

Direct cooperation between local authorities in North and South

Jan De Mets, Betty De Wachter, Bart Palmaers, Ilse Renard



Gesubsidieerd door de
Vlaamse regering

politeia

Colophon

Direct co-operation between local authorities in North and South

Authors:

Jan De Mets (freelance), Betty De Wachter (coordinator, VVSG international), Bart Palmaers (member of staff, VVSG international) and Ilse Renard (member of staff, VVSG international)

Photographs by Jan Deyver, Ilse Renard, Nathalie Slosse and Sint-Truiden municipal council.

Translated from Flemish/French into English by Glenn Robertson, Betty De Wachter (coordinator, VVSG international) and Anne Geens (member, VVSG international)

D/2007/8132/49

Politeia sa
Galerie Ravenstein 28
B-1000 Brussels
Tel. +32 2 289 26 10
Fax +32 2 289 26 19
info@politeia.be
www.politeia.be

No part of this publication may be reproduced and/or published in printed, photocopied, microfilmed or any other form whatsoever without prior written permission from the publisher.

Introduction

The handbook “Direct co-operation between local authorities in the North and South” is the most recent in a series of publications on international co-operation between local authorities produced by the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (the Flanders region in Belgium).

The Association (VVSG) represents all Flemish urban authorities, large and small, in Belgium – 308 in all. Local authorities need information and advice to carry out their work. Our association offers that support and champions their interests towards other levels of government and institutions. The VVSG is proactive on behalf of local politicians and local civil servants alike.

The VVSG works to strengthen the position of local government. To that end, it supports all pro-local policy initiatives with a view to building the institutional capacity of local government and strengthening local democracy. The association’s staff of up to 100 people provides ongoing support to local authorities that engage with their communities. An international team within the association handles European and international affairs.

This publication sets out to be a practical workbook illustrated by many concrete examples of cooperation between Flemish municipalities and their partner cities and municipalities in the South. It is broken down into 4 chapters:

1. context
2. capacity-building
3. awareness-raising
4. direct co-operation with a local authority in the South

Although all the chapters may hold interest for readers in the South, we were only able to have chapter 4 on direct co-operation translated. Hopefully, we will be able to expand on this in a future edition.

The handbook provides practical guidance and information on how to persuade the municipal council that international local government co-operation is important, how to write a policy brief on international co-operation, how to build public awareness, how to go about looking for a local government partner in the South, how to work together with other actors, and so on. Because this handbook was aimed primarily at local civil servants and aldermen for international co-operation in Flanders, or local advisory

boards, the examples mainly refer to Flemish municipalities. This does not mean that they cannot give a lead to municipalities in the South. Also, Chapter 6 brings in “the South’s voice” – a selection of personal accounts by partner towns and municipalities in the South.

Our thanks go to all the towns and municipalities that provided us with reference material and developed extremely interesting initiatives which even now are still providing inspiration to other municipalities in the North and South.

A debt of thanks is also due to the Flemish government, and especially to its international affairs department, for commissioning our association to produce this handbook.

About terminology

For this translation we have used the following terminology being well aware that institutional systems vary per country and that words can be interpreted in different ways.

- municipalities: overall term for small towns, cities.... (local authorities)
- mayor: elected head of the municipal council
- alderman: a municipal councillor who has been assigned a specific policy area (i.e. an alderman for the environment, an alderman for international relations) as a member of the board of the mayor and aldermen.
- Board of mayor and aldermen: executive body within the municipal council, composed of mayor and aldermen (max. 11)
- council officials: local civil servants, employees of the local authority
- advisory board: Consist of groups of volunteers and representatives of local organisations. They act as spokespersons for specific interests or themes and provide advice to the municipal council
- Centre for Public Welfare: autonomous body at local level specifically designed to take care of social policy issues. (only existing in Belgium)

Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1	
Why direct co-operation? What does it involve?	7
1.1 Why?	7
1.2 What is a city link?	9
1.3 Can any municipality set up a city link?	10
1.4 Does a municipality have to set up a city link to qualify for grants? ..	11
1.5 Institutional capacity-building	11
Chapter 2	
Where to start?	19
2.1 Preparation (stages 1, 2, and 3)	21
2.2 The partner search (stages 4 and 5)	27
2.3 Co-operation	32
Chapter 3	
Other cultures: A source of inspiration and a challenge	49
3.1 What does “culture” mean in the city links context?	49
3.2 Culture and communication	50
3.3 Different cultures as a source of inspiration	51
3.4 Differences that stand in the way	53
Chapter 4	
Working together with other actors	57
4.1 Why?	57
4.2 What actors can you work with?	57
Chapter 5	
Beyond the city link	61
5.1 Networks	61
5.2 Intermunicipal cooperation	62
Chapter 6	
The South’s voice	65
6.1 Introduction	65

Chapter 1

Why direct co-operation? What does it involve?

1.1 Why?

Municipalities can play a more direct role in development co-operation without taking over from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or big funders. This additionality is what gives current North-South policy its strength.

Decentralisation of government in the South also has a big impact on local administration. But newly-created authorities are still preparing their way in this new context, with little experience or training to draw on. Often, local government administration in the South lacks capacity and resources. This is where municipalities from the North can play a big role by putting their technical and administrative expertise to work for the Southern partner municipality. The particular strength of this type of cooperation lies in pulling knowledge and experiences together. This enables local civil servants to learn from one another in every policy area possible. Co-operation can then be targeted on tackling poverty and promoting local employment, town and country planning, and even tourism, the environment or Local Agenda 21.

Each policy sphere includes technical tasks that must be carried out within a complex political and administrative set-up, which is key to democratic governance. So, a balance often has to be found between service provision and democratic governance (i.e., “policy-making”). This singular characteristic is often not understood by NGOs and private organisations, while the big funders tend to see democracy-building more in national government terms, and focus on isolated projects rather than processes. NGOs, although they often also operate at the local level, tend more to have links with civil society organisations like farmers’ associations and women’s groups. Local government is often sidelined although it is central to the development process. In the long term, NGOs and funders will also benefit from being able to rely on efficient local government in the South.

WHY DIRECT CO-OPERATION?

- Increasing decentralization in the South
- Local government has similar roles in North and South
- Shared characteristic municipality – NGOs
- Focus on co-operation: interaction between partners
- General trends at local level
- Current world trends in tourism, the economy and other sectors
- Solidarity
- Starting point for awareness-raising and education about the South, helping to form a more accurate picture of the South and global relations
- Subsidy schemes offered by the North
- ...

This manual deals chiefly with city links. But direct co-operation can also take other forms. Municipalities can cooperate in a particular municipal policy area. A Southern municipality may seek assistance on its waste management, for example. A municipality may get involved in a project, but not want to enter into an official linkage which it sees as too big a commitment. In such a case, the two sides can enter into an agreement without examining whether the two municipalities have matching profiles (in terms of size, policy areas, etc.). The agreement will then be limited to a smaller-scale, more time-limited project, while still forming a whole process hinged around a specific aspect of municipal policy.

MAASMECHELEN-TSHWANE AND YOUTH POLICY

The Flemish government was looking to set up co-operation on youth policy in a long-term project between South Africa and Flanders. Maasmechelen was one of the five municipalities selected for the project. A delegation from Tshwane (formerly Pretoria) paid a first visit to the municipality in September 2001. In May 2002, a policy-maker and several youth policy officials went to South Africa to attend a conference on the role of local government in developing a robust youth policy.

In October 2002, 3 youth workers and local civil servants from South Africa made a three-day return visit to Maasmechelen, where they were briefed on its youth policy. The two sides began to step up co-operation to a high level, exploring opportunities for exchanges (e.g., work experience trainees), training placements (through job shadowing), and school sponsorships. The aim is through co-operation:

- to arrange short exchanges between local civil servants, young people and youth workers,
- to examine whether practical projects can be developed,
- to ensure a reciprocal way of working.

The scale and other differences between the partners have led them to rule out a city link for the time being. Also Maasmechelen wants to see that the project is not just focused on youth policy, but also to bring in other departments, advisory boards, etc., so as to widen its basis in the community. At the time of writing, working visits were taking place to examine initial proposals for training projects (job shadowing).

Such a co-operation scheme may lead on to a more formal city link at a future point.

1.2 What is a city link?

A city link is “an official co-operation agreement between 2 local authorities, endorsed by policymakers and society, in which mutual management of capacity-building and strengthening local democratisation processes are paramount. The city link may also be set in a wider context: it can be a means of taking up the great challenge of fairer global relations” (see also the description in “Global Village”, p 76-86, Dhaene, 2000).

The city link is not an end in itself, but a means of enabling municipal authorities and citizens to play a specific part in development co-operation. The municipality plays a threefold role as actor and facilitator in North and

South, and as stage manager. By definition, the co-operation is not open-ended, but there is the prospect for long-term co-operation. Additional advantages of the city link (compared to more traditional forms of co-operation):

1. *Long-term co-operation.* City links allow the partners to get acquainted at their own pace. There is no outside pressure to complete a specific project to a set timeline.
2. *Collegiality* (investing in people). The fact that Northern and Southern municipalities have similar remits and play the same key roles (see above) provides a solid basis for mutual confidence and understanding between colleagues.
3. *Cost-effectiveness.* A properly-managed city link can deliver big long-term effects at little cost.
4. A city link is a *mutual undertaking*. The opportunities created by the city link include mutual administrative support, economic co-operation and educational exchanges. "Mutual" means the co-operation must benefit both municipalities. The Northern municipalities also have to ask "What should this city link bring to us? What do we expect of it? What can we learn from our partner town?"

A question sometimes asked is whether the South can teach us anything. Confronting a different approach always prompts a rethink of one's own policy or new policy solutions. Do we really excel so much in areas like participation in housing policy or local traffic planning? Working together, the two partners can construct new knowledge bases and thinking in specific policy areas.

1.3 Can any municipality set up a city link?

It is less about a municipality "being able" to set up a link than "being ready" to do it. Put in more practical terms:

What international co-operation projects have previously been run? Have they gone beyond supporting local or national solidarity initiatives? Is there an alderman with an international co-operation portfolio who can help flesh the policy out? What is the council's position on international co-operation? Does the municipality have a plan for international co-operation that clearly reflects a long-term approach? Is there a (full- or part-time) North-South official that can take lead responsibility for coordinating the city link? Is there a base for it within the council departments, local

community or civil society? Is there a distinct international co-operation budget? What can the municipality offer its partner?

Experience shows that the above aspects are key to setting up a city link. Engaging in a city link means accepting that this kind of co-operation contains policy and institutional aspects. Co-operation is a process that cannot take place without self-criticism by both partners. A municipality claiming a subsidy under the Flemish development co-operation agreement will have to meet all the above criteria, among other things.

1.4 Does a municipality have to set up a city link to qualify for grants?

Definitely not. We cannot over-emphasize that a municipality first has to invest sufficiently in its own awareness- and capacity-building before taking on this kind of commitment. This is why Flemish policy on municipal international co-operation agreements sets two levels of aims. Each local authority can choose to stay at level one, and simply deliver the policy within its own municipality. Should it then want to move up to level two (city link), it will have to fulfill a number of additional criteria, especially as regards staff support.

1.5 Institutional capacity-building

Institutional capacity-building is a big part of direct co-operation, and a key focal aim of co-operation between two or more partner municipalities. It is also an important idea in the context of local government in Flanders, because management capacities are no less essential in Flanders than in the South.

Definition: Institutional capacity is about the local authority's means and ability to develop its own organisation in such a way that the policy pursued addresses citizens' expectations. It is the ability to play a role on its own basis as a local government authority vis-à-vis the community which elected it. It is the local authority's ability to effectively and robustly develop its own resources and potentials.

To strengthen governance, we need to work on different levels:

1. Investing in quality policy and administrative management (institutional set-up). Local authorities must invest in quality. They must critically assess their own operation on an ongoing basis, and be ready to make adjustments when necessary.

2. Citizens as partners: involving people in policy. Local authorities must continuously nurture and renew their relationship with their citizens.
3. Ancillary conditions: These are variable context-dependent factors (e.g., the degree of decentralization)

It means working on one's own institutional set-up, and on relations with the citizen. That may involve:

Investing in quality policy and administrative management: the institutional set-up

- Strengthening the policy function: profile of the function, managers, executive staff requirements, role of the town council, council cabinet¹, policy development.
- Strengthening administration: policy formulation and delivery;
 - expert staff: recruitment, training, judicious use of outside expertise;
 - organisation building: expand officials' responsibilities, management services contracting, a learning organisation, organisational self-analysis capability, etc.
 - human resources policy: modern personnel management tools like career planning, performance interviews, staff assessment, good working conditions, varied bonus systems, appropriate disciplinary and sanctions management,...;
 - management and administration tools like strategic planning, appropriate accounting systems, autonomy (performance assessments, management services contracting), internal and external monitoring.
- Efficiently organised local administration
 - content-focused policy areas: civic functions, local area matters, economic issues...;
 - internal support functions: staff management, financial policy, technical policy, internal management function.

Citizens as partners and joint policymakers

- Citizens challenge politics and administration, which means that simple responses and self-satisfaction are not enough.
- The population must give a thorough criticism of policy and the authorities. This is about the rights and the duties of citizens, where public-spiritedness, modern citizenship, and shared responsibility play a paramount role.

¹ The "council cabinet" in Belgium means the mayor and lead council members for policy areas

- The divide between the individual and officialdom is an established fact. That is why the authorities – in this case, the municipalities and public social welfare services – must be accessible and of course able to be held accountable.

Additional conditions

A municipality needs sufficient elbow room to pursue its own policy, i.e., the country’s other tiers of government (in Belgium: the Flemish authorities and the Belgian authorities) must provide local government with sufficient funding and scope for development. It is important to ascertain the local ramifications of a particular decision carefully before converting it into an executive order or legislation. This requires a sufficient degree of decentralization, and taking the subsidiarity principle into account, which means tasking the level of government most apt to deliver it. In this connection, we refer to the core competence debate (policy agreement signed in April 2003 between the Flemish local authorities, provinces, and authorities) and Belgium’s recent ratification of the Council of Europe Charter of Local Self-Government (which dates from 1985).

The checklist below can be used to identify whether a policy sphere like youth, the environment, culture, etc. helps to form or strengthen institutional capacity.

Citizen – Institution	Policy development	Policy delivery	Policy evaluation
Policy institutional capacity building			
Administrative institutional capacity building			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Specialised staff - Organisational competence - Human resources policy - Management tools - Governmental organisation - Internal and content support functions 			
Participation (advisory boards, hearings, information newsheet, etc.)			
Ancillary conditions: sufficient leeway for policy development (decentralization, subsidiarity...)			

ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT: BRUSSELS AND KINSHASA COOPERATE ON BIRTH REGISTRATION

Brussels City Council and its partner city Kinshasa (RDC Congo) are working to improve vital records services. This is an ideal issue for municipal co-operation, where both partners can draw on particular expertise that is specific to local government civil servants. The value of working on vital records and population registries was not immediately perceived in Belgium. A birth certificate seems like an indulgence as compared to the immense daily problems faced by the inhabitants of Kinshasa (shortage of food and drinking water, unreliable electrical equipment, inadequate or no sewerage system, etc.).

But Kinshasa was keen to go with the Brussels project. People know that without an official existence, they have no rights; that a municipality or district is ungovernable without a record of how many people live there (the governor of Kinshasa estimates the number of inhabitants at between 6 and 9 million); and that it is hard to organise democratic elections without knowing who the electorate is. A pilot project was launched in the core borough of Kinshasa, one of the 24 boroughs that make up the City of Kinshasa. The project comprised three strands: Brussels local civil servants provided training to local civil servants and employees in the Kinshasa vital records and population registries, the local population was encouraged to make use of the services and service delivery facilities provided (typewriters, desks, cupboards,...). As it appeared far too ambitious to tackle all vital records straight away, it was decided to start at the beginning: with birth certificates!

After some discussion, the essential problem proved to be lack of knowledge of the vital records registration laws (Code of Family Laws) in force in the Democratic Republic of Congo since 1988. Among other things, this meant that the national authorities had done little by way of producing and distributing registers, and that local government staff and the population were largely unaware of the legal requirements.

The first task for Brussels city local civil servants was therefore to mount an in-depth study of the relevant legislation with Congolese lawyers. Through lobbying at ministerial level, the Belgian partner informed the authorities of their responsibilities, and a start was able to be made on putting into practice what had so far been merely paper rules.

A follow-up workshop with local civil servants and Kinshasa's 24 borough mayors brought to light other common problems with birth registrations. Fortunately, the Superintendent Registrar of the Brussels vital records registry was able to leverage his experience of such complex situations.

A joint Congo government-UNICEF campaign took responsibility for printing and distributing the new birth registers which, while not yet perfect are a vast improvement. A public awareness campaign was also run for the “Kinois” – a necessary measure, as many young parents no longer automatically register their children’s birth. Since Belgium has no such problems, the campaign was entrusted to a local NGO. Doorstep calling and street theatre were used to call people’s attention to the importance of birth registration. In-hospital information was also provided to expectant and recent mothers. This case study clearly illustrates how, by operating as part of a multi-actor network, municipal officials from the North were able to help improve birth registration in Kinshasa.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION: YOUNG PEOPLE AS KEY TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY-BUILDING

Mol Town Council believes in the power and idealism of its young people. Not only to make civic participation on development co-operation a reality, but also to contribute to local authority institutional capacity-building in Flanders and in the South.

Where does the idea come from?

Mol set up a first city link with Santo Tomas (Nicaragua) in 1985 in a gesture of solidarity with the Sandinistas. More recently, Mol has forged close linkages with Peja (Kosovo) and Kara Kara (Niger). Each of these three cooperation agreements is supported by a local solidarity group: the Nicaragua committee, the Kosovo committee and the wereldwinkel (world shop). These committees gave the impetus to spontaneously-formed youth groups who maintain close linkages with young people in the South. A meeting between young people was clearly a necessity.

In 2002, the young people organised the first “four sisters linkup” event in Mol, a productive exchange involving 5 young people and a support worker from each partner municipality.

How does it work?

After consulting the partner municipalities, the young people themselves decided on the focal issue, worked out a programme, organised fund-raising events and activities, with support from North-South official and adults on the different committees. The “linkup” event is a forum for working on, giving thought to and discussing issues that interest, concern or engage young people on both sides. Things like how to help set up a youth policy in the partner municipality? How to secure participation in local policy? How to organise participation within one’s own membership group? How to get funding? How to engage young people in the city link on an ongoing basis? and so on.

In Mol, all participants were given awareness training, youth leadership training and training on how to develop a youth centre. In the Flemish Parliament, they had an opportunity to speak frankly on the many problems in their country, and attended an exhibition on democracy. Young people may be future local or national government leaders. Providing them with training and insights into the means of embracing democracy also plays into strengthening governmental authority.

They also visited schools and youth groups, the Mol youth service, and the town council. They saw how things worked in Flanders, and took their cue from it for local policy-making in their own municipality, where they can now more easily make their voice heard. To give their bit of input into the projects in the different partner municipalities, the participants organised group activities during their stay: a canteen with typical dishes from the different countries, a world festival with 400 young people, etc. All the participants were also put up with local families, which forged lifelong friendships and broadened Mol’s social basis of support.

But it did not stop there. In 2003, the scheme was taken to Nicaragua, while in 2004 the initiative came from Niger’s young people. The impact has been far-reaching. Young people in the South cannot draw on the same experiences and resources as those in the North. Taking responsibility for this complex organisation helped them develop self-confidence and initiative. In this way, the young people took ownership of the scheme. In Nicaragua and Niger the choice was made to put the exchange visitors up with local families. That called for efforts both from the young people from Mol – having to forego their accustomed luxury – and the host families in the developing countries who were living on the breadline. A balance was struck whereby Mol council paid the host families an allowance in return for the partner municipalities inspecting the host homes, especially from the hygiene angle. At the request of Santo Tomas and Kara Kara, the young people from Mol supported their Southern partners by providing training in art and the Third World, and on how to organise participation. Mol’s North-South official kept

matters under ongoing review, because a trip by a group of young people needs to be well-prepared in terms of practical details (participant and group leader selection, letters to embassies, insurance, etc.) and content. The participants undertook to follow training before leaving, go on a combined weekend course, perform tasks and devise awareness-building activities. This created both in Mol and the partner municipality a process of ongoing co-operation between the young people themselves, between the young people and the partner municipalities, and between the young people and the local council services. Until very recently, young people had little right to be involved in local politics in Niger and Nicaragua. The exchanges that took place created opportunities.

More details of this scheme can be found in the Mol council brochure: "The four sisters linkup, an instructive meeting between young people from different cultures"

Chapter 2

Where to start?

A city link agreement should be the most inclusive possible process, because the aim, once the link is established, is to create the widest possible network between the North and South.

Ideally, the linkage should be internally- and externally-based.

- *Internally*: other council departments, local civil servants and aldermen, the town council, the town clerk, the departmental heads committee, the information officer, etc.
- *Externally*: the local development co-operation advisory board, interested citizens and their groups, trade bodies like shopkeepers' associations, business groups, etc.

Both bases are essential to long-term success. If handled by just one or two individuals (aldermen and/or the North-South official), the city link may not survive the next council elections. An expert committee of concerned officials and department heads can ensure that the initiative is firmly rooted in the municipality. At the same time, a local development co-operation advisory board working group can handle the practicalities of the city link. It is important to promote regular consultation between the two.

Below is a multi-phase plan for a city link. It is guidance rather than a sure-fire solution, because each city link has its own characteristics and develops in its own way. The principles of the plan are:

1. The start is never easy: the municipality has to accept that it is in a learning curve and is venturing into innovative solutions without following well-worn paths.
2. Accept setbacks: by all means dream of a future ideal city link, but start from what is (especially strengths) and learn from the mistakes.
3. Preferably work with an open agenda: what the municipality does with its partner is less important than how they work together.
4. Be aware that a city link is only one way of contributing to local development in the South. A municipality in the North cannot tackle all the problems, but can form a key link. Think carefully about how and in what areas your municipality's knowledge and experiences can yield significant added value.

You can use this practical summary to inform the members of expert committees on the different phases of the plan, for example.

Summary of the plan in phases:

Preparation	Stage 1	Concept of the city link as part of international cooperation policy
	Stage 2	Broad consultation on the aim and creation of the link
	Stage 3	Back to the policy options



Approval of the outcomes of this phase and decision to start the next phase

Search	Stage 4	Partner profiling
	Stage 5	Searching for and choosing the partner



Approval of the outcomes of this phase and decision to start the next phase

Cooperation	Stage 6	Confirm the choice of partner and first visit
	Stage 7	Draw up a long-term cooperation programme



2.1 Preparation (stages 1, 2, and 3)

STAGE 1 – CONCEPT OF THE CITY LINK AS PART OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION POLICY

- Discussion on the objectives of municipal international co-operation (in the council cabinet², town council, local development co-operation advisory board...)
- Discussion on the concept and purpose of a city link (with all the partners concerned)
- Development of an appropriate communication strategy (in collaboration with the communication or information department)

This first stage is all about getting a consensus on what a “city link” means, and positioning it within broader international co-operation policy. A key aspect of the preparation phase is engaging consultation with politicians, services, organisations, the public, etc.

- Consensus and political will. The objectives of the municipal international co-operation should be discussed. The lead official and/or council cabinet member can write a background note in agreement with the advisory board. The council cabinet member will comment on the note in the council cabinet and town council meetings. The council cabinet member can (must?) make his/her colleagues aware of the significance of such a North-South/South-North policy and to try to energise the entire municipality around it. In this first phase, it will be easily evident how much commitment exists to formulate a policy and how much local government needs to engage with the project. The discussion should preferably be fed back to the advisory board.
- Concept and purpose of a city link. The questions to be asked here are: Why does our municipality want to enter into a city link? What added value can we offer? What are our strengths and weaknesses? What can we help the partner municipality with? What are we going to do, and what should we preferably not do? Are we taking our future partner municipality’s criticisms seriously enough, and are we ready to adapt our policy if need be? What budgets do we want to earmark for the city link and with what aims: can we allocate a separate budget (see stage 2) on top of, for example, departmental operating expenses, the local development co-operation advisory board’s operating expenses, grants to NGOs? Is there a general consensus on spending part of the budget on

² The “council cabinet” in Belgium means the mayor and lead council members for policy areas

field missions? You can then think about tying the qualifying criteria for local council subsidies for projects run by individuals and NGOs more closely to the (future) city link, such as by adding a new criterion of “a local government focus” or by allocating additional subsidies to initiatives that support the (future) city link. Such decisions clearly have consequences: draw up a detailed statement of the policy to be pursued or adapt it if it already exists, rethink the budget in light of the city link, review the subsidies rules, communicate on policy.

- A communication strategy agreed with the communication or information service. The aim is to explain the purpose of the policy (to create transparency), and to motivate the individuals and NGOs concerned around it.

STAGE 2 – BROAD CONSULTATION ON THE AIM OF THE CITY LINK

- Consultation of the council departments and council on the definition/ concept and profile
- Consultation of the advisory board
- List of partners in the municipality and their activities
- Consideration of budget implications (review sources of funding)
- Refine the communication strategy by adding new elements
 - How to present your own municipality as a partner?
 - Communication with partners in the North
 - Communication within your municipality and council (according to the policy areas selected)

In fact, the groundwork for a city link starts with a collective agreement: the creation of a base (consensus) on the concept of the city link. It is important that there should be no misunderstandings later (“That’s not what I understood by a city link!”). This is why wide-ranging consultation is necessary both within and outside the council.

Consultation of departments/councillors and detailed profiling

Write a comprehensible document elaborating on the definition and concept of a city link. Outline the broader context in which the city link is set: see that the link ties in with the council’s international policy, that there is a linkage with sustainable development policy, that it squares with the Flemish agreements policy or the Belgian federal programme, etc. The document can also outline the opportunities offered by a city link for council departments that show an interest in cooperating with the North-South service.

Write a second document profiling your municipality. First draft a proposal and ask departmental heads (or their assistants) to comment on it. This is not a tourist brochure, but a presentation of the municipality as a worthwhile partner for international co-operation. A profile can address the following questions:

- Population size?
- Geographical traits?
- Statistical data?
- What image does the municipality want to develop? Who are we? In what area do we see ourselves as most distinctive?
- What are our strengths and what can we offer? What are our weaknesses?
- What are the general objectives of the current policy?

It is important to present the full package in practical terms to your colleagues. That is crucial for the choice of the partner municipality and the policy spheres in which you want to/can cooperate. If your strengths lie in youth policy (youth activities programme, young people's participation in the youth council, children's council, network of youth centres, etc.), this can top the list of avenues for co-operation. But remain open to other proposals from potential partner municipalities. You can get a lot out of cooperating in a sphere in which your own municipality is not yet particularly strong (e.g., community involvement in creating liveable neighbourhoods). You are likely to learn a lot about the participatory method of a Southern partner. In practise, however, we have found that Northern municipalities prefer to start from their own strengths and offer them as areas for practical co-operation.

Specific consultation of council departments – e.g., going round each department in turn – quickly reveals existing international contacts, and which staff members are receptive to municipal international policy and want to cooperate actively in a city link. They will be potential candidates for an internal committee of experts. In the opening phase, such a committee will reach a consensus on the profile and criteria for the partner search.

Advisory boards

Advisory boards can play a major role in the three-way relation between local civil servants, politicians and NGOs-civil society. They can work with the committee of experts on writing the profile of the municipality and identifying the selection criteria for the partner municipality. The board is an advisory body. It is the municipal council that takes the decisions and has policy and financial responsibility. A properly prepared joint briefing session with the local development co-operation advisory board will pre-

vent frictions arising over information disclosure, discussions, etc. Co-operation with the local development co-operation advisory board also offers many opportunities for creating the city link.

Detailed list of partner municipalities

Draw up a detailed list of existing and potential partners within your own municipality.

- What are their activities in the North (including awareness-building) and/or in the South (investment or capacity-building support for projects/processes, awareness-building...)
- What is their approach to international co-operation?

Also, get information on potential relationships and projects from the local development co-operation advisory board. That will give you an idea of the opportunities for co-operation with other partners, which is key to broadening the social basis of support. Balanced co-operation makes it easier to create general public awareness. Collective initiatives will be essential to raise the profile and visibility of the city link.

HOLD A PUBLIC CONSULTATION CONFERENCE

Kortrijk City Council took care not to go into a city link with a "rich helping the poor" attitude. The concept definition was focused on equality. In what it called the "exploratory" phase, the council gave thought to its own activities as the first step in identifying criteria for writing its own profile and looking for a future partner.

To maximize involvement in the partner search (local civil servants, politicians, NGOs and their activists, young people, sociocultural organisations,...), the city council organised a conference on 7 December 2002 on the role of local government in international co-operation. The objectives were:

- to provide information on North-South policy and municipal international co-operation, and more specifically all aspects of the city link,
- to provide information specific to the choices made,
- to reach a wide audience and stimulate involvement (especially among different council departments).

The conference was a great success, attracting 100 participants, with only council departments and elected officeholders under-represented. There were outstanding speeches and discussions, not in the least with the university professor Michael Tharakan from the Kerala-based Centre for Development Studies in India. The issues addressed included the interaction between local government and civil society, equality between partner municipalities, thoughts on educational and youth exchanges, participation, and more.

As groundwork for the conference, Kortrijk council had sent a questionnaire to the Kerala Institute of Local Administration to canvass its views on international co-operation and local government's role in it.

After the conference, a number of people volunteered to monitor the Kortrijk working group. The absent council departments and elected officeholders were indirectly informed, and international co-operation became a fixed item on the agenda. The information given and the contacts with the South were used as a basis for choices to be made with reference to the city link.

Budget

Examine whether your municipality has sufficient financial resources to engage in a city link. Given the specifically municipal character of the city link, we advise Flemish municipalities to earmark a small but ring-fenced budget additional to the subsidies granted to NGOs and the local development co-operation advisory board. This will also help avoid friction with these partners, who may fear that the city link will lead to the loss of their own subsidies. So, be clear on the budget and work organisation from the outset. You can also include a provision in the subsidy rules – drawn up by the local development co-operation advisory board in agreement with the council – giving preferential treatment to NGOs that support the city link. You cannot set up a city link unless the two partners can meet regularly. Bear in mind that you may also encounter opposition on this from the local administration and the public. Often, field visits from – and especially to – the South are seen as junkets. On the other hand, in the view of one Flemish municipality: “to play in the Champions League, a Belgian football team has to travel all over Europe, and no-one finds that unusual. In the same way, you can only really develop a city link through regular exchanges.”

Communication

Communication is key at every stage of preparations. It is in this phase that the communication strategy will be fine-tuned: How do you communicate within your own executive and council, how do you communicate with the

new partners in the North (or the South, in the case of southern readers), and how do you present your own municipality as a partner?

STAGE 3 – TESTING AGAINST THE POLICY OPTIONS

- Does it match the policy statements?
- Look at alternatives (e.g., working with networks and multilateral co-operation)
- Compare your own profile to that of the partners concerned, and communicate to the public
- Evaluate the preparations

After having canvassed the council departments, drawn up a profile and assessed your partners, you need to stand back and consider whether what you have come up with stacks up against the policy statement and the municipality's priorities. In other words, is the city link still the best option for our municipality, or do we still have too much to do within our own municipality (strengthening the internal or external base, finding a budget, lack of experience with international co-operation...)?

If the answer to these questions is “no”, consider possible alternatives for the municipality. For the alternatives “working with networks” and “multilateral co-operation”, go to chapter 5 of this handbook.

Do not just assume that you have nothing to offer your partner. Here are some thoughts from front-line operators: “There are a lot of things that Flemish local authorities could take a little more pride in. Clean streets, strictly controlled waste recycling, a high level of volunteering (in advisory boards, voluntary organizations, composting...), the work put in by some local civil servants and leaders... sometimes we don't play up our achievements enough”.

If the answer to the questions is “yes”, then you are ready to go: the municipality is favourable to a city link. Get the scheme approved by the executive council and/or the town council: there is consensus, there is a political will, proper internal and external consultations have taken place, the thinking is in line, an initial profile of the municipality has been sketched out. All that then remains is for the local authority to take a decision on the next phase: we can start looking for a partner!

You can write a report or brochure summarizing the objectives and key reasons for a city link for internal and external consumption. You can also include the adjusted profile in it (after canvassing departments), and the

assessment of partners in your own municipality, and a few considerations by way of an evaluation of this phase. Now is also the time to inform the local population fully about what has been done so far.

2.2 The partner search (stages 4 and 5)

STAGE 4 – PROFILE OF THE PARTNER MUNICIPALITY

- Set the criteria, wishes and critical points
- Draw up a document for the future partner municipality
- Feedback for the candidates

Criteria

Now some key snags have been ironed out, it is time to look for a partner. But what kind of municipality are we looking for? And where do we look?

Flemish municipalities work out the criteria for their future partner by reference to their own profile. Some questions to ask:

1. In what part of the world? Is the municipality in a region or country on the DAC list (the DAC is the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD))? Does the local development co-operation advisory board have a preference for a particular continent, region, country, or municipality?
2. Are there criteria that will rule it out? Critical points? Or just a few key criteria? What is the “best fit”? Examples. Some Flemish municipalities prefer not to cooperate with a Spanish-speaking municipality and choose Dutch, French, or English as a working language. So: how important is the common working language in communication between municipalities? Some insist on having at least a telephone and a fax. Or are we looking for a municipality by reference to one or more specific features of our municipality (e.g., only a coastal town of a certain size)?
3. As regards the Southern municipality: Does it have a level of political self-government (contextual factor = decentralization), how is the municipality structured internally, what budget and financial resources does it have? How big is it, and what is its population size? What are its key characteristics (e.g., a coastal town or a small rural village)? Where do its strengths and weaknesses lie (in comparison with the Northern municipality’s profile)? How does it see its relations with the population or civil society (participatory bodies, volunteering, etc.)? Does it have other linkages or experience of international arrangements? ...

How to write all that up for potentially interested municipalities?

You can address the following aspects in a document that you write and send out to potential partners.

First, as in the consultations in your own municipality, explain the concept of the city link. Emphasize the exchange of knowledge and experiences, and the importance of a two-way process. Give a short introduction to your municipality/town and possibly a brief run-through of the aldermen and their responsibilities.

You can also give a run-down on current municipal policy priorities. Then give a clear statement of what is expected of the partner and find out about its policy: Who are the policy-making officials, what policy responsibilities do they have? When were they elected and by whom? What are the existing council departments (how is the authority organised)? Has the local authority drawn up a management plan? What are the action points, where are the focuses, the obstacles? You can emphasize your intention to “think about this cooperation agreement together”: What can we do together? How do we go about it? Find out how committed the partner is, e.g., as regards support for staff: is the partner willing to hire or appoint a coordinator for the city link? If you consider it important, you can ask whether it has already set up links with other municipalities. You can set additional conditions. So, Antwerp³ set the city link in a framework of sustainable development, gender equality and democracy. Ask to make proposals: What are your policy priorities? Do you already have proposals for co-operation? You can possibly inquire about any past contacts with your own municipality.

Finally, explain how an interested partner can react, e.g., by filling out a project profile sheet...

Do not forget to give your own municipality’s contact details.

If you are expecting a lot of applications, you would be better off limiting the information sheet and putting this kind of question at a later selection of candidate partners (e.g., when they have been narrowed down to a short-list).

Feedback

This document should preferably circulate first within the specific working group, council cabinet⁴, town council, local development co-operation advisory board, etc. Once consensus has been achieved, both the document

³ A Flemish city.

⁴ The “council cabinet” in Belgium means the mayor and lead council members for policy areas

and the municipality profile can be translated. Remember to allocate a budget for translation.

STAGE 5 – PARTNER SEARCH AND SELECTION

- Channels for making contact
- Communication on own and desired partner's profiles
- Collect information
- Agree on how to react, e.g., if the partner is not suitable
- Ask for additional information from potential partners
- Narrow it down from a longlist to a shortlist of prospects

Channels for making contact: where will we find the ideal partner?

1. Chance contacts

Some Northern municipalities have forged links with Southern partners as a result of chance contacts: an officeholder who was interested by a Southern colleague's story at an international congress, a local inhabitant who had worked for years in the South, an NGO which had already for some time been running a project in the South supported by the municipality, a municipality contacted by a university with planned projects in the South, or by the Belgian government on a request from the South, etc. One striking thing is the need felt by all at one time or another to put things on a formal basis. Chance-based co-operation schemes can turn into a proper city link if close attention is paid to the specific characteristics of the municipality! So, do not rule out chance.

Herent had long-standing links with Guatemala. The Herent-born priest Fons Stessel worked for many years in Guatemala, where he was murdered. Bernard Dumoulin, the current North-South official, worked there for seven years with his wife and is already fluent in Q'eqchi. What more natural than for Herent to want to further develop these links.

2. Civic participation

It is worth finding out if any local people have contacts in the South (or if you are an African or Surinamese reader, in the North), and what opportunities such contacts may offer for a firm city link. "Have you got any interesting suggestions or good contacts? Tell us how that could constitute a good base for a city link."

In 2002, Edegem local council set up a city link committee comprising representatives of different departments, various experts and the chair of the local development co-operation advisory board. The committee drew up the municipality's profile as information for candidate partners in the South. Edegem residents were able to take part in choosing the partner. They could notify the committee of any contacts they had in the South. Edegem finally chose to link up with the local council of San Jerónimo in Peru via an existing contact with a Flemish NGO operating in the Peruvian town, so the profile was not circulated internationally.

3. Press and embassies

You can also put out a call via the local press. Another possibility is to make inquiries of embassies in the committee of experts' preferred countries.

4. Outside organisations

You can contact Flemish or European municipalities (or ones in your country, for readers in the South) that already have experience in this field, the association of Flemish cities and municipalities in Belgium (VVSG), or its counterpart in your country. They will very likely know which municipalities in the South would like to cooperate with a local authority in the North (or vice versa). They can also forward your request to sister organisations abroad.

Or you can explore all these avenues at the same time! Each approach has its advantages. It is for each individual municipality to decide how to go about it. Whatever approach you take, the main thing is to talk about it with the discussion bodies (advisory board), local voluntary organizations and concerned residents. You can get an outside consultant to help you prepare the partner search if you want.

You might get a large number of possible contacts that you need to pre-select from based on preset criteria. But whatever else, you will have a first list of potential partners (the longlist). You can send them the document referred to earlier, asking if the profile interests them and whether they want to/can apply to be a partner.

You must set realistic deadlines for applications, bearing in mind that some local authorities have more formal procedures than in Flanders. City and municipal councils in countries like Morocco or Surinam, for example, have to submit their proposals on a city link agreement to their national governments first.

Communication

During the process, you can discuss your and the desired partner's profiles within your municipality, what you have done so far, and what you plan to do next.

Collect information

At the same time, you can collect information yourselves by reading publications on North-South issues, consulting websites, asking for information from European and international organisations, NGOs (like 11.11.11 in Belgium), studying examples of good practises in subsidy programmes, contacting embassies, etc.

Reactions

It is important for the committee of experts to agree on how to respond to reactions (within the municipality or from the partner municipality), especially if the candidate is unsuitable.

Additional information

Later on, you will have to ask potential partners for more information. Get the committee of experts to draw up a checklist for that (and see stage 4, the authority decides for itself exactly when it wants more information).

From longlisting to shortlisting

The applications are coming in. After the deadline, the committee makes a first selection based on the profile, criteria, and expectations of both partners. This is the *shortlist*.

The council may request additional information from shortlisted candidates to help the final choice. An exchange of views on co-operation and a comparison of expectations can play an important role (see below, "cooperation agreement"). A comparative table of pros and cons can be drawn up from this shortlist as the basis for elimination by the committee of experts, which will submit its proposal to the council cabinet⁵. If it is hard to choose between the final two candidates, it may be helpful to meet officials from these cities or municipalities in person before deciding. Bear in mind that you have to get along well with others in order to work with them.

This concludes another phase – the search. Once again, you have to get official approval and a decision to embark on the next phase (co-operation).

⁵ The "council cabinet" in Belgium means the mayor and lead council members for policy areas

The search is over but there is no proper city link yet. You have a partner municipality, but only on paper. Now, you have to get better acquainted.

2.3 Co-operation

STAGE 6 – CONFIRMING THE PARTNER SELECTION

- Initial contact to confirm the choice and make appointments to get better acquainted
- Identification visit and confirmation (from South to North and vice versa)
- What is an identification visit?
- Priorities before, during, and after
- Before you go
- While you are there
- After the visit: follow-up
- Presentation of the co-operation protocol and consultation of all those concerned in both municipalities

Initial contact with the partner

Now the choice has been made, the selected partner municipality needs to be informed. You should get in touch with the partner to confirm your choice and agree on the co-operation. The first thing is to set up an “identification visit”.

What is an identification visit?

Here, identification means exploring the partner municipality, setting the broad lines and starting points, general framework of co-operation, and its feasibility.

There are various points of identification all throughout the co-operation process: identification of the partner municipality, identification of the co-operation process, identification of concrete projects, etc. At each of these points you should (need to?) organise an “identification visit”.

Remember: before leaving, there must be a consensus in council on the essentials and key choices:

- The end purpose: why does the municipality want to contribute to development cooperation through a city link?
- The added value: What do we have to offer?

- Minimum criteria: things that determine what we do, what we don't do, what we finance, what we don't finance...

If you have not yet made these choices, you will find it hard to give a firm answer on the different proposals that will be made. We tell Flemish municipalities that they should not be afraid to make their own proposals, that it is even a good idea. If you just wait for the future partner to come up with initiatives, you may well see them produce a “shopping list” of everything they want to see done. In this case, the relation comes down to a “you give, they get” situation.

What are the key issues for a working visit (before, during, and after)?

- Communication, internal and external, is vital from the start. Good, regular communication helps create transparency and a solid partnership. You need a frank dialogue in which you can address all issues. For example, try to include the “shopping list” issues in the municipality's policy planning and priorities. This helps put the co-operation on a professional basis. You should also keep the staff, council and local residents of your own municipality informed.

- The participants going on the visit must be thoughtfully and rationally selected. It helps transparency. Do not take too many people, and justify those you do take; explain the purpose of the trip, and what their respective tasks will be. Prepare the participants properly for the visit: What are the tasks and responsibilities? Share out the tasks, agree in advance on who keeps the money, who takes the decisions, who does the negotiating, who writes the report, what are the expectations on return. Participants should preferably be selected according to the issues addressed on the visit, in agreement with the partner.

An initial visit (exploring the partner municipality/identification of possible areas for co-operation) is certainly different from a technical mission. Elected officeholders (council cabinet⁶ or municipal local civil servants), as well as the North-South/South-North official should be involved in an initial visit. This needs to be discussed with local residents, internally, and with the partner municipality. The Etterbeek council cabinet, for example, chose to send municipal councillors from all political groups on its first mission to Essaouira (partner in Morocco). This was a good strategic move, because huge empathy is generated during a mission.

⁶ The “council cabinet” in Belgium means the mayor and lead council members for policy areas

Timing. Adapt the pace of your working visit to local ways and timings (see chapter 3 “Other cultures: challenging and inspirational”). Make allowance for such things as feast days, holidays, festivals, town council meetings and different work paces.

Follow-up: Remember to pay sufficient attention to follow-up, as there is often a big void after a working visit.

How to prepare a visit?

The next few pages set out a checklist for working and identification visits. After that, we look only at aspects that require more explanation.

Consultation and agreement with the partner municipality are key at each stage (of preparation) of a working visit. It is important for the two municipalities to agree clearly on the purpose and programme of the visit. Each municipality must also spell out what it expects from the visit.

IDENTIFICATION VISIT CHECKLIST

1. To do before the overseas working visit (field visit)
 - Draft the terms of reference (see below)
 - Consultation between alderman and lead officer
 - Consultation with the partner municipality
 - Internal communication: how to inform the different departments and get them involved in the identification mission?
 - Communicate with the local population
 - Write a memo with terms of reference (and have it translated and circulated)
 - Practical groundwork for the visit
 - Select candidates according to the criteria set out in the terms of reference
 - Discuss the mission, expectations, each participant’s tasks and programme, and post-visit expectations with the participants
 - Collect information on the country and partner municipality: history, politics, culture, local government bodies, decentralization (of the partner municipality, NGOs, embassies, ministries, universities, research centres, personal relations, websites, etc.). Get the information from sources at home and abroad.
 - Collect essential travel information: weather, customs, mobile phone coverage, gifts, clothing...
 - Practical arrangements: apply for travel documents, vaccines, insurance, plane tickets, book accommodation, foreign currency (agree on who will handle the money during the visit), voltage and mains sockets, transport during the working visit...

- Discuss and organise language and translation requirements in detail
- Give your country's embassy advance notice of the working visit.
- During the visit
 - Check regularly that all items in the terms of reference have been discussed
 - Discuss regularly how the programme is going
 - Agree about the report (who will write it, deadline, form and contents, to whom sent, etc.) and keep the contents under review.
 - A final assessment meeting to evaluate the working visit and discuss follow-up. Possibly set up a press conference.
- After the visit
 - Write a carefully-drafted report that follows what was agreed
 - Joint discussion with local civil servants and aldermen
 - Internal communication: council departments, council cabinet⁷, town council, advisory board...
 - Communication with the public
 - Organise awareness-building activities

2. To do before receiving a working visit by a delegation from abroad

Same list as above, with some additional activities:

- See how to get council departments, lead officers and town councillors participating in the visit
- Check which actors within the municipality can be proactively involved in the visit
- Examine whether the delegation itself can take part in awareness-building activities
- Possibly invite the embassy of the country concerned to the official reception
- Check whether interpreters are needed and how many
- Supply the visiting delegation with the information they need about hotels (and host families), food, clothing, weather, transport during the visit, allowances and/or spending money, foreign currencies, travel documents, names and addresses of the contact persons, provide town street plans, possibly phonecards, public transport tickets, etc. and reassure the members of the delegation that they will be met at the airport
- Send information on customs

⁷ The “council cabinet” in Belgium means the mayor and lead council members for policy areas

- Take out health and public liability insurance for the members of the delegation. Tell the visitors clearly that they are insured and what the insurance covers.
- Preferably, allow for some non-official activities during the working visit
- Allow some free time for your guests. But make sure they understand what you want and expect of them
- Keep coming back to the programme during the working visit
- A final meeting to run through what has been agreed and plan the follow-up
- Evaluation and feedback after the working visit: reports in both municipalities

Preparations before leaving: internal memo on agreements and terms of reference

You must draw up a memo on what has been agreed about the trips abroad, setting out the quality criteria, conditions and follow-up, and possibly even the composition of the delegations. You can also agree on how the allowances (what the council will pay, and what expenses the participants will pay) are to be allocated.

It is important that the composition of the delegation, and the terms of reference (see below) should be decided in consultation with the aldermen/councillors, and preferably also with the committee of experts and definitely with the partner municipality.

What are the “terms of reference”?

The “terms of reference” are the things agreed on that all the parties concerned can refer to in a discussion or for clarification.

The terms of reference are contained in the document written before the visit, in agreement with all the parties concerned, with unanimous agreement on the following aspects:

- Reason for the mission: why is this working visit being held?
- Framework: what is the broader context to the visit?
- Objective: what is the exact objective?
- Desired outcomes: what do we want to achieve? (summary of problems – priorities set)
- Participants: description of profile and/or selection criteria
- Programme: description and scheduling of activities
- Description of issues to be addressed. For an initial identification visit, these could be:
 - Getting a picture of the local situation (local council, council departments, local services provided, voluntary groups, specific organisations, ...)
 - Identification of all parties concerned: contact persons, key individuals in setting up the co-operation
 - List of the partner municipality's priority policy spheres
 - Joint discussion on the choice of areas in which cooperation is sought
 - Joint discussion on the objectives
 - Joint discussion on the short- and long-term outcomes to be achieved
 - Feasibility assessment
 - Assessment of the partner municipality's commitment
 - Joint discussion on how to go about it (planning, types of activities, staff motivation, investments, etc.)
 - Joint discussion on the budget
 - Agreement on communication and follow-up between the two municipalities
 - Draw up a common agreement on future co-operation
 - ...
- Evaluation
- Follow-up on the visit

An initial identification visit will often encounter difficulties, because it is the first time the participants meet.

Possible obstacles:

- One of the partners does not ask (what we think are) relevant questions/ puts nothing down on paper
- One of the partners does not have transparent criteria for the selection and composition of delegations
- The partner does not come up with a programme
- The partner comes with a shopping list of pressing needs

These obstacles can be got around during the process of getting to know one another and co-operation, by learning how to accommodate cultural differences (see chapter 3, “other cultures”) and by setting down on paper as much as possible of what was agreed during the working visits and missions.

It is a good idea to specify before each visit what activities will be set up: gather information on the local authorities (find out more), try to get a better understanding of the local authority set-up, organise a conference with all the actors involved (private and public sector as well as civil society if possible), organise consultation/discussion events with all the actors involved, visit completed projects, discuss ongoing projects, discuss policy priorities and opportunities for co-operation.

During the visit

Quickly check whether everything you planned – activities and topics for discussion – is being addressed during the field visit (in other words check the terms of reference). Field visits tend to have crowded programmes. Draw up a realistic scheme of activities. Allow sufficient time for an identification visit, always arrange a final evaluation meeting and discuss follow-up (e.g., drawing up a cooperation agreement). Take the time needed for this (a full day is not too much) so that you can draw up a protocol and/or prepare the next field visit together there and then.

Dialogue is key all throughout the visit. Only if you are clear about each side’s expectations and points of view will you be agreed on a project that is supported and interpreted in the same way by both partners.

Examples of misunderstandings and areas of tension:

- No regular communication for technical reasons or lack of proper understanding
- The partner will not/cannot invest in an official to coordinate the cooperation process (resulting in poor follow-up, difficult contacts, inconsistency...)
- Continuous demand for purely financial support (vague objectives, different expectations)
- The actual partner proves not to be the local council but the mayor who runs a one-man show (lack of transparency, deficient administration, etc.)
- Tension between the process and project: it may already be clear on the first visit that one of the parties concerned is interested only in concrete schemes
- Tension between the different expectations: between the experts' opinions and the involvement of the different actors, tension between the expectations of front-line workers and top management, tension between the expectations of the North and South. Identification is a key exercise in achieving balance, therefore
- Local government corruption issues
- Other possible obstacles (see also chapter 3, "other cultures")

For a proper understanding, you must establish dialogue and not back away from confrontation!

It is particularly important on a first identification visit to test the water by observing how co-operation works and choosing projects. Bear these priorities in mind:

- Projects must match the key choices already made.
- Projects must be conferred in.
- Think about the added value and complementarity of the specific projects compared to other municipal projects, and the initiatives of NGOs and other funders.

A real-life example: On a field visit to the partner city of Sucre in Bolivia, Mechelen discovered that a major Swiss NGO funder was operating there with the same objectives (but with a region-wide reach, where Mechelen was focused more on the municipality and its urban hinterland). Mechelen wanted to work with the NGO, but would run the risk of being "swallowed up". The Mechelen delegation pressed to cooperate directly with the local authority and for transparent means. Joint discussion eventually produced a compromise with the Swiss funder.

- Do not just involve specialists in projects, get the community immediately affected involved, too.
- Try to identify the key people.
- Think about the interests of both municipalities. Try and link interests to capacities.
- Agree on the allocation of tasks and responsibilities.

Whatever else, you must get enough information and acquire enough experience to be able to decide whether it is worth the trouble of continuing to cooperate with the partner selected. If – despite the good intentions – you feel that communication between you is not good, that the partner is showing little or no commitment, sees you only as a funding source, and there is no way of getting a phased approach going, you would be better to rethink your choice from the beginning and call a halt to the co-operation.

What should a dialogue between partner municipalities include?

1. View of world relations, society, the role of local government, what municipal international co-operation is about.
2. The field visit: what is the local authority's role within the shared vision, what is co-operation between two local authorities meant to do?
3. Objectives
 - What do you want to achieve through the co-operation? Long-term, short-term?
 - What is the focus: administrative co-operation, exchange, financial assistance...
 - What are the expectations? Are they the same on both sides and achievable? Are they appropriate to the vision (common or both partners separately)?
4. Conditions, wants, ...
 - Transparency, honesty with one another
 - Local transparency, involvement of local communities, civil society...
 - Deadlines
 - Joint planning, monitoring, evaluation
5. Practical arrangements
 - Communication: how, how often, what, ...
 - Planning: joint, annual, strategic, with input from the actors...
 - Financial transfers: how?

After the visit

Follow-up

After the delegation's visit, there must be: reporting back, joint discussion between the lead officer and alderman, internal and external communication, a work-up of the agreements concluded during the field visit and possibly organisation of awareness-raising activities.

During the visit, the necessary agreements were reached on communication and follow-up. Go through the draft protocol with the actors concerned: the city links working group, the local development co-operation advisory board, the town council,...

Or suggest drawing up a cooperation agreement and submitting it to the partner so that both parties are properly informed. You can fine-tune the details and sign it on the next working visit.

The report: the document drawn up in both municipalities after the visit:

- reference back to the terms of reference
- objective of the field visit
- description of outcomes
- description of activities
- summary of information gathered on topics and issues to be addressed
- reasons for any changes to the programme, group of participants...
- report on the evaluation during the visit
- description of post-visit follow-up
- financial report

Why conclude a cooperation agreement?

Getting to know the partner is not just a matter of concluding a contract. But a contract

- puts the co-operation on an official footing;
- ratifies the agreements reached, which are and remain in force now and in the future for those who have made them and for the others concerned;
- acts as guidance for the two partners.

We have to again emphasize the importance of dialogue in this process. The contract can only try to be a record of the understanding.

The cooperation agreement is also a strategic instrument: getting it signed by all the political groups in your and the partner's municipalities avoids problems in case of a change of executive.

What can/must be laid down in a cooperation agreement?

A cooperation agreement:

1. creates a general framework with
 - the common vision of and general objectives for the city link
 - the limits of co-operation (what can and cannot be done)
 - the founding principles of the partnership:
 - I) The definition of priority partners inside and outside the local authority (involvement of civil society – broadening the social basis of support), possibly – set up a committee in each municipality (council executives, local civil servants, volunteers, etc.)
 - II) Reciprocity
 - III) Joint planning, follow-up, evaluation...
2. and lays down the key practical agreements (= reciprocal undertakings) as regards:
 - administrative follow-up or support,
 - duration of the agreement (and the scope/procedure for extension),
 - communication/disclosure of information,
 - finances,
 - agreements on planning, follow-up, evaluation,
 - assurances on follow-up, maintenance, investments...
 - discussions, agreements on revision of the protocol.

STAGE 7 – DEVELOPING A LONG-TERM COOPERATION PROGRAMME

- Work out a multi-year approach with an annual programme that sets specific objectives and projects
- Talk about the programme – internally and externally
- Analyse council staff's training needs
- Implementation
- Follow-up and evaluation

We have not rushed into things at this stage, but may well already be 2 or 3 years on from our initial stage. Following the options chosen in the preceding phases, the two partners now work out a long-term cooperation programme.

- Work out with your partner a multi-year approach and an annual programme with a schedule for follow-up and readjustment. If you want to take part in subsidy programmes, make sure that your plans can easily fit in with the application form requirements.
- Also plan and budget for carrying out small-scale projects. Bear in mind that a city link is a long process and enables the two municipalities to work out a strategic plan in one or more policy spheres. But it is important to carry out concrete projects on a regular basis using a pilot scheme

so that the people and politicians in the North and South are won over. One example – a plan to develop tourism gives a long-term boost to the economy and jobs. In the short term, you can hire an unskilled individual as caretaker of a historical monument, run a road to a tourist site or install sanitation. For this, it may often be necessary and even advisable to sound out NGOs about what the region really needs, and get them to carry out certain tasks.

- Stay in contact with the staff, local council, civil society and local population, both at home and out there. Talk to your partner frequently.
- Analyse what training the council staff (and public) will need in international co-operation and city links. Then, work out a training programme for your own council staff.
- Implement the annual programme systematically and invest small amounts as planned
- Review the city link regularly, readjust it where necessary and include evaluation sessions.

SOME THINGS THAT STOP THIS PHASE WORKING

- The partner has no central information point available to you (North-South coordinator).
- Too few local civil servants (to send on field visits, facilitate processes or analyse problems) in your municipality, or no local civil servants available because they are busy with other priorities.
- Inequalities between partners create an imbalance/can harm the relationship (no reciprocity or parity)

MECHELEN AND SUCRE COOPERATE ON TOURISM

In 1996, the Flemish city of Mechelen took the first steps towards cooperating with Sucre, the constitutional capital of Bolivia. Although the two partners had always got on well, things did not go smoothly: every change in control of the council meant a struggle for survival, coping with practical problems (key people going, communication breakdown,...), but they always found the strength to keep going.

As both were historical cities with a rich cultural heritage, their chosen policy sphere for co-operation was cultural tourism.

During the co-operation with Mechelen, a process was started that would enable Sucre council to leverage its cultural heritage as a tourist asset.

During this time, the city councils not only co-operated on international relations, tourism, culture and museum and monument management, but also with external partners, like the hospitality industry, the Mechelen Catholic college and Sucre University's department of tourism.

Practical achievements:

- The Sucre actors concerned are represented in an Inter-Institutional Committee (IIC) for tourism, whose Articles have received official recognition and which is now operational.
- Local civil servants, educators and members of the tourist guides federation went on a training course. The experience acquired was passed on to colleagues in Sucre.
- The Sucre website was adapted and translated into French, English and German.
- The IIC worked out new common promotional strategies. A first tourist brochure was printed in Spanish and English.
- The council's tourism manager was appointed secretary of the IIC, strengthening her position within the municipality. In the last change of control of the authority, she was not moved but was able to keep her post, probably because the private sector and local authority see her as a key person in the co-operation with Mechelen.
- The tourism training courses dispensed by Sucre University and the Mechelen college were compared to better address the needs of industry and to be able to add extra language courses. This again demonstrates the importance of having the university in the IIC, to provide a meeting place for industry and education.

- In Mechelen itself, the city link was used as a starting point to create public awareness. A page on relations with Sucre was added to the Mechelen website. In 2002, Mechelen council organised a themed month on Bolivia in collaboration with the library, the Fine Arts Academy, the 11.11.11 campaign, and the NGO *Muzieklabyrint* ("Music Labyrinth"), which organized a workshop on the Bolivian panpipes. The workshop (with workbook files to prepare the pupils for the workshop and help them assimilate the knowledge afterwards) was offered free of charge to all sixth-year primary school children in Mechelen, and repeated in 2003.

By making the necessary readjustments and adaptations to their planning, the partners overcame all the obstacles to achieve a successful first year.

This readied them to set up other future activities.

Their long-term aim is to work out a plan to increase foreign tourism in the region (to boost local incomes and jobs), and make Bolivia's central authorities aware of the need to invest there.

The exchange of know-how is not a one-way street. Various aspects of management in Mechelen were criticised and readjusted in the common action plan.

In light of past problems, the North/South official turned to civil society for help. A city link working group of the recently-established Consultative Committee has set new initiatives going that add to the co-operation between municipalities... The social basis of support is being successfully broadened.

In 2003, the city link as such was reviewed and readjusted where necessary. Clearer cooperation agreements were worked on. The municipality wants to collaborate in policy spheres other than tourism to broaden the basis of support within council departments. Interesting encounters with other sectors had already taken place during the initial collaboration. On a visit to Planckendaal zoo (to show how Mechelen organises such an excursion), the Bolivian delegation had shown an interest in the water purification plant and contact details were subsequently exchanged. That required co-operation with the municipal environmental health department.

LOMMEL AND ONGWEDIVA: A PROMISING FUTURE

The Flemish municipality of Lommel has had a co-operation agreement with Ongwediva in Northern Namibia since 1998. The first contacts date from 1993, when European observers were sent out in force to monitor the second general elections.

The initial focus of cooperation was on municipal management. What the African partner needed was a sharing of experiences to strengthen democratic local management (“good governance and capacity building”). Council staff were given general training in it, but lacked experience of working in a local council.

A number of training courses were therefore set up jointly by the two local authorities in Lommel and Ardoorie to start off their cooperation. The local civil servants were given training in informing the local population about waste reduction, conferring with banks on bringing in electronic payments systems, and more.

Two practical achievements in Ongwediva helped form the development of a long-term policy. One was the “Open Market” project, where covered stalls were set up on a dedicated site for small traders to sell their goods in hygienic conditions. Because most were women, the council extended the site and added a play area and childcare facilities. The market traders’ committee is now responsible for developing a long-term vision for the local economy. The responsible alderman follows up on this project with input from the Lommel local traders’ manager.

Another aim is to give a boost to tourism, because a major shopping centre near Ongwediva is in need of hotels and infrastructure. Tourism can give a boost to the local economy. The alderman in charge of this area would like to follow tourism development training in Flanders.

The other achievement is the construction of a multipurpose centre, used as a community, meeting and arts centre. It also has a small library. The multipurpose centre has been enlisted as a resource in the fight against AIDS, as somewhere for locals to get individual help and information. It also runs a youth cultural programme and various leisure activities. In this way, the council is addressing another relevant challenge: combining youth policy with the centre’s activities. Local civil servants trained in Lommel had already taken an interest in the children’s local council, childcare provision and other initiatives. The two examples cited show how the Lommel, Ardoorie and Ongwediva local councils developed long-term projects that contribute towards increasingly efficient management.

ETTERBEEK – ESSAOUIRA: A CITY LINK TIED INTO LOCAL AGENDA 21

Belgium's development co-operation agency has, since 1995, been supporting the implementation of a United Nations (UN) Local Agenda 21 (LA21) project in Essaouira, Morocco – which is also being done in Nakuru (Kenya), Vien (Vietnam) and in Bayamo (Cuba). Project follow-up in all cases is being done by Professor Han Verschure (who has links with the United Nations). In 2002, the Essaouira project was transferred to the local authority.

Etterbeek struck up contacts with Essaouira at the urging of Professor Verschure. In July 2002, a delegation went out from Etterbeek to Morocco for the first time to examine the opportunities for co-operation linked into the Local Agenda 21. The link between Etterbeek and Essaouira came into being in particular circumstances. The Habitat project had already provided for a Local Agenda 21 centre, which is now an officially recognised non-profit organization with local and provincial authority representatives. The two tiers of government also undertook to provide the centre with an operating budget. The centre is an instrument for building management capacities and helping to improve the local population's living conditions. Meanwhile, a new cooperation agreement between the two municipalities linked to the centre has already been signed.

Having already collaborated with the UN in the Habitat project, Essaouira council was able to bring its considerable experience of two-way working to the arrangement with Etterbeek. The cooperation agreement focused on two areas: work with women's cooperatives and young people, and improving living conditions in the Mellah district.

Mellah is the most disadvantaged neighbourhood in Essaouira, blighted by poverty and social exclusion. The local council has difficulty tackling the problems in this neighbourhood. Etterbeek borough council passed on its experience with community and civic centres, and help for young people facing difficulties. One of the key activities was therefore to build a community and civic centre in Mellah. There is already an LA21 centre in Essaouira, an open house that provides information, organises exhibitions and acts as the LA21 management offices. But it is only usable by community groups, not people living in poverty themselves.

The neighbourhood therefore needed a community and civic centre to give new impetus to change, give the local community a voice, run public awareness campaigns, and provide point-of-delivery education, health, and other services. Essaouira and Etterbeek decided jointly to draw up a social policy programme.

Etterbeek also acted as an intermediary with the Brussels-Capital Regional government and even the European Union. Central government support was essential, because Etterbeek lacked the financial resources to tackle the dilapidated state of housing in Mellah from the subsidence caused by sea water.

Etterbeek borough council is developing an LA21. Its environmental services department – in collaboration with the alderman for North-South relations – is running a public awareness campaign to inform the inhabitants of Etterbeek about the world water shortage, encourage them to use rainwater, etc. Etterbeek council is even setting an example in some council properties.

Chapter 3

Other cultures:

A source of inspiration and a challenge

Establishing a city link obviously involves opening up to other cultures, customs and practices, norms and values, and a different outlook. This is not necessarily easy, because it is inter-personal relationships that are involved. This chapter is not intended to give you a daunting picture of the obstacles involved in intercultural co-operation, but rather to show you how co-operation can inspire you yourself, and your municipality. The chapter also contains many quotes from the Guatemalan delegation who attended our day workshop on interculturality held on 22 April 2003 during their working visit to Herent.

3.1 What does “culture” mean in the city links context?

Imagine stepping out of the aeroplane on your first working visit and going through fields and grassland, or alongside a desert, to get where you are going. Transport, and town and country planning, are organised differently, the houses look different, etc. During your visit, you may well see that children are educated in a different way, eating habits are not the same,...

You will look at the other society through your own eyes, and may judge it against your own upbringing, lifestyle and how you do things. “This is how we do things. That’s why we’re more organised, our lifestyle is healthier,...”.

To quote Marc Colpaert, an trainer at the CIMIC (a Belgian centre concerned with intercultural management and international communication): “we’re too quick to think that culture is self-evident”. Nature may be universal and innate (e.g., we will all die sooner or later), but culture is learned (how we see death, organise funerals,...).

Culture can be described as the overall vision shared and practised without thinking by a large number of people in a given context.

But while culture may influence human beings, they remain individuals and so may take a view that diverges from the group or custom. The mayor

of the partner municipality in Africa may be very punctual while his/her colleague in the North may be more lackadaisical. “Each country or region has its own culture and so does each organisation – including local councils. An organisational culture could be defined as the collective view of how the organization acts, its external image and how it deals with others; the overall vision is what distinguishes one organisation from another.”

3.2 Culture and communication

Communication – including with respect to cultural differences – is part and parcel of the city link. If the two partners have different values, attitudes and practises, misunderstandings may easily arise. Add to these differences in language, and the cooperation can quickly be derailed. So you must not try and gloss over misunderstandings, but make an effort to address them through frank dialogue. Discuss the cultural differences together, and use them as a source of inspiration.

The starting points for discussion are:

- People everywhere in the world have the same basic needs and experiences. Education and social care may not be the same in the South and North, but they are essential, and so they are found both here and there. The Guatemalan delegation: “We have seen that not just parents, but grandparents, too, work hard. So children get left in nurseries or with childminders. We do not understand how you can leave your children so easily.”
- Everyone can be receptive to another culture without slavishly accepting or letting themselves be dominated by it. Restaurants in China often have a spittoon by the table, which is normal there. Belching after eating is a sign of politeness, indicating that one has enjoyed the food. It is part of their culture, so do not sit in judgement on it. The Chinese, for example, find it unhygienic not to cover the mouth and nose when having a cold.

If you take the person you are dealing with seriously and treat them with respect, cultural differences pose no threat.

Communication is naturally a language issue

The Guatemalan delegation at the end of their working visit: “Language is a key aspect that enables knowledge to be exchanged; but translation is often a problem because a language has a soul which cannot always be mir-

rored. Over that three week visit, we discovered something of that soul, we saw what concerned people here.”

So, the importance of talking to one another is again highlighted. But what do you do before and after working visits?

- Provide means of communication: a telephone and fax are essential (for submitting reports and giving feedback, for sending invoices). It is also useful if you have an email address, so you can communicate more quickly.
- Agree on what language you will use. As it will be a foreign language for one or both of you, it is a good idea to translate the key technical terms (the co-operation agreement, subsidy application file, working visit programmes, evaluation reports, etc).
- Check regularly whether you are interpreting what you have agreed on in the same way.
- Make regular working visits to keep up personal contacts with your partner, even if the local community is against it. You may find that you and the person you are talking to on the phone are not seeing eye to eye, and it is hard to sort that out over the phone. Attempts may be made to try and indirectly steer the cooperation in a different direction, and the North-South relations officer does not get enough feedback from his opposite number to turn the situation around. Municipalities and central authorities that have experience in the matter have told us that even with modern technologies, you cannot keep cooperation up and on track by fax or email. Field contacts are essential.

We queried the Guatemala delegation about possible obstacles caused by a different cultural background or philosophy.

“There are always problems, but that should not defeat the cooperation. Never try and pick the fruit before it’s ripe.

The words of our forefathers have touched us, despite the huge generation gap. Faith and language may differ, but there is only one sun, one moon, one earth that we share; so we are linked by the same things.”

3.3 Different cultures as a source of inspiration

Whether it is you visiting your partner or the other way round, every visit will prompt questions and reactions. You may, for instance, wonder why they address this issue in this way, and may learn a lesson from it. Different approaches offer new ideas. Each working visit is also an opportunity to get

better acquainted and discover a different way of life. A visit can be a rewarding experience in this way, too.

“We wonder what you are working for. To eat or to get by? Or to ‘keep up with the Joneses’...?”

They acknowledge that: “People reveal their true selves at the dinner table, just as in Guatemala. It would be a shame to miss out on this occasion by being pressed for time”.

Some of us are already toying with the idea that there may be another way. “Are we on the right track?” “Isn't our partner's approach better, if only in human terms?” Comparing and contrasting things with your partner will make you put your ideas in perspective. Below, we list some of the benefits of cultural differences.

The mirror effect

Collaborating with your partner is often like looking in a mirror. When – as an alderman or elected officeholder – you explain the political structure, departmental organisation or what you do, you will dwell at length on matters you never previously considered. This can often lead to a reassessment of democratic governance.

“We have learned that you went through two world wars. We wonder whether you are still aware of how your forefathers suffered. Your history is important to the present political system.”

Luc Draye, Herent's council cabinet member for North-South relations: “The visit to our Guatemalan partners made me think about politics at home. People in Guatemala feel involved in politics. We attended a “Cabilde abierto”, a public meeting of the municipal council, where a large number of local people – many of them illiterate peasants – were present. That contrasts with the widespread public apathy we find at home.”

Good or bad practices from your partner municipality can help you pinpoint flaws and failings in your own municipality. Many South American towns, for example, pay much more attention to the restoration of historic monuments or integrating new buildings into the urban landscape. Participation may be organized to a surprising degree in the South. We are now making a concerted effort to re-establish neighbourhood councils and get local communities involved in our municipalities, too.

Putting things into perspective

A working visit may show you that local civil servants and elected office-holders on the other side of the world also face problems and challenges, causing you to put your situation into perspective. You may suddenly see things you have taken for granted (transport, means of communication, easy access to information,...) in a new light.

Guatemalan municipal councils try to get local communities involved in politics to build their self-confidence. This is no easy matter, because each municipality is divided into multiple, often distant, communities, which entails a very long trek. But local mayors will still walk for miles to consult with villagers before taking an important decision. We in the West, having no problems of distance or access, are exercised by the failure of the participation process to go as smoothly as we think it should, or when members of the public concern themselves with council plans.

Recognition

A field visit makes officials from the North realise they have little to complain about, and helps put their daily problems into proportion. They also end up having great respect for the culture of the South, which tends to be much less individualistic than ours. They are often deeply impressed by the solidarity and fellow-feeling that prevail in communities and wonder which of the two is happier. The way in which working visits are carried out in the South is also interesting for Northern officials: in the North, programmes are always worked out in advance and leave little room for spur-of-the-moment activities or spontaneous dialogue, even though these can be profitable. You also have to allow free time, and make allowances for jet-lag, the change of climate and food. Try to persuade your colleagues and council management to build in free time as occasions to get dialogue going. This is another area where you have to know one another, so try and find middle ground.

3.4 Differences that stand in the way

We do not intend to list all the cultural differences that can interfere with co-operation, not least because it depends on the individual and situation. But you should assess the obstacles in advance. To help you, look back at the questions addressed earlier, especially:

- The groundwork document for a partner search:
What are the partner municipality's decision-making procedures? How is civic participation organised?
- The check-list for working visits: collect information on the cultural context, customs and practices.

Bureaucracy versus the oral tradition, work pace and time

A culture based on generations of oral tradition will not see the point of putting agreements on paper. Westerners, by contrast, are used to putting everything down on paper; hence their expectation of getting an immediate reply to letters, and their sometimes angry reaction to the time taken by a partner municipality in Africa in replying to a letter or sending a programme for the working visit. ("Are they not interested in it? ") This can be a stumbling block, especially at the start. African hosts, however, will go the extra mile and cancel other appointments to welcome a delegation, unlike Westerners who free up less time in such circumstances.

This is due to the different concepts of time. Westerners are committed to their inflexible programmes, so they have to watch the clock. People from another culture often see them as hurried or rude, as a result, and feel slighted. Their practicality also comes across as remote and cold, though this is happily offset by the hospitable nature of Flemish people.

Gender relations

Cultural differences are further compounded by gender equality issues. Even in the North, gender equality is not yet a reality. An African municipality where politics is a male affair will not be inclined to see a woman as a contact in her own right. It may be some time before she is treated with respect or taken seriously. In Europe, too, there are companies and councils where women have to forcibly demand to be heard due to a long-standing male-dominated meeting culture. But male councillors and local civil servants in the North can also have problems in this area: politics may be a man's business in our hypothetical example, but women play a key role in rural community life. If you wish to involve civil society in the cooperation (e.g., on agricultural policy), you will have to confer with the women's group.

Another tricky issue with gender equality is dress code. For example: a female alderman adapts to the partner municipality by ensuring that her shoulders and legs are covered. She normally wears long skirts, but occasionally wears trousers. At one point she is told that for a woman to wear trousers is not appropriate in their culture. How accommodating do you

have to be in a situation like that? Be respectful towards them, but also demand respect for your own culture: explain to them that dress codes are different in your country. It is important that the two partners should respect one another.

But dress code is not just a gender matter. In some cultures, it is also expected that formal dress will be worn at official meetings. Norms may vary by country, region or municipality (whether rural or urban) in Africa, Latin America and Asia, so it is important to find out beforehand.

As in other matters, you have to get to know and confer with one another in order to reach a compromise. In short, do not look on differences as obstacles, but accept them constructively. That way you can bridge the gap between the cultures.

Marc Colpaert:

“We cannot develop a society. We must give it the freedom to develop for itself.”

The Guatemala delegation:

“We have to take the time to get to know each other better so we can look beyond the differences.”

An example of interculturality taken into account in a city link.

A festival was staged in co-operation with the B' nai B' rith organisation on 15 May 2003 to thank the people of Paramaribo (Surinam) for their solidarity with Jews during the Second World War. The festival also celebrated a new cooperation agreement between the Jewish community of Antwerp and Paramaribo.

Part of the event was also to shed light on a neglected corner of history. As early as the 17th century, Jewish refugees had emigrated towards Surinam. During World War Two, Surinam was still a Dutch colony, although receiving no financial support. When Surinam heard of the persecution of the Jews, it passed a resolution guaranteeing a safe haven for any Jew who succeeded in fleeing Europe. Refugee families stayed there until after the war. What makes their action so special is that, despite their poverty, they felt concern for people who lived thousands of miles away. B' nai B' rith saw to it that the town of Paramaribo gained the official title of “Faithful City”, the highest accolade in the Jewish community.

Chapter 4

Working together with other actors

In previous chapters, we stressed the importance of looking for other partners to broaden the social basis of support for the city link.

4.1 Why?

The local authority acts as “stage manager”. Local councils are responsible for ensuring “joined-up governance” of all local activities, and are best placed to support and coordinate them. The local authority in the North and South is tasked with running local development processes. Initiatives for the public and private sectors to work together, or with civil society, can be supported from the North by providing know-how, experience, etc. But experience also shows that the city link is liable to grind to a halt if the North-South relations official leaves or falls ill. This is why we put so much emphasis on broadening the social basis of support with other partners. Limited experience and internal capacity will often force the municipality to enlist other actors, like the advisory board.

4.2 What actors can you work with?

Internal actors

The other council departments.

The local development co-operation advisory board

Flemish municipalities have a local development co-operation advisory board. In fact, they must have one to qualify for subsidies. The board includes NGOs working in Southern countries and/or engaged in development cooperation in their own country. As a partner in the South, it will be useful for you to know whether your partner municipality’s development co-operation advisory board includes NGOs who are active or have links in your country, or are interested in a co-operation relationship.

It is important to run pilot projects that will deliver tangible results which can convince the local population and politicians in both North and South.

For this, you will often need and want to ask NGOs what the region's essential needs are, and task them with various duties. The area of tension between the two actors will gradually disappear as the central authorities come to see them as full partners and give momentum to mutual co-operation. They are equals in their own respective areas. The local council allocates tasks, sets the budget, informs and involves the local development co-operation advisory board. Awareness-raising activities can also very often be organised jointly. All these activities are coordinated by a specific city link working group. The North-South official, who sees the big picture, has a crucial role. The same applies to municipalities in the South. If you do not have a local development co-operation advisory board, you can set up a committee of volunteers, local civil servants and/or councillors who can help the city link run smoothly.

Big funders/NGOs

A Northern municipality may feel it is overreaching itself to work with big funders, but practice shows otherwise. This makes it important for Southern municipalities to inform their partner municipality about NGOs operating in their region, their activities and their relation with the local council.

The private sector

In some policy spheres like tourism and the local economy, you cannot do without the private sector. Involve them as full partners so as to achieve public-private partnerships. There are many advantages to these: often, local businessmen lack confidence in the local authority or the way it is run. Cooperating with a local authority in the North can restore confidence because there is oversight of expenditure, projects run, etc. The good practices of public-private partnerships in the North can play into that: the tourism service and tourist office, the festivals department and non-profit organizations, the local economy and market committees, (public/private) intermunicipal utility associations, etc.

In this area, the local authority acts not just as stage manager but also economic actor. To survive in a globalized competitive economy means keeping a grip on economic development in the region. Local authorities must create jobs and invest in the private sector. The talk in Flanders is of economic development regions, where the focus is also on local employment. Money is also needed to finance decentralization; that cannot just come from a sound tax policy – it also means building up the private sector.

Isn't working with the private sector just a sort of tied aid? No, it is not about joint North-South economic projects but

- making them able to appreciate the economic potential,
- looking for growth niches,
- stimulating private sector development.
- exploring/creating a market for a product, preferably through fair trade

The aim: to create opportunities for the sustainable financing of regional development.

Through shared financing, such partnerships attract additional investment and can secure the long-term continuity of cooperation. If political control of the council changes, there will be less temptation to discontinue cooperation with the Northern partner because most of the local population, especially investors, will be against it. You can respond by giving the key alderman a linking position on the advisory board. This lessens the risk of this alderman being transferred/dismissed when control of the next council changes.

Case study 1: Mechelen council asked for Sucre council's director of tourism to be appointed to a link position as secretary of the Inter-Institutional Tourism Committee. It is highly likely that this strategic move was what enabled her to keep her post, as the other officials were transferred.

Case study 2: The town of Turnhout cooperates with the town of Hanzong in China. Hanzong is interested in cooperation on the environment. Belgian legislation reflects the changes in Western Europe regarding environmental development, where quality standards actually contribute to economic development. Hanzong council wanted to find out more about how this (Belgian) national legislation is applied locally. An exchange of council know-how is essential to this cooperation. At the same time Turnhout council envisaged developing partnerships with firms in Hanzong, like the cardboard factory or plants involved with water purification. Interestingly, most commercial firms in China are owned by local authorities as the majority shareholder, making partnerships of this type inevitable.

Civil society

Some of the foregoing arguments also apply to what follows. In many policy spheres – especially where civic participation is key – it is better to look for links with local voluntary organizations, since this will give a real idea of the municipality's scope and problems. Talk to women's groups, agricul-

tural cooperatives, trade unions, sports and youth clubs and ask what they think about current policy, where they would like to be more involved, how they see the future, what projects they would prioritise. Some local authorities may have little capacity because, even though decentralised, they are under-resourced to discharge their responsibilities. In such cases, contact with civil society may be the only way to get cooperation going with the local authority.

This is not about usurping the role of NGOs. Our job is to help people claim their rights through civil society and force the local authority to assume its responsibilities. The other tasks are for the NGOs to do. You must use this complementarity to advantage.

Chapter 5

Beyond the city link

If you want to go beyond the city link, you can join a network or engage in intermunicipal co-operation. Since this handbook was written mainly for local councils in the North, the examples below come from Flanders. But they can still provide inspiration to the South.

5.1 Networks

Some municipalities in Flanders have long been engaged in direct international cooperation, so networks have developed between municipalities that have partners in the same region or that work on the same issue.

Sint-Truiden council suggested linking up with Lommel and Mol council in Flanders plus Eindhoven and Maastricht councils in the Netherlands in a platform for dialogue. All five municipalities have partners in Nicaragua. They can learn from one another, exchange experiences, join forces in awareness-raising activities and cross-border projects (in neighbouring municipalities in the North and in Nicaragua). For five municipalities to band together to receive a folk dance troupe from Nicaragua and offer them a tour brings benefits to all concerned.

Brugge and Mechelen work in the field of cultural tourism with a partner in Latin America. Questioning one another and swapping ideas proved a big learning experience for both cities. Evergem found inspiration in Mol, a town with several years' experience in youth exchanges.

Your municipality may have other international contacts that you can use to supplement the city link.

Sint-Niklaas municipal council decided to set up a network with other councils that already had a link with Tambacounda in Senegal. The town of La Roche-sur-Yon in France was invited to take part in a visit by the Senegalese partner and all the parties agreed a common multi-year plan. Other municipalities may also join in the future, such as the twinning partner Colmar, and five towns in the Tambacounda network (in Mali, Gambia, Guinea Bissau...).

But examples of intermunicipal co-operation can also be found in the South. Nicaragua is a case in point, where the Santo Tomás (Mol), Ciudad Darío (Lommel), Nueva Guinea (St-Truiden), Rowed (Maastricht) and Juigalpa (Eindhoven) councils sealed contacts and exchanged information, organised youth days and worked out a joint library project.

5.2 Intermunicipal cooperation

It might be that your municipality feels too small to put itself on the market. Why not try and link up with other municipalities that share the same interests, so you can go through the process together? The municipalities of Lommel and Ardooi, for instance, joined forces to cooperate with a municipality in Namibia.

Jan Swinnen, council cabinet member for international co-operation, Lommel: "We think that being a rural municipality, Ardooi complements us and will add value to the cooperation."

What goes for the North also goes for the South. In Guatemala, big municipalities like Cobán are subdivided into regions, each with their own mayor. Each region is in turn composed of communities (38 for just one region in Cobán) of between 50 and 500 people – a set-up in no way comparable to ours. As both Herent and the Guatemalan partners encourage civic participation, cooperation with the different levels was an obvious choice. Because of the complexity of this type of cooperation, a North-South official was hired to act as a central information point for all the municipalities. Herent council claims that cooperation with several municipalities delivers big benefits and greater momentum through motivating and keeping check on one another.

The towns of Herent and Olen both had neighbouring municipalities as partners in Guatemala. They linked up to organise a conference with their Guatemala partners to look for solutions in a range of policy spheres. The conference topic was: how does my past shape my future (my local operation and planning)? The scale of the event was what decided Herent to work together with Olen.

Chapter 6

The South's voice

6.1 Introduction

The tendency of development assistance to be forced onto receiving countries from the outside often created problems in the past. There is a growing recognition among development organisations and international bodies that it is important for countries to take their own development in hand, for the South to be involved in devising development cooperation. It has also been realised that development is more about policy and good governance than technical issues.

The South must have a major say in international cooperation between two municipalities. The local authority and people are placed best to know their own needs and problems, as well as their strengths and potential. But the risk is that the Flemish municipality, experienced in the business of local government, will downgrade the potential of municipal cooperation to a one-way transfer of knowledge from North to South, leaving the partner municipality locked in the role of recipient.

Breaking out of this stereotyped role division depends on bearing some key facts in mind. First, decentralization is a recent phenomenon, meaning that local councils in the South are often recent, inexperienced, and may have little power. Periodic changes of administration may interrupt local contacts. In many countries, the machinery of administration is tied to the political leadership. Other problems are corruption, a lack of financial resources and infrastructure, and domination by the leadership.

This is what makes it important to listen to local communities. Civil society operating at local level has an important influence on the local authority. The more local authorities involve the people in decision-making, the more sustainable the decisions will be.

In the cooperation process, Northern municipalities should put a focus on participation and striking up contacts with civil society. Likewise, the North must not be afraid to ask itself the question, "Are we getting enough feedback from our civil society?"

Know your partner

Acknowledging the other's individuality and respecting their culture are fundamental to achieving mutual respect in cooperation and avoiding disputes that stem from cultural differences. So be fully informed about and open-minded towards local customs and traditions.

The VVSG – *the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities* – also has an important role in this area.

The Association represents all Flemish towns and municipalities in Belgium, 308 in all. Local authorities need information, advice and consultation to deliver their services. Our association offers that support and champions their interests towards other levels of government and institutions. The VVSG is proactive on behalf of local politicians and local civil servants alike.

The VVSG works to strengthen the position of local government. To that end, it supports all initiatives favourable to local policy with a view to building the institutional capacity of local government and strengthening local democracy.

The association has a staff of up to 100 people who provide ongoing support to local authorities that engage with their communities. An international team within the association handles European and international affairs.

By strengthening contacts and consultation with sister organisations in the South, the VVSG can expand its knowledge of the partner municipality's social, economic, political and cultural development. Most of the information will come from contacts between municipalities and their partner. The VVSG asks municipalities to keep them briefed on exchange arrangements (in Belgium and abroad) so it can pass the information on to other concerned people. This will enable it, for example, to visit a Flemish municipality when a council delegation from the South is there, invite local civil servants and/or councillors from the South to attend training sessions or go with a Flemish council delegation to its partner municipality to see how the cooperation is progressing and offer advice on the spot if need be.

TIPS AND HINTS

1. Be up to date with the economic, political, social, cultural, spiritual and geographical situation of your partner country and municipality. Analyse your partner municipality's surroundings (see "identification visit", point 2.3) and send the information on to all parties concerned.
2. Consult as much of your partner country's literature (novels, poetry,...) as you can. Don't simply refer to scientific, technical, or descriptive studies but let your imagination carried away by literary works, if possible those of local authors. Studying the region's history will give you a better understanding of the current situation.
3. Strike up contacts with people who know the region: NGOs, academics, former development workers or volunteers who have worked locally, Belgian development cooperation agency officials, journalists, etc. Listen to what they have to say, but stay realistic (this also applies to literary works). Find out about the organisations that are active there.
4. Strike up contacts with other municipalities that have experience with a municipality in the same country or region. Even though local councils work in a wide variety of ways, you can leverage their experiences for your own preparations.
5. Provide your partner with plenty of information on your municipality.
6. Keep on widening your knowledge base, especially when setting the issues for cooperation. Then find out more about these issues. Ask your partner municipality if they have information material on the matter, and also ask local organisations for information.

Dialogue

Good governance is based on an open and transparent policy dialogue. Communication in a city link is based on how you and your partner municipality see cooperation. But, in reality, there is nothing easy about intercultural communication, as we saw previously under point 3.2

That said, here are a few handy tips and hints.

Many cultural differences are immediately evident on a working visit. Dress code, diet, relations between the generations, and between men and women, are just a few that can influence the dialogue.

But culture is more than just what you see on the surface. While it is true that communication between cultures starts with communication between people, it also involves cultural factors that can give rise to misunderstandings – factors like national or ethnic background, sex, age, social class, educational level, sexual preferences, occupation, religion and socio-geographical origins.

That makes it important to:

- Study the specific historical and sociocultural characteristics of the country, region or municipality (see above “know your partner”)
- Conduct yourself and communicate by reference to the other culture you are encountering
- Understand the other person’s thinking and behaviour
- Pay heed to the codes of conduct and expectations of other cultures
- See yourself through the other’s eyes

Cooperation

An in-depth knowledge and analysis of the partner’s environment are the basis of good dialogue. Balanced cooperation also needs a great deal of transparency and reciprocity.

There is nothing self-evident about partnership working. Northern municipalities have a tendency to take over planning, decision-making and management of the partnership. The rigid and restrictive administrative framework in which local councils work does not help matters. The regional (Flemish) and federal authorities which demand proper accounting among other things do not necessarily take account of front-line limitations or processes dictated by local paces of working.

A balanced partnership is not easily achieved if the Southern municipality does not assume its responsibilities as a development actor or fails to apply the principles of good governance and civic participation. Because city links are a recent thing, confusion often surrounds the division of duties, especially in decision-making. The partners need time to find the right ways to handle dialogue and conflict management. The urge to deliver quick results and detailed transparency may prompt the North to be paternalistic or try and run the whole show.

The first thing is to agree on certain points. How will the cooperation work in practice? How will we work out a plan? What are the focal issues of our cooperation? What both sides want out of the cooperation may be very different.

What Southern municipalities mainly want are prestige and funding. They may be less keen to take a hard look at their development role, reform local management, make the city link part of a comprehensive local development strategy driven by the local authority. Civil society in the South tends to see municipal cooperation as an ally in the struggle to get local authorities to enable civic participation and involvement in local area management.

Each municipality has its own priorities, which are shaped by its own interests. What is a priority for the North, may not be for the South, because another voluntary organization or funder is already cooperating with it or the municipality has already launched a project on that issue. Give them time and the right to decide what is appropriate for them in an intermunicipal cooperation arrangement. Setting time aside for discussion in the planning process is not a needless luxury.

The plan of action must be worked out jointly, and based on realistic needs, and available human capacities and resources. The two partners' political, administrative and civic responsibilities must be clearly spelled out.

Both partners must see the cooperation as a dynamic process. You should carry out a self-assessment at regular intervals to revise or adjust the cooperation.

ESSAOUIRA – ETTERBEEK: TRAINING TO LEVERAGE “HUMAN CAPITAL”

Essaouira, Etterbeek's Moroccan partner municipality, was short on financial resources, but long on “human capital” in both local authority administration and policy areas: technicians, engineers, data processing specialists, manual workers, and local councillors. 60% of the municipal budget goes on staffing costs. This suggests that efficient staff management is a must for them. Essaouira therefore asked Etterbeek to help them set up staff training and reorganise the council departments. Systems used in the North to identify employees' skills and abilities allow councils to hire appropriate staff and enable them to develop their strengths. Essaouira enlisted Etterbeek's experience, and also sought training for local civil servants and municipal councillors who are responsible for framing broad policy lines and objectives, for which they must know how the machinery of local government works. Finally, Essaouira wanted to tap Etterbeek's experience in various municipal policy spheres: record-keeping, vital registration, reception skills, staff management. As both partners were fluent in French and not too far apart, the theory and work experience training courses could be held in Belgium or Morocco.

Communication creates the dynamic

When control of the council changed, the cooperation with Etterbeek came up for review. The presentation of the city link did not focus enough on the main themes and added value of cooperation between the municipal authorities. Most of the municipal councillors saw it as a job for the Local Agenda 21 platform, and passed all the work onto LA21 and took no further interest in it. They saw LA21 as a legacy of the previous administration, an

undertaking which they saw as limited to purely ceremonial meetings with Etterbeek. The last field visit made it clear to various councillors that while LA21 can enable cooperation, involvement by the municipality is essential. Formal and informal meetings took place to confer with different partners and discuss the different points of view, giving them a clearer understanding of the importance of municipal international co-operation, and a feeling of being duty-bound to assume their responsibility.

They do not consider it enough to have one visit a year to the partner municipality in order to seal agreements. The cooperation needs to be followed-up on an ongoing basis on both sides, in each municipality between the administration and voluntary organizations through reports, emails, etc. To get a clear understanding on planning – monthly, annual or triennial – the partners must discuss it in depth.

In the words of one municipal councillor, “We shall only achieve what our link sets out to do when as many of Essaouira’s inhabitants as possible are involved or at least informed and made aware. As a politician, I feel it is my job to contribute to that awareness.” He was not alone in that feeling – at a consultation meeting on LA21 reorganisation, several councillors volunteered to sit in the platform. Strikingly, many municipal councillors in the South are or were active in a voluntary organization and so could forge a link between the administration and civil society.

They are planning internal consultations to readjust the priorities for the years to come and divide up the duties for following up on the city link.

The priorities of a woman municipal councillor

In Essaouira, four women were elected to the municipal council, one of them as mayoress. This gave them more scope. One said, “As a councillor, I am concerned not just about the citizens in general, but also the women of Essaouira who make a huge contribution to society – working, looking after the family, struggling against poverty, etc. It is mainly women that vote, because they are aware that a woman can help improve their situation. Moroccan women are very patient. I aim to work with NGOs and women’s groups to improve women’s situation (e.g., projects that combine work and family life) but also to raise visibility through the city link. It is important for women to know their rights, protect themselves against violence and make their voice heard. They do not readily talk about their problems, so the council has a duty to create a platform for communication (for instance, through listening groups, health centres, and setting up a women’s committee in the council).” She asked Etterbeek to support the women councillors.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE SOUTH

Essaouira recommended microprojects for 2 reasons:

- 1 The local community also wants to benefit from what the link can bring. Microprojects – with however little funding – deliver tangible results and give a human face to cooperation. The public also sees Etterbeek and Essaouira “managing” the projects together.
- 2 *The snowball effect*
At first sight, restoration of the Jihad door seems of minor significance. The door had been damaged through constant water seepage. The door was closed, cutting off the adjoining district, killing business and tourism. The purpose of the restoration – along with other actions – was to give a new impetus to the district. The microproject is one of the many projects that were set up under LA21 in consultation with all the parties concerned (project coordinator, Habitat project, politicians of both sexes, civil servants, representatives of voluntary organizations, local traders’ committees, etc.). It is now one of many project opportunities logged in a database.

Training and support by a coordinating body

The growth of democratic governance in Morocco made it opportune to put in place support by a coordinating body, ultimately in Morocco, but pending that by a foreign organisation. A number of Essaouira residents who had gone on training provided by the association of Dutch municipalities (VNG) were strongly behind the training as an opportunity to collect experience from other countries and exchange knowledge, not only with the Dutch municipalities but also between the Southern partners. “We got to know one another at first hand, which facilitates experience sharing and contact.” The local working visits to different practical schemes running in Dutch municipalities were highly instructive.

KINSHASA'S VIEW OF COOPERATION AS A PARTNER WITH BRUSSELS

Since the first contacts were set up between Brussels and Kinshasa three years ago, the partner city has had four different governors. As a result, none of the Kinshasa city local civil servants who were in post when the cooperation started up are still there. The only person left who was a key person when the cooperation agreement was signed is an outside consultant, the lawyer Yassim Beladé, who has worked to ensure continuity. The cooperation agreement was signed by the mayor of the borough of Brussels (population 135 000, 4 districts) and the vice-governor of Kinshasa (population approximately 8 million, 24 independent boroughs).

How does the current governor see the cooperation?

The special relationship between Belgium and the Congo derived from the colonial past is significant in the current cooperation. The choice made by both is first and foremost symbolic – the capitals of the colonizing power and the former colony are seeking a rapprochement after many years of mutual disregard, which inspires hope in the population.

The man and woman in the street also want Belgium to take Congo in hand again, because the Congolese have suffered greatly from dictatorships and wars since independence, resulting in the collapse of community life.

The Congolese think fondly of the Belgians. And the cooperation comes at just the right time, because government is gradually decentralising, one result of which will be that central government will cease to be abreast of local cooperation initiatives. The cooperation with Brussels should help advance the implementation of Kinshasa's action plan to tackle insanitary conditions, improve hygiene, improve the public transport system, prepare the population for elections, and upgrade school facilities.

Good governance is a catchword for the governor: decentralization and transparency can only be delivered if the necessary infrastructure is in place, like a computer network with which to centralise and control information. Modernization is essential to good governance. The biggest threat to cooperation is for it to develop through people who do not remain in post and do not hand on information to their successors.

The cooperation with Brussels borough council took the practical form of a pilot project on birth registration in a single municipality of Kinshasa province. Were the areas of cooperation to be redefined today, the governor would not call on Brussels to address the problems in this sector. Other organisations like UNICEF and Amnesty International are already working on that. Work on the vital registration service is useful, but there are other priorities – like transport – which are not yet getting outside assistance. The advantage of getting Brussels local civil servants involved in this project is that they are familiar with the daily routine and so can translate the actions of the big organisations into practicalities.

There is no certainty that Brussels is making the most of the resources available for cooperation: there is a lot of travelling for technical meetings and studies, but it is mainly equipment that is in short supply. Cooperation with the vital registration service is moving very slowly. At this pace, it will be at least 20 more years before the vital registration service is working properly. A single partnership is not enough to address the challenges facing a huge metropolitan district like Kinshasa. Thought must be given to allocating the help efficiently.

What do the other actors concerned think of the cooperation?

The head of the provincial “women and family service” is highly enthusiastic about the cooperation with Brussels to improve vital registration services. She feels it supports her daily effort to uphold the rights of children and women. She argues that this is the first time that front-line staff, those who do the daily work, have been involved. Personal contact with the specialists in Brussels creates an open and positive work atmosphere. Sound staff management is essential to getting the most out of Brussels’ efforts. Municipal officials often lack the aptitude to use the training to good effect. But sound staff management is a political responsibility, and the support from Brussels can be used to press for action on this.

The outside consultant tasked with practical follow-up stresses the importance of exchange activities in enabling the two municipalities to get to know and understand each other, thereby facilitating project implementation. Effective cooperation depends on leveraging the knowledge acquired and allocating funds properly. At present, there is a wide gap between planning and implementation, due to problems in carrying out funds transfers. This can have a demoralising effect on those concerned, and result in changes of staff between the time when the decision is made and when it is implemented. More information on the Brussels-Kinshasa linkage can be found on the “international solidarity” page of the www.Brucity.be website.



*Essaouira,
Etterbeek's
Moroccan partner*



*Brussels cooperates
with its partner
municipality,
Kinshasa*



*Sint-Truiden
cooperates with
the Nicaraguan
municipality,
Nueva Guinea*

THE NICARAGUAN PARTNER'S VIEW OF COOPERATION WITH SINT-TRUIDEN

The quotes in this brochure come from the chairwoman and secretary of Ahsodeng, a joint committee of local civil servants and volunteers who ensure the follow-up of the city link.

A partner of equal value

The idea for cooperation originated with civil society groups in Sint-Truiden and Nueva Guinea. Nueva Guinea council followed it up as a means of giving impetus to youth, environmental, educational, and area planning and management projects, and encouraging civil society participation in local authority affairs. The cooperation was developed and carried out in the same way in both municipalities from the outset. "We want to develop activities with the local population and councils of both municipalities to promote sustainable development in our own municipality, because each municipality has other priority needs. We know that our municipalities form part of a country; that country forms part of a continent; and the continents are what make up the whole planet, for which we are all responsible".

Communication: a key to success

Regular visits between Nueva Guinea and Sint-Truiden enables them to discuss projects and the approach in depth. A select group set up in both municipalities is responsible for keeping communication and discussions going between visits by email and telephone. The groups consult with the council and their colleagues to come up with proposals, discuss results, problems and factors of success, or formulate criticisms, after which the two municipalities contact one another to work out a compromise. Micro-projects are worked out in agreements and contracts, forcing the two municipalities to have mutual commitments.

Turn pitfalls into challenges

Even so, cooperation is not hitch-free. The Nueva Guinea committee wants a motivated alderman to be taken on to ensure communication between the council and civil society organisations.

This is essential for ongoing follow-up and administration, jobs that are still too often done by volunteers.

More effort is called for from both councils in terms of staffing.

The committee sees conflict of interests as one of the big pitfalls in each municipality. "Politicians find it hard to engage in a city link without thinking what might be in it for them". Two things need to be done to ensure civic participation. One is for the municipalities to create the conditions to

enable civic participation. The other is that people must learn how to use the opportunities the law gives them to take part in local government. Nicaragua's legal framework also offers scope for developing city links. Exchanges of this kind are needed in cultural, educational, human and economic terms.

But the local basis of political support must be developed. So far, the committees of both municipalities have been unable to enthuse aldermen and mayors about the opportunities that city links offer their own municipality. Making local politicians and people aware is another challenge, therefore. We try and convince them through individual conversations and group discussions. The more there are of us and the better we know one another, the more effective, coherent, targeted and sustainable our actions will be.

Investing in human capital

This is not Nueva Guinea's first city link. It has previously had cooperation exchanges with different Latin American and European countries on the environment, agriculture, education and culture. These experiences have taught them that investment in human capital "is not just a good idea, but essential for the rounded development of a municipality and its inhabitants".

Nueva Guinea believes that the co-operation with Sint-Truiden can bring about attitudinal change in both municipalities. But it is a long-term process that needs patience and capacity, and to be supported by financial resources. The early results are gradually being seen in Nueva Guinea. Many people have discovered their inner resources and an ability to contribute to the project, if they acknowledge it and have the will. The training courses in both Nueva Guinea and Sint-Truiden are instructive. The local civil servants from Nueva Guinea do not want to just undergo training on their own in Sint-Truiden, but to have their local counterparts there to share their knowledge and culture.

Support by a coordinating body

Nueva Guinea needs assistance, exchanges of experiences, capacity-building and advice for each co-operation process. The municipality also wants support provided by a coordinating body of cities and municipalities.

ONGWEDIVA – LOMMEL: EXCHANGE OF LOCAL CIVIL SERVANTS

Expectations were high for the exchange of local civil servants between Lommel, Ardooi and Ongwediva. The people of Ongwediva went into it believing that the Flemish municipalities would be at a much more advanced stage of development, and saw Belgium as a land of plenty, a “first world” country. The visit to Lommel was an awakening to reality. While it is true that Ardooi and Lommel are modern municipalities, they still have much to learn and cannot solve all the problems. The exchange of officials would therefore be a learning experience for all three municipalities.

The partnership was well-timed for Ongwediva. It would help spur its development, and move it on faster than the other Namibian municipalities. Ongwediva set the council’s priorities in a strategic plan for 2002 to 2007. Top of the list were professionalization and training of council staff in different policy spheres, among other things. Visits and training courses for local civil servants were central to the co-operation between Lommel, Ardooi and Ongwediva from the start.

One issue on the agenda for the exchange of officials was waste management. Lommel also has to continually urge people to act by sorting their waste. Sound waste management requires co-operation between local authority and local community. This shared responsibility was a good lesson for the Namibian colleague.

Following Lommel’s lead, the Namibian council ran a public awareness campaign, sending out letters and calling at houses. Hazardous waste left lying in the street was collected and council rubbish skips were sited closer to houses so that people could more easily deposit their refuse in them.

What lesson can Lommel town council take away from this? Ongwediva town council set up neighbourhood committees whose members are elected by the local community – one committee for each group of 120 houses and families. As a result, Ongwediva has seven neighbourhood committees that are in contact with the town council and play a key role as advisory and decision preparation bodies. They also provide the town council with the community’s feedback on service provision. This approach to participation and feedback can be a source of inspiration for Flemish municipalities.

