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# Twinning and winning

Local-level international cooperation in the form of city twinings can be a powerful tool for development. What is needed to make such alliances succeed?

by Kosie de Villiers, Tobie de Coning and Eon Smit

The twinning of cities has evolved from an international instrument of friendship and cultural exchange to what is being acclaimed as a powerful tool for capacity-building and economic development. From its simple beginnings as a programme of outreach, citizen exchange and friendship ties, twinning is now widely used as an instrument to build regional unity, to learn from others, and to help accomplish development goals.

Notwithstanding the popularity of twinning, very little research is available globally to assist prospective twin cities with the development of an effective strategy and partnership arrangement.

Groundbreaking doctoral research conducted at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) has contributed in a substantial way to fill this vacuum. The study investigated twinings as strategic alliances between communities. Findings that emanated from a scrutiny of the literature on strategic alliances and a survey conducted among South African municipalities prompted the following important recommendations for successful twinning:

- Ensure *proper partner selection*. Partners should be committed, show understanding and cultural sensitivity, and display an overall positive attitude.
- *Market* the existence of the alliance and its goals to all stakeholders in the community. It is important to make everyone aware of the twinning and to obtain active participation.
- Commit *quality management* to the process.
- Draw up a *well-conceived business plan* that spells out the key objectives and the plans for their achievement.

## A groundbreaking study

Since very little academic research had previously been published about the international relations of local communities, this research was an important pioneering contribution in the field. Although conducted among South African communities, the study has positioned itself as a valuable foundation for further research in the global arena.

This USB study has already captured the attention of the international stakeholder community, and the Dr Kosie de Villiers was invited to speak on the topic at the 50th anniversary conference of Sister Cities International in Washington during July 2006.

## ■ The twinning phenomenon

Twinning has not only grown in popularity, but has also evolved substantially in character. Besides twinning between communities, two other models of international partnering at the local level have become common: municipal international cooperation (MIC) and decentralised cooperation (DC).

Twinning has also become a means of outreach to former Soviet and Eastern Europe countries as well as third-world countries, with the latter known as North-South twinings. Several global trends are seen to drive the formation of international relationships at the local level:

- the increased emphasis on democratisation and decentralisation;
- the impact of globalisation;
- the evolution in communications and reduced travel time; and
- privatisation and the strength of the non-governmental (NGO) sector.

It is especially the trend where governments decentralise powers to local authorities that has forced this sphere of government to become more entrepreneurial in seeking local economic development and exploring avenues like twinning. Addressing development issues at the local level through the medium of twinning is now a key strategy of the international development community for reaching the Millennium Development Goals.

Still, despite the developmental interest by international bodies, the field has remained under-researched. No objective measurement programmes are conducted on the efficacy of twinings, and no large-scale research on whether the benefits of these relationships outweigh the costs has been reported in the literature. In other words, no generally accepted model has emerged which could be used to advise communi-

ties on how to approach twinning or what to sensibly invest in as part of setting up a partnership programme with a foreign city. This status of the field motivated the USB study.

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### ■ Structural forms of twinning

To investigate the twinning phenomenon, the research first examined how twinings are structured. Three different, but closely related, types of local-level international relationships could be defined:

**Municipal international cooperation (MIC)** focuses on technical cooperation, and either constitutes capacity-building initiatives

between Northern and Southern municipalities or collaboration on a certain theme or initiative by municipalities.

**Sister cities and city twinning** refer to a broader involvement in which the whole community – civil society, the business community and the education sector – participates. The local government plays a facilitating role in setting up and main-

taining the relationship, but the primary bond is forged between communities. This is sometimes called organised citizen-to-citizen diplomacy.

**Decentralised cooperation (DC)** embraces a wider range of development actions carried out by non-governmental actors and voluntary associations. DC comes from a blending of the quest by donors to find alternative delivery channels for aid programmes, and the drive of local government associations and their members to diversify their collaborative relationships with foreign partners. Local governments are usually the lead actors, with the objective being sustainable local development and the activities comprising exchanges and support. North-South twinings typically use this form of relationship.

The three different concepts of twinning are, however, closely related. A relationship could transform from one into another as circumstances change. For example, should a donor discontinue its funding in a DC arrangement, the momentum could be maintained and the twinning may continue as municipal cooperation or a community-twinning relationship.

### ■ What factors would promote successful twinning?

The available research on twinning consisted only of limited case studies. Yet, from these and also from publications by bodies like Sister Cities International, a list of possible success factors could be extracted. It is argued, based on the evidence found in the literature, that the twinning relationship would function more successfully when these factors are present.

The list of these success factors therefore formed the basis of what the research

### The evolution of twinning

The international twinning of cities and towns can be traced back to 1920. In the aftermath of World War II, three UK cities twinned with German counterparts in an attempt to reach out to war-ravaged German cities. In 1956 US President Eisenhower initiated an organised twinning programme as an outgrowth of his People-to-People programme, which later evolved into Sister Cities International (SCI). These initiatives in both Europe and America focused on interaction between local citizens and communities across international borders.

It is estimated that between 15 000 and 20 000 towns and cities globally are at present twinned through various forms of partnering agreements. Different terms are used to describe these long-term partnerships: sister cities, twin cities, friendship cities, municipal international cooperation, and city-to-city cooperation (C2C). This type of diplomatic activity is also called paradiplomacy or low diplomacy.

Twinning can be broadly defined as a long-term strategic alliance between communities in different cities or towns, in which their municipalities are key actors. A community can be understood as the citizens, local government administration, civil society groups and business organisations, which together form a sub-national geographic entity.

The emphasis of twinning has grown from merely friendship ties to efforts to facilitate economic exchange and development. Three different but overlapping approaches are common:

- Associative twinning, which is based on friendship and cultural exchange
- Reciprocatve twinning, which is based on educational and people exchange
- Commercial twinning, which is based on trade and economic development.

Factors that lead to twinning success		Indicators used to measure the factor
1	Communities that have a twinning strategy in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Existence of twinning strategy</li> </ul>
2	Communities with more alliance experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Stable political leadership (years council in office)</li> <li>■ Number of twinings</li> <li>■ Number of years since first twinning</li> </ul>
3	Twinings where positive attitudes are high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Trust</li> <li>■ Reciprocity</li> <li>■ Commitment</li> <li>■ Understanding</li> <li>■ Cultural sensitivity</li> <li>■ Risk</li> <li>■ Flexibility</li> </ul>
4	Twinings where community involvement is high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Twinning type (is community involved?)</li> <li>■ Community actors involved</li> <li>■ Community awareness of the twinning</li> </ul>
5	Twinings with higher levels of contact (exchange and communication)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Actors involved in communication</li> <li>■ Frequency of communication</li> </ul>
6	Twinings with more resources and infrastructure allocated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Budget</li> <li>■ Donor-funded or not</li> <li>■ Structural arrangements</li> </ul>
7	Twinings that followed a structured planning process (from partner selection to business planning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Existence of formal partner selection process</li> <li>■ Existence of written business plan</li> </ul>
8	Twinings where leadership and management are strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Professional management available</li> <li>■ Involvement of twinning champion</li> </ul>
9	Twinings that do active marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Marketing taking place</li> <li>■ Level of media exposure of twinning</li> </ul>
10	Twinings where the partners have similar characteristics	Possible areas of similarity like : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Religion(s)</li> <li>■ Historical background</li> <li>■ Key industries</li> <li>■ Community value system</li> <li>■ Goals for twinning</li> <li>■ Expectations of outcomes</li> <li>■ Commitment of management</li> <li>■ Personalities involved</li> </ul>

set out to examine empirically through a survey of twinning relationships of South African municipalities. The research framework is shown in the **box above**. A questionnaire was developed to measure each of the factors in accordance with the indicators shown.

### Measuring alliance success of municipalities

To practically examine the assumed success factors, a way of measuring success as an outcome of the partnering relationship had to be created. Two questions were used in the questionnaire. The first asked respondents to indicate the perceived success of the twinning relationship in comparison to the initial objectives on a 7-point scale. The second required respondents to rate the present state of the rela-

tionship as either *Negative, Neutral or Positive*.

These two measures were combined into a composite score called *alliance success*. The survey covered South Africa's 284 municipalities – six metropolitan, 47 district and 231 local municipalities.

namely China, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Correlational and ANOVA statistical tests were performed on the received data to test the range of research hypotheses.

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A total of 171 partnership relationships in various stages of formation were reported. More than half of the established partnerships are with only four countries,

### Findings as a basis for further research

The statistical analysis showed that several of the assumed success factors indeed corre-

Factors that influence alliance success		
	Factor	Comments
1	Twinnings where positive attitudes are high	The factor as a whole, but also specifically the following indicators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Commitment</li> <li>■ Understanding</li> <li>■ Cultural sensitivity</li> </ul>
2	Twinnings where community involvement is high	<b>Not</b> the factor as a whole, but only the following indicator <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Community awareness of the twinning</li> </ul>
3	Twinnings that followed a structured planning process (from partner selection to business planning)	<b>Not</b> the factor as a whole, but only the following indicator showed a strong influence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Existence of written business plan</li> </ul>
4	Twinnings where leadership and management are strong	
5	Twinnings that do active marketing	This factor shows a relatively strong influence
6	Twinnings where the partners have similar characteristics	<b>Not</b> the factor as a whole, but only the following two indicators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Commitment of management</li> <li>■ Personalities involved</li> </ul>



Factors that influence alliance success		
	Factor	Comments
1	Communities that have a twinning strategy in place	
2	Communities with more alliance experience	
3	Twinnings where positive attitudes are high	Except the indicators shown above
4	Twinnings where community involvement is high	Except the indicators shown above
5	Twinnings with higher levels of contact (exchange and communication)	
6	Twinnings with more resources and infrastructure allocated	
7	Twinnings that followed a structured planning process (from partner selection to business planning)	Except for the need to have a business plan as an individual indicator
8	Twinnings where the partners have similar characteristics	Except for the two indicators shown above

lated with alliance success. In the case of others, however, there was no convincing evidence of their importance for the success of the alliance. The findings are summarised in the **tables shown here**.

The first table shows those factors that, based on the statistical significance of the test results, can be put forward as factors that impact positively on a twinning relationship. It should be noted that although certain factors (a combined score of a set of indicators) did not show relationships with alliance success, some of their indicators did. These inconsistencies are addressed in the Comments column.

The second table shows those factors that could not be proved to have any influence on twinning success. Although in some of these cases the data suggested the possibility of an impact, the results were statistically inconclusive.

Some of these factors that showed no significant impact may raise eyebrows. The findings are counter-intuitive to what makes sense in real life. These factors may well be significant, but the data received, which were perhaps influenced by the limitations of the sample that responded, did not provide sufficient evidence to judge that they are important.

The value of this research is that it could establish certain important factors as vital recommendations for a successful partnering agreement. But larger-scale research, especially across international borders, is needed to test whether there are not several more of these factors that play a significant role in alliance success. ■



These findings were published by JC de Villiers (kosie@adept.co.za), TJ de Coning and EvdM Smit in the *SA Journal of Business Management*, 2007, 38 (1), in an article titled *Towards an understanding of the success factors in international twinning and sister-city relationships*. This article won Kosie de Villiers the 2007 USB award for the best publication from a research report or PhD thesis. The article was based on his PhD thesis, *Strategic alliances between communities, with special emphasis on the twinning of South African cities and towns with international partners*, which was supervised by Prof TJ de Coning and Prof EvdM Smit and presented to the USB in December 2005.