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Promoting local governance through Municipal International Cooperation

As the spread of decentralisation and democratisation gathers speed, so local governments in developing countries are taking more and more responsibility for improving their performance, managing the interface between the state and citizens, and providing services, despite having access only to limited resources. Thanks to decentralisation and the holding of local elections, a variety of organisations, interest groups and professional associations – some of which were previously dormant whilst others are new – are now able to participate in the development process and to claim a political role in social and economic development. The impact is being felt most keenly at the municipal level, where local governments and non-state actors are best placed to express and defend local interests.

This trend, which makes development cooperation more complex, political and demanding than it used to be, has been closely monitored by organisations involved in 'municipal international cooperation' (MIC). Broadly speaking, these are municipal associations and individual municipalities from the North, including civil-society organisations originating from these municipalities, that are involved in projects and programmes with partner municipalities and citizens in the South.

Development agencies are becoming increasingly aware of these organisations' potential for supporting wider state reforms such as democratisation, good governance and decentralisation, as well as sector reforms for enhanced service delivery. But implementing a local governance agenda through MIC is a tough job, as is highlighted by the articles in this issue of *Capacity.org*.

The first article, by Randal Smith of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, discusses local governance in the context of MIC and examines how to advance a local governance agenda. The second article is an interview with Elong M'Bassi, the Coordinator of the Municipal Development Partnership, Western Africa Branch,

based in Cotonou. He takes a critical look at the current practice of MIC on the African continent, and explains how Northern partners should redefine their terms of engagement in order to provide more effective support for capacity-building.

The third article, by Corina Dhaene of ACE Europe, a research and consulting firm for European and international cooperation and local development, discusses the nitty-gritty of implementing ambitious ideas and agendas. She explains how municipalities in the Flemish-speaking region of Belgium are gradually embracing a local governance agenda and describes some of the problems they have encountered on the road to innovation. The fourth article is written by Serena Foracchia from Reggio Emilia, a town in Northern Italy. Her account provides a municipal perspective on MIC. She draws a number of conclusions from the testing of new approaches to better governance in various parts of the world.

This issue of *Capacity.org* is based on a recent workshop on promoting local governance through MIC, organised jointly by the ECDPM and ACE Europe. The results of this workshop will soon be published as part of the ECDPM's *InBrief* series.

Discussing 'local governance' in the context of MIC

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) was established in 1995 in response to a need for a collective voice for local government in Commonwealth structures to press forward the decentralisation and democratisation reforms of the time. Nine years on, CLGF continues its advocacy role within the Commonwealth structures, and promotes the exchange of information through the Commonwealth Local Government Good Practice Scheme, the annual Commonwealth Local Government Handbook, a major conference held every two years, and numerous symposia. At the same time as the Cotonou Partnership Agreement has recognised local governments as state actors, Commonwealth governments have given enhanced recognition to CLGF as a state actor representing its elected members. It is now officially classified as an 'associated Commonwealth organisation'.

This article, written by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), addresses some of the current issues of local governance in the context of municipal international cooperation (MIC). This is not a simple task and there is only space and scope to outline a few of the key areas which we hope can be explored more thoroughly in the wider discourse to come to a clearer and more internationally accepted consensus on them.

What is local governance?

The background paper for a recent workshop entitled 'Promoting Local Governance through Municipal International Cooperation', organised jointly by the ECDPM and ACE Europe, asserted that 'local governance links the processes of democratisation and decentralisation at a sub-national level.' Although, strictly speaking, local governance does not require local democracy, we believe that decentralisation without local democracy is quite simply less effective!

When we speak of governance, we speak of the processes of interaction - the relationship - between government and citizens, whether as individuals, businesses or civil-society organisations. Local governance is the interaction between a local government and its citizens. It also includes the interaction between local government and other government bodies and levels. These are the external dimensions of local governance.

There is also an internal dimension, i.e. the relationship between the governing body (i.e. elected members in democratic structures) and the administration.

What we need to examine is how one impacts on the other and how these different elements produce better, more responsive local government, or not, as the case may be.

As I have already stated, the CLGF believes that local democracy produces more effective local governance. This is achieved by deploying local authority resources more effectively and more appropriately. The more a local government can involve stakeholders in local decision-making, the stronger and more sustainable its decisions will be.

Nobel prize-winner Amartya Sen has argued that democracy has tangible benefits and that political and economic freedoms reinforce one another. He points out that there has never been a famine in a functioning democracy, whether it is economically rich or poor.¹

We believe that a similar analysis may be extended to local democracy, as the advantages of democratic pluralism reach far beyond disaster prevention. The empirical evidence, however, remains patchy and contradictory. In part, this is because a definition of what constitutes local democracy has not yet been fully agreed.

Good local governance?

Following on from any discussion of the definition of local governance is the obvious question, 'What constitutes good local governance?' Can we measure it? If so, how? Can we establish indicators of good local governance? Can we set standards? If so, who

should be setting what standards and for whom? To what extent should these standards be aspirational?

The UN Habitat Urban Governance Campaign is actively promoting effective urban governance and working on the development of such indicators. These will be an important contribution to the debate. The CLGF recognises the tension inherent to balancing universality with country-specificity: what fits the political culture of one country may not fit that of another. A prescriptive approach is not therefore appropriate.

But we do believe that there is such a thing as good local governance. To allow norms of local governance to be simply country-specific would be to be complacent about an area where we wish to see improvement. Indicators of good local governance need to be developed and adopted by local governments, national associations of local government and ministries of local government, so as to ensure ownership and a focus on the prevailing priorities. International organisations have a contribution to make in this connection, by helping to expand the issues under consideration, and challenge accepted practices.

International partners can also help by trying to mainstream local governance issues. Many MIC projects focus on technical assistance. Improvements achieved by such schemes can be embedded by making sure that the local council and/or the local community exercise effective political control. Most MIC programmes touch at least indirectly upon aspects of local governance. It would be of great value if these were made more explicit.

The CLGF's Good Practice Scheme

The CLGF has been developing and promoting MIC activities across the Commonwealth aimed at encouraging the two-way exchange of skills, ideas and good practices. The ultimate objective is to enable partners to work jointly on challenges facing one of the partner authorities.

The Commonwealth Local Government Good Practice Scheme supports focused and practical projects on a North-South or South-South basis, that are aimed at achieving clearly

defined objectives in terms of improving service delivery and strengthening local governance. Funding supports the exchange of personnel and councillors, so as to enable them to work alongside and shadow their counterparts, as well as local consultative exercises such as workshops, and the piloting of new initiatives. No capital funding is available and projects must demonstrate that their results are sustainable. Key to the approach is the requirement that projects must be drawn up jointly (a planning meeting is a core component of the funding) and staff time on both sides of the partnership is given in kind.

Lessons

The CLGF's engagement in MIC has highlighted certain lessons, derived from direct experience and formal external reviews.

- MIC projects tend to have a slow lead time. There are many reasons for this. If the partners are new to each other, they need time to build a relationship based on mutual understanding and trust. In addition, peer-level discussions over a period of time about what concepts mean and how they might be interpreted help to ensure that genuinely workable and locally appropriate development solutions can be devised.
- There is a need for long-term sources of finance to facilitate effective MIC that respects the time frames involved.
- For many partners - and often the very important local 'champions' - their involvement in MIC activities is an 'add-on' to their day-to-day work. In order for MIC to be genuinely successful, it is important that there is a real buy-in at the highest political and administrative levels.
- Participants, whether from a local authority or from other stakeholder groups, should receive as much briefing/training as possible in preparation for working in a developmental context. We have found that it often works well to send or receive a team of people, both to promote institutional learning by ensuring that a broad cross-section of people are involved, and to enable them to share



Photo: ECDPM, Volker Hauck.

'Poor neighbourhoods need to be integrated into wider municipal development' Image of Kampala town, Uganda.

ideas about how learning can be relevant and maximised after the visit.

- Traditionally, this has involved producing reports that are rarely read after the end of the reporting process, and the knowledge being retained by individuals who have been directly involved in a project. This implies that MIC has a very local impact. To guarantee a strategic impact, we need to find ways to ensure that any lessons learnt benefit not just the individual partnership, but also those who have not been directly involved.

In the current framework of the Good Practice Scheme, the CLGF is working very closely with national associations to help them disseminate the lessons learnt and increase the chances of project outcomes having a direct impact on policy development.

Pushing the local governance agenda

First, the argument in favour of local democracy must be won. In some countries, it has only been won in part, whilst in others it has been lost. A debate needs to be held about what constitutes good local democracy. Second, there is the question of inclusivity. Representative local democracy must be inclusive and strive to achieve inclusivity.

This embraces gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disability, class and many other aspects. Inclusivity should not be achieved by setting quotas for elected representatives. Instead, the elected representatives must seek the opinions of the full range of groups they purport to represent.

Third, community advocacy. Community organisations that play an advocacy role must be encouraged and supported. They have an important role to play in ensuring that local authorities are aware of wider community issues.

Finally, as governance is about an interaction, so is the process of improving our engagement with the local governance agenda. We must be prepared to take the time to listen and learn from our colleagues and partners.

- 1 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press: 1999, p.16.

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The Commonwealth Local Government Forum will be holding a conference on Deepening Local Democracy, in Aberdeen, Scotland, from 14 to 17 March 2005. This conference will be directly addressing issues affecting local governance. Further details are available at www.clgf2005.org or info@clgf.org.uk

'Capacity-building combined with seed money is what we want MIC to be about'

Interview with Elong M'Bassi, Coordinator of the Municipal Development Partnership (MDP) in Cotonou, Benin (www.pdm-net.org)

What is your view on the fundamentals of municipal international cooperation (MIC)?

Elong M'bassi: We have to remember that the instrument of cooperation between cities and municipalities began in Europe, in France and Germany, after the Second World War and was designed to help avoid major clashes occurring every 50 years. In Africa, too, local governments are closely involved in peace-keeping and in resolving tensions between countries and communities. Good MIC partners are emerging in the South as the municipal movement gains strength every day. There are almost 6,000 elected local governments and some 120,000 local councillors in West Africa. These are the players who live and breathe democratisation. Contrary to the central level, where things are not moving, the local level is where dynamic change leading to further democratisation is possible.

What's the link between the African municipal movement and the concept of local governance?

Elong M'bassi: The institution of local government is the first tool for building a democratic society and supporting local development. What we now need is a second tool: local governments working hand-in-hand with citizens and civil-society organisations. We have to build local coalitions between local government and civil society to overcome the traditional divide between state and non-state actors. We're not there

yet, and the EU position on the involvement of non-state actors is not helping things either. On the contrary, it is sustaining the divide. The bottom line is the delivery of services: if local institutions are not able to deliver services, they are not useful. Therefore, to support local governance, the whole system of centrally steered and controlled sector policies has to be revised. If central government wants to have a positive impact on people's lives, it has to put the local level in the centre and recognise the potential of local partnerships and coalitions.

How can MIC help this?

Elong M'Bassi: It would be a major step forward if around 20% of all EU financial support could be channelled through MIC to the local level. We know from experience that sector policies and donor budget support fail to sustain investments in service delivery. This is because the one institution that needs to sustain these investments is not involved: local government. We have to challenge the African governments to be more consistent in their decentralisation policies. One of the main tasks of the municipal movement in Africa and the rest of the world is to improve the instruments of MIC to this end.

It must be said, though, that we still have a long way to go. Many instances of MIC are still linked with humanitarian concerns and end up as polite exchanges between mayors and senior officials culminating in the transfer of collected money or old materials, like books and trucks. I say to the African governments that MIC is not a funding channel.

Of course, if you in the North give, we take. But what we really need is for MIC to concentrate on capacity-building. One of the major problems in the South is capacity. Capacity to manage budgets and capital investments, to plan service delivery and set up partnerships. Capacity-building combined with seed money to put the theory into practice is what we want MIC to be about. This should encourage central governments and donors to recognise the added value of strengthening the capacity of local government. Strong local governments could indeed be envisaged as new tools for ensuring that donor money is used effectively and investments are sustained.

Should Northern MIC partners redefine their terms of engagement?

Elong M'Bassi: I urge partners in the North to support their legitimate counterparts in the South: the national and regional associations of local authorities. We have to build a strong worldwide municipal movement that keeps local development on the agenda and puts local governments at the centre of development policies.

The Northern partners, working together with their central governments, should insist on involving their Southern local counterparts in bilateral negotiations on development cooperation. Contrary to NGO representation, there is no problem in appointing legitimate representatives for local government. The North should no longer allow local governments to be ignored. Northern partners can advocate changes in donor policies and should lobby for more money to go to local government.

What is Municipal International Cooperation (MIC)?

MIC between Northern and Southern municipalities is an approach to development cooperation that puts local government and its interaction with its partners at the centre of development efforts. It is also capable of encouraging better governance in local affairs. It is complementary to other development approaches and seeks to create synergies with them. The underlying idea is that closer cooperation and exchanges between municipalities in the South and North can lead to creative and effective solutions for local development issues. It is known under different names, such as twinning, city-to-city cooperation, city link, jumelage, or coopération décentralisée. The most common feature is a joint decision taken by two local governments to work together and encourage exchanges of information between their administrations (i.e. the colleague-to-colleague approach). In the majority of cases, municipal NGOs and civil-society organisations in the North and South are involved and undertake projects under the umbrella of an MIC agreement. MIC also encompasses networking and cooperation between associations of local authorities in the North and their sister associations in the South.

Northern municipalities engaged in MIC have shown that local governments can actually engage in international cooperation without central interference. Through Southern associations of municipalities, Northern partners can decide to support organisations and programmes that deliver technical assistance to local development and support joint action, such as the Municipal Development Partnership.

Last but not least, I would insist on a bigger effort to educate citizens on the importance of international cooperation and to promote a feeling of shared responsibility for development. Educational programmes and campaigns should be used, for example, to inform people about the links between a more rational use of water resources in the North and access to safe water in the South.

Finally, what do you expect from the new MIC strategies that are currently being discussed?

Elong M'Bassi: I expect MIC to strengthen local democratisation and partnership between local government and civil society all over the world. You in the North have a huge amount of ground to cover in order to re-establish genuine local partnership. You have discarded the ideals of 18th-century philosophers about society and citizenry. Citizens have very little say in the management of your local governments. What Africa is trying to achieve can provide the North with valuable insights. But we too still have a way to go, considering that we only regained our independence 50 years ago. There is no short cut to progress, so we have to learn and to build.

Second, I would like MIC partners to focus more on local economic development. I invite

Northern municipalities to share their economic strategies and tools, for example in the field of territorial development.

Third, we have an urgent duty to involve our young people in keeping democracy alive all over the world.

Fourth, I urge Northern partners to use MIC as an instrument to achieve progress on gender issues. If you compare, for example, the percentages of female participation in elected councils in the North to the South, it's clear that this is a major challenge that MIC could meet.

The interview was conducted by Corina Dhaene, ACE Europe

Moving beyond project assistance in MIC: insights from Flanders

During the past few years, associations of municipalities in the North have started to pay attention to their members' international relations, and have recognised their potential for engaging local actors in development cooperation. A number of North-South municipal linkages emerged in Flanders (the Flemish-speaking region of Belgium) as small-scale expressions of solidarity in the margin of mainstream development cooperation. Some of these relations date from the late 1970s, and may be considered as the first experiences with municipal international cooperation (MIC). Inspired by good practices in Flanders and 'pitching' on new international development trends (such as accentuating local actors and their contribution to local development), the VVSG decided at the end of the 1990s to support MIC. For the VVSG, it was clear that dealing with local actors, and more in particular with local governments, required hands-on experience. This experience was largely available among local government practitioners in the North.

The idea of supporting international development efforts with the aid of Northern municipalities encountered resistance. Flemish development NGOs found it difficult to accept

the idea of municipalities playing a more active role in local development programmes in the South. Since the 1980s, Flemish local authorities have been easy to mobilise in support of NGO campaigns and projects. Local authorities have tended to allocate their development cooperation budgets almost entirely to Northern NGOs. A small number of municipalities have been active development actors, but experiences with MIC have not been fully coherent, of mixed quality and have had little demonstrable impact. The challenge was to scale-up existing experiences to connect MIC to the wider development agenda. A second, even greater challenge was to convince Flemish municipalities of their potential as development actors, to make them accept their new role and to build their capacity to perform it.

Supporting processes of change: a bumpy ride

An analysis of MIC practice in Flanders in 2002-2003 shows that municipalities tend to work in a very traditional project mode, moving from one problem field to the other. Although they work in partnership with Southern municipalities, links with any local development strategy are weak. Equally, a



"The mayor of Nimlahakok, a small town in Guatemala, explains to a delegation from Nimlahakok's twin town of Herent, Belgium, how he generally deals with questions posed by local people. Photograph by courtesy of the International Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities."

comprehensive MIC strategy for a longer-term partnership is absent in most cases. Very often, the partnerships do not seem to grow beyond the typical TA approach and involve no more than a series of minor projects. Hence, the impact on the ground is necessarily limited and only a small group of privileged people benefit from the cooperation. Furthermore, Flemish municipalities sometimes overstate their expertise in municipal affairs and consequently reduce the potential embedded in the MIC concept to a one-way transfer of know-how from the North to the South.

The Flemish MIC framework

- The main players: 10% of Flemish municipalities (ranging from very small towns to big cities, including citizens through socio-cultural and other organisations) and the VVSG.
- External financial support comes from two sources: the federal budget for development cooperation and the Flemish budget. (Belgium is a federal state, in which Flanders figures as a constitutional region.) In total, the VVSG can channel approximately EUR 2 million per year through these programmes to Flemish municipalities involved in MIC (federal budget: EUR 450,000; Flemish budget: EUR 1,550,000). Both programmes take a different angle: the federal programme focuses on the technical capacity of Southern municipalities to plan, finance and deliver services (with projects running for one year). The Flemish programme ties the individual municipality to a number of goals (related to capacity-building and community involvement in the North and city links with the South) within the framework of longer-term cooperation processes.
- The VVSG invests in capacity-building on behalf of its members: the tools for learning, information and communication, coaching and support are a magazine, a manual, a website, networking among Flemish municipalities, and training programmes. The VVSG seeks to systematise the experiences of Flemish municipalities by using the above tools and by undertaking intensive consultation with the municipalities. At the outset, the focus was on enhancing knowledge about the challenges for local development in the South, the practical modalities of MIC (including basic project and process management), development education and awareness-raising. Later, the VVSG tried to prepare Flemish municipalities for engaging in more complex partnership relations with partners in the South.
- The VVSG started to set up a constructive dialogue with Flemish development NGOs to identify and strengthen the comparative roles played by municipalities and NGOs in development cooperation.

Some successful cases have nevertheless demonstrated that MIC has the potential to achieve much greater objectives, such as promoting more democratic and participative ways of producing local policies in the South encompassing all aspects of life in the municipality and involving all relevant stakeholders (i.e. the idea of local governance). These Flemish cases prove that it is possible to make the leap from TA interventions to facilitating change processes, without substituting the lack of expertise and capacity in the South for executing municipal tasks.

Typically, these municipalities are committed to change (not only in the South, but also in their own communities). They choose to develop a multi-stakeholder approach in order to create a shared responsibility for local development. To them, MIC is a framework for developing long-term relations based on trust between colleagues and for bringing together local people with hands-on experience in managing political processes. It was on the basis of these cases that the VVSG identified the preconditions for transforming MIC into an effective instrument for supporting change processes in the South: the development of a long-term commitment and vision on both sides, efforts to include civil society and to build the necessary social capital, and the integration of MIC as an instrument for local development in local institutional frameworks and policies.

In trying to define new strategies to overcome the apparent limitations in the practice of MIC,

the VVSG now has to solve the problem of the funding rules of the federal programme and the limitations of the Flemish municipalities (in terms of structure and human resources). However, the VVSG is still convinced that MIC has to support and initiate processes of change, rather than offer a framework for traditional project assistance to the South.

Lessons learned

The majority of Flemish municipalities have yet to embark on a new MIC trail. The VVSG still faces a number of critical challenges to which it has adjusted its strategy for the coming years, based on lessons learned from past experiences:

- **Donor policies and processes of local governance: a difficult match**
The funding rules and regulations for MIC (in particular those imposed by the federal programme) have encouraged a project approach and place a strong accent on technical assistance. The framework does not allow for long-term planning, as is needed to support change processes among partners. Until recently, Flemish and Belgian development policies did not include any strategies for local governance and the challenges connected to it. The experience gained by the VVSG in trying to develop a new framework shows the difficulty of convincing others, especially the federal government, that the objective of MIC should and could be to support local governance processes. The experiences with the Flemish programme demon-

strate that encouraging cooperation processes yields better results.

- **Trade-off between public and political support on the one hand and innovation on the other**

Engaging in MIC is a hard-won position in many municipalities. Gaining public and political support from local government institutions is, however, key to sustaining MIC efforts. In order to keep this support, MIC actors focus too easily on quick wins through projects which make development cooperation efforts more concrete. In addition, municipalities work towards concrete and tangible results because they feel that this is what their Southern partners expect. Indeed, Southern partners frequently communicate a long list of practical needs to their partner city.

- **Concerted action between municipalities and NGOs strengthens the impact of MIC on local governance**

Development NGOs contest the legitimacy of local authorities to move beyond TA (connected to their municipal tasks) and engage in democratisation processes. From the outset, Flemish local authorities felt that development NGOs did not want them to undertake a more active role as development actors. Consequently, MIC was not really seen as an instrument that could be developed in parallel with inputs from other development actors. It is now clear from experience, however, that joint action in the North and South, based on clear agreements and the

comparative advantages of the actors involved, pays off.

- **Technical expertise does not automatically entail the capacity to support change processes**

A TA strategy provides a comfortable grip for local officials engaged in MIC for the first time. The technical expertise of Flemish municipalities is one of their strengths; officials feel they can add value to local development in the South (the idea of the colleague-to-colleague approach). However, this is not sufficient for engaging in change processes. Furthermore,

lack of time and analytical capacities (in relation to development issues) among a large number of local government actors in Flanders (i.e. local officials and politicians) means that they cannot always assist with more complex development processes in the South. An ongoing effort has to be made to build the capacity of Northern municipalities to raise their level of professionalism and (critical) analysis.

- **It is difficult to gain a clear understanding of the Southern perspective**
By strengthening its connections with sister organisations (and other relevant stakeholders)

in the South, the VVSG should be able to gain more insight into the challenges facing municipal development in the South. This will make it easier to promote the local governance agenda more systematically. In addition, the VVSG continues to network with sister organisations in the North and assesses the performance and experiences of Flemish municipalities in working together with their partners in the field, by accompanying them on field missions.

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(with thanks to the VVSG).*

Creating 'space' for multi-actor exchange and dialogue: Reggio Emilia's experiences with MIC

Reggio Emilia is a medium-sized town in the Emilia Romagna region of northern Italy. It has shown itself to be highly responsive to issues of social inclusion and civic participation in developing public policies in support of an effective municipal welfare system. At the same time as managing and improving its own services, both the local authority in Reggio Emilia and the town's citizens are also interested in improving the political situation in Eastern Europe and Africa. Back in the 1970s, civic groups had already demonstrated their support for the political independence of and the democratic movement in Mozambique, and against apartheid in South Africa. It was against this background that elected officials and the Mayor launched a number of twinning arrangements.

Different paths leading to MIC

In Reggio Emilia, the Mayor, or the elected official in charge of managing the city's international relations, must express their agreement with MIC activities. There are several different paths to obtaining such agreement:

- **Path 1:** An expression of political willingness to extend, renew and give added value to MIC agreements signed by previous local administrations.
- **Path 2:** An expression of political willingness by the municipal leadership to sign a new cooperation agreement, possibly with a local authority in a new geographical region, with the aim of supporting human

rights and the establishment of democratic systems.

- **Path 3:** The municipal executive responds to specific demands by civil-society organisations in Reggio Emilia to undertake MIC activities with a particular city (e.g. associations, economic groups, university, schools, local NGOs, etc.). These demands may spring from existing bilateral contacts with civil-society organisations, economic interests, a wish to cooperate for study purposes, etc.
- **Path 4:** The municipal executive responds to a request for participation in a large-scale project. The request needs to come from a sister city or one of the municipal associations of which Reggio Emilia is a member.

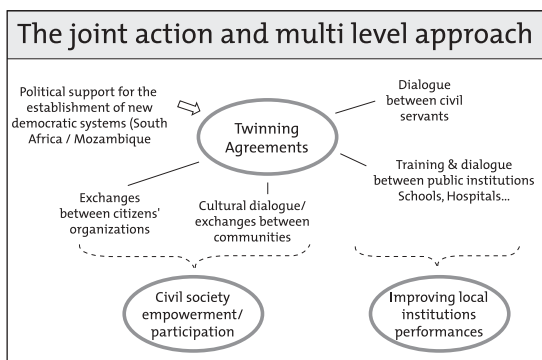
Reggio Emilia has worked along all these four paths. The municipality is currently rebuilding its contacts with the municipality of Pemba in Mozambique, which date back to a cooperation agreement signed in 1975. Another example is the cooperation agreement with the Serbian town of Kragujevac, which was signed in 2000. In this case, citizens of both towns expressed an interest in 'getting to know each other better' and in undertaking economic activities. In addition, certain NGOs in Reggio Emilia were already active in the Balkans and had demonstrated a political will to support the development of democratic processes.

Aiming for 'joint action' and a 'multi-level approach' to MIC

Reggio Emilia has created an independent agency called Reggio nel Mondo, which implements the municipality's decisions with regard to international relations. It also functions as a knowledge centre and - through its advisory function - seeks to introduce innovative practices and lessons learned from past experience into the city's MIC activities.

Reggio Emilia's approach to MIC is based on the principle of twinning. A twinning agreement is understood as being the creation of a lasting link between two municipalities. These are expected to cooperate and support each other in establishing an effective form of local government. Each municipality urges its citizens to dialogue and to meet representatives of the partner municipality, in order to improve local governance by sharing experiences and best practices at all levels of society.

In our case, MIC, through twinning agreements, aims to support the empowerment of the population and thus its participation in the town's political and administrative life. It also supports the exchange of information and experiences between officials of partner towns, thus improving local institutions' performances. Ideally, such a context will facilitate the definition of a fully participatory and shared strategy of cooperation, resulting in the creation of a long-lasting 'twinning' relationship.



Lessons learned from different MIC approaches

The links with Pemba lasted from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, before being revitalised in 2000. They began in the form of a purely 'technical' approach centring on the fulfilment of basic needs like water and health care services. While the twinning arrangement helped to create basic services, it did not improve the way in which public services are managed.

Despite these experiences, the new cooperation agreement between the two municipalities still follows the old pattern of requests for purely technical services. Moreover, implementing a strategy which aims to involve society at large is no easy matter. On the one hand, officials from Reggio Emilia have encountered a fairly hierarchic decision-making structure in Pemba, a problem compounded by a lack of capacity among civil-society actors. As a result, local administrators continue to take unilateral decisions without consulting their constituents. At the same time, the various actors from Reggio Emilia, including NGOs, tend to support 'easier' technical projects such as the construction of water wells, which do not require them to pay much attention to the wider social context.

The Reggio nel Mondo Agency responds to the technical needs of its partner, but also takes some additional measures. Based on a redefined MIC strategy, it has started by:

- designing public awareness campaigns in Reggio Emilia about MIC, stressing the need to create long-term municipal links;
- taking 'informal' capacity-building initiatives to empower local officials. This is done by implementing technical plans without commissioning specific project activities.

The links with Kragujevac have generated quite different experiences. All cooperation activities between Reggio Emilia and this Serbian town are planned and supervised by two City Working Groups (CWG), one in each town. Both CWGs define a set of intervention priorities. They analyse the experiences in Reggio Emilia and design projects to exchange information and experiences for the benefit of both towns. These projects cover a range of sectors, including culture, economic cooperation, public services and education. Thematic interventions include a dialogue with counterparts in the partner city. The community is invited to participate in the project initiatives, which are always coordinated by municipal representatives.

The creation of the CWGs is not a new management idea: it was suggested by the City-to-City UNDP-UNOPS programme, of which Reggio Emilia is an active partner. The local council introduced the principle of CWGs in 2000. A CWG is a committee composed of

representatives of all local government and civic stakeholders who are interested in taking part. A CWG is not closed: new representatives and members interested in developing project ideas are invited to participate.

MIC with Kragujevac is clearly facilitated by the cultural and geographical proximity of the two municipalities. The Serbian town has followed a development process which is fairly similar to the way in which Italian local councils developed in the past. The concept of democracy and participation is more easily accepted and understood. Overall, society is more structured and ready to implement a capacity development approach based on peer review, exchanges of 'good practices', joint discussions, etc.

Conclusion

There is a great demand for this type of exchange. A 'joint action' approach has proved itself to be highly effective for creating effective local governance support programmes. The cooperation process is 'owned' by both communities and has led to the signing of a twinning agreement between the two municipalities.

Reggio Emilia will try to apply the CWG approach to the cooperation arrangement it is hoping to make with the town of Polokwane in South Africa. We will need to see whether this approach works with a municipality in a very different cultural and economic context.

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The European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) launched Capacity.org as a tool for development researchers, practitioners and decision-makers. As a website and a newsletter, Capacity.org combines information on capacity development policy and practice within international development cooperation with debate on policy issues and practical experiences. It acts as a platform for dialogue by providing a channel for informed review and synthesis of the complex issues faced by development practitioners and policy-makers.

Focusing on both the 'why' and the 'how' of capacity development, Capacity.org seeks to unravel the complexity of ideas and practices underpinning the term 'capacity development'. To achieve this, the editors particularly encourage the exchange of perspectives and experiences from the South, so as to ensure that discussions are rooted in reality.

Our aim is to make Capacity.org a joint effort, mobilising and sharing a range of capacities and expertise. Interested individuals and organisations can help make Capacity.org an effective communication tool for people seeking to alleviate poverty through capacity development by contributing information, lessons, ideas, opinions and feedback. Any offers of co-finance or for linking up with related initiatives are very welcome.

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