

At first sight, Yokohama and Toyama cities in Japan might not have much in common. Yet, they both represent models of sustainable urbanization for the 21st century.

Yokohama is the second largest city in Japan, with a population of just under 4 million. Over the past 60 years, through carefully designed and implemented projects and regulations, as well as through active participation from citizens and the private sector, Yokohama has transformed itself from a degrading suburban residential town into a competitive, eco-friendly, livable city with a strong economic base.

Toyama, on the other hand, is a mid-sized city—less than 500,000 residents. Yet, it has become the home of Japan's high tech, robotics, banking, and pharmaceutical industries, and a major producer of hydroelectric power. Designated in 2008 by the national government of Japan as an "Environmental Model City" and, a few years later, an "Environmental Future City", the OECD recognized Toyama in 2012 as one of five cities with advanced "Compact City" policies.

These cities demonstrate Japan's successes in making urban spaces accessible, livable, resilient, and competitive.

Today, more than half of the global population—nearly 3.6 billion people—live in cities. By 2050, city dwellers will account for more than 70% of the world's population. The challenges and solutions sought by practitioners at the front lines of the rapid urbanization in Japan are highly relevant for most of the World Bank's client countries.

In order to take full advantage of Japan's expertise, the World Bank's Tokyo Development Learning Center (TDLC) introduced the City Partnership Program (CPP), one of the first major initiatives directly engaging with multiple subnational entities in a Bank donor country.

TDLC's mandate is to facilitate a coordinated collaboration with select Japanese cities on joint research and knowledge exchange, and to identify opportunities for linking Japanese expertise with project-level engagements in developing countries.

The first batch of CPP cities—Kitakyushu, Kobe, Toyama, and Yokohama—were selected in July 2016 by a committee of development professionals, and, in November 2016, the World Bank and Toyama and Yokohama announced their collaboration plans.

“There is a growing demand by client countries and cities to learn from urban practitioners. The CPP’s selection of cities of varying sizes and characteristics is valuable to our clients, ranging from small towns to large cities,” said Phil Karp of the World Bank at the joint press conference with Toyama City. “Toyama offers expertise in infrastructure development and service delivery for elderly citizens, re-vitalization of the city center, densification, and natural disaster risk management, all of which are of great value and interest to our clients.”

As participants in the CPP, city officials and representatives will document lessons on various development challenges and solutions areas through joint research, knowledge delivery, and learning activities designed to share experience around specific issues. The participants will also engage in capturing and documenting practical “how to” experiences from relevant agencies in both cities and produce outputs, such as knowledge notes, toolkits, good practice guides, and videos.

Since their joining, TDLC has conducted Technical Deep Dives (TDD) on Compact Cities with Toyama, and on Smart Cities with Yokohama. TDDs are an innovative approach to knowledge exchange, comprising workshops, site visits, peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, and action planning, which aim to foster operational development of World Bank-funded projects on specific issues.

As a participant in the Compact Cities TDD, Dr. Salina Ivy, mayor of Narayanganj in Bangladesh, expressed her expectations for technical and knowledge support: “Narayanganj is facing challenges due to its high population density. I am concerned about managing the city in a way that ensures service delivery for such a large number of people in an equitable manner.” She said the TDD could help provide support on that challenging issue.

During the TDD, the TDLC also held a one-day international conference on Smart Cities with the support of Yokohama City. Approximately 190 people from municipal governments that participated in the Smart Cities TDD, as well as representatives from the private sector and academia, joined the conference. The participants discussed issues relating to the new challenges facing Smart Cities, such as citizen engagement, assured service delivery, sustainability, innovation, and competitiveness.

The TDD experiences and discussions will be shared through the TDLC’s and the Bank’s various online platforms, creating a self-sustaining learning model of engaging with subnational entities around key thematic areas.