Success factors and the city-to-city partnership management process – from strategy to alliance capability

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ABSTRACT

International city-to-city (C2C) partnerships, also known as twinning or sister cities, have evolved from their beginnings as a facilitating instrument of international friendship and cultural exchange at the local level, to a powerful tool for capacity building, learning, and economic and social development in developing countries. In recent years research findings from both academic and practitioner studies have provided much-needed insights into the failure rate and factors that contribute to the sustainability and success of such relationships. But to apply these principles, cities need guidelines and a formal policy and process framework to conclude sustainable relationships and manage them successfully. This paper draws on recent studies in South Africa and the United States of America, and frames a C2C partnership as a strategic alliance entered into between two or more cities. It applies principles from the management literature on strategic alliances to the field of C2C cooperation and proposes a management and planning model which municipalities involved in international C2C partnerships can use to ensure the success of individual relationships. This model consists of six steps: strategy formulation, identification of potential partners, evaluation and selection of potential partners, negotiation of the alliance and agreement, implementation, and the embedding of knowledge which leads to alliance capability and continued alliance success. The paper suggests that C2C cooperation can make a major development contribution and that application of this model can effectively increase relationship success at the local level.

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Introduction

City-to-city (C2C) cooperation has moved from the simple twinning of cities to include also complex webs of relationships including multiple linkages and networks of relationships. These linkages at the local level across the globe have different geographical orientations, for instance, North–North, North–South, South–South, and different thematic focuses. While recent research concerning the success factors of C2C cooperation has been conducted and reported, cities still do not have clear management guidelines on the application of these principles and which process frameworks to follow to ensure delivery of relationship objectives and expectations, and sustainability over a long period (De Villiers, 2005). This paper proposes a basic process framework which could be used by a municipality to successfully implement a C2C cooperation programme at the municipality or community level. Although the discussion focuses mainly on single C2C relationships, it is also applicable to multiple linkages and the formation of city networks.

The paper draws on various studies conducted in the field of international C2C cooperation in South Africa and the United States of America (USA) (De Villiers, 2005; De Villiers, De Coning, & Smit, 2006; ICMA, 2004) in which the sustainability and success factors of C2C partnerships were identified in North–South and South–South relationships. These partnerships can normally be categorised as municipality-to-municipality relationships focusing on municipal capacity building and learning, community-to-community relationships focusing on broad-based community linkages, or decentralised cooperation relationships where project funding is provided by an international donor (De Villiers, 2005).

A paucity of management guidelines and principles applicable to C2C cooperation formation and management is evident in the literature on C2C cooperation, and as a partnership can also be viewed as an alliance, management models from the organisational alliance literature were used in the formulation of a C2C partnership management framework.

City-to-city partnership as alliance

The terms C2C cooperation and C2C partnership are used interchangeably by academics and practitioners, but the word

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partnership implies a much stronger relationship than mere cooperation. As the intention of most twinning and sister-city relationships is to work together over a long term for mutual benefit, this signifies a partnership between the two (or more) cities involved. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for instance, defines a twinning or a linkage simply as "[a] long-term partnership between communities in different cities or towns" (UNDP, 2000:8). Such a relationship can also be seen as an alliance between the parties. De Villiers (2005), for instance, points out that the term 'alliance' has both a general and more specific meaning and that it now serves as an 'umbrella' term for a host of cooperative relationships.

It can be argued that there are many similarities between C2C partnerships and alliance relationships between organisations. Strategic alliances are reportedly already used in a diverse number of problem domains. Gray (2000:243) mentions that two distinct streams of research have emerged in the strategic alliance field: one focuses on strategic alliances and joint ventures among business organisations while the other addresses cross-sectoral alliances among businesses, governments, schools, NGOs, and other stake-holders. In the field of paradiplomacy, for example, the term alli-ance has already been used by authors such as Keating (1999:8) who refers to "alliances between specific regions", and Hocking (1999:18) who observes that "[j]ust as firms have engaged in the construction of strategic alliances for reasons of cost and compet-itiveness, so regions, localities and cities develop international linkages and their own brand of strategic alliance aimed at strengthening their position in the global economy". The idea of applying the concept of strategic alliances to the field of C2C partnership relationships is therefore consistent with current literature and practice.

Many similarities can be observed between organisational strategic alliances and C2C partnerships (De Villiers, 2005). Both are, for instance, driven by the same forces of globalisation and decentralisation; both have similar aims such as learning and increasing competitiveness; both are characterised by shared objectives and moving the partners towards the attainment of a long-term strategic goal; both entail a commitment of resources and joint decision-making; both are aimed at creating advantage for the parties involved; and both can connect more than two partners, leading to the formation of network organisations.

Against this background, it is therefore argued that a C2C part-nership can be defined as a "long-term strategic alliance between communities in different cities or towns, in which their munici-palities are key actors". The municipality's main roles are normally those of leader and facilitator.

Success factors of city-to-city partnerships

Many C2C partnerships fail. In a study in South Africa, for instance, only 13% were rated as highly successful (De Villiers, 2005). A follow-up study indicated that an estimated 51% of part-nerships identified in 2004 had been abandoned by 2006, and of the 50 that were investigated only 7 were found to be worthy of emulation. It was further found that the costs of these relationships probably far outweigh the benefits (DPLG, 2006).

Factors that are present in successful C2C partnership pro-grammes have been identified by many practitioner studies, among others by Sister Cities International (SCI), the UNDP, the New Zea-land Institute of Economic Research (NZIER), the City of Bonn, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), as well as academic research studies (De Villiers, 2005). As many of these factors have been derived from limited case study analyses, De Villiers (2005) conducted primary research among the 284 municipalities of South Africa to investigate which of these factors could be related positively to success in reportedly successful

international relationships. In the USA the ICMA conducted research among 23 participants in the ICMA 2-year funded contracts between a US city and an international city, in order to establish sustainability factors that would play a role in ensuring the longevity of the partnership. Looking at all of these studies, a number of factors that are present in successful and sustainable relationships can be identified.

Firstly, it is important that an enabling environment exists to facilitate successful partnering initiatives. National government policy and position regarding local international relations will greatly influence the extent and success of relationships. In South Africa, for instance, a large number of links were formed after the national government published an official municipal international relations (MIR) strategy document in 1999 (De Villiers, 2005). Careful partner selection is important, and partners should be chosen who can assist the community in reaching its specific goals. Resources should also be concentrated by limiting the number of partners. The council plays the major facilitating role in the C2C relationship and strong support from the municipal council and the commitment of its management are needed. Broad-based community involvement, including sub-alliances between institu-tions, groups, organisations and the business sector, are important for success. The level of community awareness of the twinning, for instance, has a significant positive correlation with success (De Villiers, 2005), and the ICMA also found that more citizen partici-pation leads to a higher degree of sustainability (ICMA, 2004). Examples of successful community-driven partnerships include those between Cape Town (South Africa) and Aachen (Germany); Hibiscus Coast Municipality (South Africa) and Oskarshamn (Swe-den); and Honolulu (Hawaii) and Hue (Vietnam).

Other success factors are the quality of management, and strong, committed community leadership. In many successful relation-ships a broad-based twinning committee from each partner was in place. But effective and permanent organisational structures and staff are also needed to sustain the partnership. In addition, the relationship should be formalised through a signed agreement or memorandum of understanding, typically with a long-term focus. This should, very importantly, be underpinned by a business plan with clear objectives, goals, projects and planned activities.

Relationships are formed and maintained through reliable and regular communication involving all stakeholders and including both mutual understanding and commitment between partners. This implies that the relationship should be actively marketed and promoted among the relevant parties. Regular exchanges and strong relationship building that tie the two communities together are also needed, which might be influenced by the similarities of personalities on both sides (De Villiers, 2005). In addition, the foundation of these relationships is built on the attitudes and values of trust, reciprocity, commitment, understanding, cultural sensitivity, positive attitude towards risk, and flexibility. Finally, the ability to access on-going community-based financial resources to sustain the relationship is very important, as well as regular eval-uation and revision of the agreement and the relationship.

But these factors cannot be seen in isolation and there is a strong relationship among them. The ICMA, for instance, points out that "[t]he interdependence between projects and partnerships is at the heart of sustainability. A partnership cannot continue to grow without new project initiatives, and a project cannot continue to have impact without the support and relationships provided by a strong partnership" (ICMA, 2004:4). The ICMA further concludes that "[w]ithout the introduction of a process to ensure project and partnership sustainability, the programs run the risk of achieving only short-term impacts disregarding the long-term needs of both communities", and "[t]o address these complex challenges, a framework for sustainability must be introduced at the beginning of the partnership" (ICMA, 2004:6). A study conducted in South