counties, and towns across the U.S. must proactively plan new structures for engaging in international affairs. Northern Virginia's approach has paid substantial environmental, economic, and social dividends. Just as the U.S. needs a new foreign policy, U.S. localities must reinvent their international engagement. Getting this right is critical as demands grow for local governments to respond to 21st-century challenges with fewer resources. Leveraging the international commercial presence and successful experience in the home countries for that presence is vital for meaningful global activities at the local level.