Municipal International Relations in South African Local Government

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ABSTRACT

Global change is particularly apparent in urban areas and has reinforced a movement towards co-ordination and progressive strategic management practices at the municipal and regional level across the world. 21st Century imperatives require municipalities across the world, to fundamentally re-assess their bureaucratic processes to remain relevant and effective.

In South Africa, these universal challenges are accompanied by the additional challenges of transition and democratization. Much emphasis is placed on the need for an effective process of sharing ideas and innovations among municipalities and urban practitioners in order to deepen their understanding regarding the complexity of urban problems and opportunities. The range and scope of municipal international relations has expanded rapidly over the past decades. In this regard, co-operation and networks-building form integral parts of municipalities' development strategies. Co-operation has become more systematic and less ad hoc. There has been a movement away from simple to complex linkages. The character of co-operation projects and networks has also changed. They have become less ceremonial and more substantial and project focused. The activities have become more targeted with measurable objectives and tangible results.

This article investigates the public administrative yield of municipal international relations by reflecting on a case of an existing partnership in a selected South African municipality.

INTRODUCTION

Local government across the world faces a variety of challenges posed by major economic, political and technological changes. Especially in the developing world, the above-mentioned factors collectively tend to exacerbate the situation. The challenges may include the following:

- The growing internationalization of economic, political and cultural life;
- A rapidly changing global economy that has major impact on local economies;

- Changes in the nature of politics as the growing need for more substantive citizen participation is increasingly accommodated; and
- The rise of the information or network society, which is transforming the nature of communication and interaction between all spheres of society.

These changes require municipalities across the world, to fundamentally re-assess their roles and responsibilities as well as the way in which they carry out such responsibilities. In the case of South Africa these universal challenges have been accompanied by the additional challenges of transition and democratization. In South Africa municipalities are therefore required to conduct integrated development planning, a public administrative process which is aimed towards bringing about sustainable and integrated planning. The so-called Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) constitute for each municipality a single plan that defines development priorities and goals for a five-year period. IDPs are based on a long-term vision and the goals and principles of developmental and local governance (The Urban Programme in South Africa, Integrated Municipal Development, 2007: 31).

One way in which local government positions itself with regard to the call for sustainable development within the context of political, economic and technological changes against the backdrop of globalization, is in fact to become active participants in partnerships across the world. This article investigates the public administrative yield of municipal international relations by reflecting on a case of an existing partnership in a selected South African municipality.

MUNICIPAL INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (MIR) AS A NEW PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIVE AND GOVERNANCE PARADIGM

It is no longer possible for municipalities to, in the new millennium, address the variety of issues by simply relying on their internal systems and capacity. A new paradigm is required to enable local government to both deliver on their mandate and to continuously improve its development trajectory at the same time (The Urban Programme in South Africa, Integrated Municipal Development, 2007: 9).

Municipal international relations is one element of a larger paradigm featuring municipal partnering as a vehicle to creating learning organizations, building strategic networks of exchange between (and within) municipalities and developing common approaches to the main urban problems such as poverty, unemployment, environmental decline, lack of adequate shelter and violence. As a response, there has been a vigorous expansion of all types of municipal international co-operation (Johannesburg Metropolitan Council: Municipal International Relations and Associated Protocols, 2006: 3).

For the purposes of this discourse, municipal international relations could be defined as a linkage between two or more communities hailing from different countries where at least one actor is a municipality and where some of the other entities may include private associations, non-governmental organizations or community based organizations (Johannesburg Metropolitan Council: Municipal International Relations and Associated Protocols, 2006: 4).

In practice, it may involve other peripheral stakeholders such as organized local government as well as associated government agencies on other (higher) levels or spheres (Johannesburg Metropolitan Council: Municipal International Relations and Associated

Protocols, 2006: 17). Especially in the context of developing states, the key actors may take interest in such activities from the point of view of their pursuit of sustainable development. Municipal international relations intend therefore to aid in implementing and operationalising strategies to effectively achieve sustainability in development. In the design of municipal international relations activities, the following should be considered:

Research by Najam and Robins (2001:66), Luken and Hesp, (2006:12) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), quoted by Luken (2006:47), has identified certain key characteristics of an *'effective strategy'* for sustainable development. All three sources agree on the following issues:

- Sustainable development is not an overnight activity;
- Sustainable development is based on partnership and ownership; and
- Sustainable development requires strong implementation capability and capacity.

The post-apartheid South Africa requires municipalities to become development agents, rather than merely being bureaucratic institutions. It is however evident that policy integration is no longer a national issue but must also be addressed internationally, whilst including local government as main actors (Buffalo City-Gävle Partnership: Framework Programme 2007-2010, 2007: 15). Municipalities and municipal associations therefore participate in international associations, networks and activities for a number of different purposes and objectives. These include (Johannesburg Metropolitan Council: Municipal International Relations and Associated Protocols, 2006: 5):

- To facilitate information and knowledge sharing;
- To build managerial and technical capacity;
- To promote a region or city as an attractive location for investment and tourism;
- To address regional and global challenges that have local impact but which need to be tackled on a broad basis; and
- To contribute to global understanding, solidarity and peace.

In addition to the purposes and objectives, the role of municipalities should, in establishing and managing municipal international relations include:

- investigating and exploring the prospects of partnerships/relationships and their developmental impact on the municipality;
- identifying and initiating international agreements and relationships in line with South Africa's Foreign Policy;
- preparing a plan for municipal international relations to support their municipal priorities as part of the IDP process;
- submitting this plan and details of any official international visit or agreement to a designated Municipal International Relations Committee/task group; and
- preparing an annual record and evaluation of all international co-operation arrangements and events they have been involved in for public scrutiny and for submission to national, provincial government and organised local government.

If the above requirements and modalities are met, municipalities should investigate, on the basis of what their *needs* are, as opposed to what the *demand* from potential stakeholders may be, the type of municipal international relation, best suited for them.

TYPES OF MIR

Over the years, different types of municipal international relations have evolved. The different types of partnerships have developed in response to practicalities dictated by and among different actors in this arena. The following types of MIR can be identified (Johannesburg Metropolitan Council: Municipal International Relations and Associated Protocols, 2006: 5):

Participation in representative associations of municipalities

The number and the influence of international associations of municipalities has increased significantly in recent years and include broad-based inclusive organisations, more regional organisations and those that have a specific focus.

The International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) and the United Towns Organisation (UTO) are the most significant international associations of major municipal entities. These organisations had formed the G4 groups which together with several of the regional associations (Eurocities, the Union of African Towns, the Arab Towns Organisation, Citynet and representatives of North and Latin America municipal associations) became known at G4+. The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and many South African municipalities are members of IULA and participate in its extensive range of activities and its associated organisations.

Twinning arrangements and international agreements

The twinning of cities and towns across international boundaries to support cultural, friendship and economic exchanges and partnerships has traditionally been the major mechanism for inter-municipal relations. A number of South African cities and towns have entered into twinning arrangements with municipalities elsewhere in the world.

A twinning agreement should not be confused with the so-called international agreement. Twinning is an informal arrangement, indicating mutual intentions and goodwill but which does not entail a legally binding agreement. The basic purpose of a twinning agreement should be to provide an opportunity for a contract on as wide a scale as possible with local communities of other countries.

The existence of certain common features and linkages usually form part of the criteria whereby municipalities select appropriate twinning partners. The twinning approach has recently been enhanced by a new focus on tripartite partnerships where three rather than two cities create a formal link with each other.

An international agreement on the other hand can be defined as a written agreement between states and or international organisation and therefore governed by international law whatever its particular destination (Johannesburg Metropolitan Council: Municipal International Relations and Associated Protocols, 2006: 6).

The following objectives may be considered before signing a twinning agreement namely:
* The agreement must be aimed at real socio-economic interaction;
* The agreement should promote good relations between local authorities;
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- The agreement must not be cosmetic;
- The agreement should create opportunities for the extension of mutual understanding, visits, contact and co-operation, as well as exchange of knowledge and information concerning the various activities of the respective municipalities;
- Funding must be available as this increases effectiveness of projects arising from such an arrangement;
- The eventual agreement between the two municipalities should benefit the community and the municipality; and
- The choice of a municipality should be financially viable to ascertain the different goals.

Membership of networks

The focus of municipal international co-operation has shifted from twinning to a more flexible network approach where groups of municipalities link themselves in range of ways to carry out joint programmes of for instance research and learning, information and technology sharing, management development, co-ordinated action on common problems, economic co-operation.

The networks take many different forms. They may be formal or less formal. They may have a very broad membership or they can comprise a small number of members. They may involve high levels of international travel and personnel exchange or they may be largely run using electronic communication.

Certain networks involve cities and towns with certain common features who co-operate on a range of issues. Other networks such as the Healthy Cities Network are focused on a specific programme.

These networks are also initiated and funded in a number of ways:
- By municipalities themselves;
- By municipal associations;
- By the UN and other international agencies; and
- By non-governmental organisations and research institutions

Municipal marketing and global presence

Many municipalities, particularly major cities and metropolitan areas, devote increasing resources to marketing themselves as "world cities" that are attractive sites of investment and tourism. Marketing involves a range of activities including bidding to host major international events, identifying and lobbying potential investors, attending trade and international conventions and ensuring that good marketing media is widely distributed internationally.

PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES FOR MIR

The principles that may guide municipal international relations may shortly be described as to include the following:

International principles

Engagements to MIR to an important developmental and strategic instrument for local government and should be encouraged and supported. Involvement in international and regional municipal associations and networks and the active promotion of their city, town and/or internationally should be seen as important components of the development strategies of municipalities. National and provincial government and organized local government thus have an obligation to encourage and support the development of such involvement by creating an enabling legislative framework and through providing co-ordination, resources, information and research.

MIR should be focused on supporting the successful implementation of the strategic priorities of local government. It is critical that international co-operation and networking does not become activities in and for themselves. They must be designed and implemented as part of a broader strategic plan guiding the activity of SALGA and the municipalities concerned.

MIR should be developmental and outcomes orientated and should add value to municipal programmes. MIR should be seen as an integral part of municipal activities not as a separate add-on and should be used as a tool to facilitate a developmental approach in local government. It is important accordingly that it becomes focused and subject to monitoring and performance review to ensure that it adds value to municipal programmes.

External principles

All spheres of government should be informed by the following "external" principles in engaging in activities related to municipal international co-operation and action:

MIR should be used to develop stronger relationships with developing southern hemisphere counties. A large number of current international linkages are with municipalities from the Northern hemisphere. These linkages are important and need to be developed and maintained. However, South African local government should also take the lead in initiating a wider range of contact and co-operation with countries of the Southern hemisphere. Southern hemisphere contexts and development challenges have similarities and powerful linkages around capacity building, governance and development can be built. In addition, there are common issues facing developing countries around which joint action and lobbying needs to be developed.

MIR should emphasise links between African countries and should support the development of an African Renaissance. South African municipalities should especially seek to build linkages based on mutual benefit and focused on common issues and commitment with municipalities elsewhere in Africa. Local government in South Africa has an important contribution to make in fostering and supporting the African Renaissance by co-operating with local government across the continent. Such co-operation should help develop an African practice that builds on international lessons but is rooted in African knowledge and experience and is sensitive to the needs and realties of the continent.

MIR should help build the influence of developing countries in the global policy making process. At present developing countries lack power and influence within the major multi-lateral agencies and the global forums that play very significant roles in determining global development policy. It is important that this imbalance be addressed. Co-operation

amongst municipalities from developing countries to develop coherent policy alternatives for addressing urban and rural development and democracy at the local level is an important component of this.

MIR should contribute to an international culture of human rights, global solidarity and understanding. International exchange can be a powerful vehicle for building an international culture of human rights among and within nations. It can also foster international solidarity regarding the marginal status of many developing countries in the world economy and the need for universal solutions to the problems of poverty and social exclusion. South African local government should actively seek to support human rights, democratic values and global solidarity in its MIR programmes.

MUNICIPAL INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: THE CASE OF BUFFALO CITY MUNICIPALITY

Buffalo City, in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, is currently actively engaged in international relations and processes whereby partnerships with cities, municipalities and other institutions internationally are fostered. Buffalo City Municipality has a populous of approximately 701,895 and geographically comprises an area of 2510 square kilometre.

The Buffalo City Council regards international relations a catalyst that enables the municipality to gain a competitive advantage for economic growth and development so that service delivery may be enhanced. Such activities are consistent with the vision and goals of the municipality as expressed in its IDP. The intention is furthermore to focus all policy and strategy relating to the international relations operations of the Buffalo City Municipality towards interactions that may yield measurable results subjected to regular performance measurement and review.

This Municipality has made a significant footprint in international relations. One of the most prominent current initiatives includes a twinning agreement with the Citiy of Gävle (Sweden). This partnership was initiated in 2003 and includes cooperation in areas such as urban planning, emergency response, and the establishment of community and support centres.

The purpose and objectives of the municipal international relations framework (MIRF) of the Buffalo City Municipality (BCM)

The following form the extent of the purposes and objectives of the MIRF on this regard:
- To align BCM international relations and international development cooperation activities as closely to RSA foreign policy as possible;
- To position BCM in the ongoing national (e.g. SALGA) discussion about the role of local government – and specifically municipalities – in the conduct of international relations, and actively engage with key stakeholders (e.g. the national Department of Provincial and Local Government) in this regard;
- To ensure prioritization of BCM's strategic priorities as outlined in the IDP/Budget and Local Economic and Development strategy; and
- To promote Buffalo City Municipality as an attractive location for investment and tourism.

In terms of its Council's policy, the Buffalo City Municipality's involvement in establishing and maintaining international relationships should therefore contribute to:

- Economic development of the area including, but not limited to, tourism, investment and trade;
- Cultural development of the area including, but not limited to, respect for different cultures and artistic pursuits;
- Social development including, but not limited to, sporting exchanges, social upliftment, HIV & Aids, and horticultural interests;
- Educational development including, but not limited to links between non-governmental organisations, community based organisations, the business community and other areas of exchange.
- Knowledge sharing and skills transfer, not limited to Buffalo City municipality recipients but also ensure direct benefits for international partners as well.

In this case, effective international relations contribute significantly to the Buffalo City Municipality in the following areas:

- Knowledge and Skills transfer;
- The economy;
- The community;
- The arts;
- Raising the profile of Buffalo City internationally;
- Promoting Buffalo City as an attractive city for migration, investment, and to live and do business in;
- Promoting the city as a tourist destination;
- Providing business with access to new markets;
- Developing offshore contacts and networks;
- Sports (the 2010 Soccer World Cup tournament as catalyst); and
- Education.

However, practicing international relations require consistency and proper management so that all international partnerships or twinning agreements can expand and evolve in order to benefit the relevant stakeholders. In order to ensure the achievement of this objective, the Buffalo City's policy on international relations stipulate that any agreement signed needs to be *needs* rather than *demand* driven. This implies that it will constitute a proactive approach whereby the prospective and proposed relationship(s) are based on clear and specific initiatives, projects and programmes that will assist in meeting Buffalo City Municipality's strategic priorities as outlined in the IDP rather than one where applications from foreign entities demand the conclusion of an agreement for mutual benefit, rather than be vaguely defined. It is thus stipulated that partnerships should relate to the following:

- **Strategic focus –** international relations should support the Council's strategic vision and goals;
- **Economic development –** international relations should focus on realising opportunities for growing and developing the city's, and the region's economy;
- **Sense of place –** international relations should add to a sense of place, in the political, arts and cultural centre of South Africa; and to the vitality and diversity of the city;

- **Consistency with Government foreign policy –** Council's international relations policy should be consistent with the Government's foreign policy;
- **Productive relationships –** the Council should have a portfolio of city-to-city relationships which provide positive tangible results for the city;
- **Fostering linkages-** international relations should provide the community and business with opportunities to connect with international cities;
- **Enhancing understanding-** international relations creates opportunities for residents of Buffalo City to experience, explore, and understand other cultures, and should enhance goodwill and understanding; and
- **Promotion of the city –** international relations should promote Buffalo City on the international stage as an excellent place to live, do business, and visit.

Finally, given the fact that the Buffalo City-Gävle partnership has been running for approximately five years, the process has yielded through experiential learning, some important lessons including (Urban Development Programme: Municipal Partnerships, 2007: 40-41):

- Political commitment to the partnership(s) in all participating entities is crucial for a meaningful and successful cooperation and the sustainability of the projects implemented;
- It is important to have a critical mass of departments and people involved in a partnership to assist in maintaining it over time. It assists in cementing and maintaining crucial personal links and forms a wider base for lasting cooperation;
- In order to build a partnership, patience is important as it takes time to develop sound working relationships and effective projects. In this case it has become apparent that the start-up phase, may take as long as two years, and it may take as long as five years before projects become fully operational and sustainable;
- Differences in municipal working environments and cultures should not be viewed as obstacles, but rather opportunities for learning and growth. However, special effort is needed to foster a good working relationship between collaborating staff;
- Relationships are strengthened by exchange visits and social activities that include municipal staff, as well as politicians and consultants;
- Capacity building should form the core of any partnership. Study tours are of paramount importance. Excellent networking ensued through joint workshops and seminars;
- For efficient capacity building, municipal partners should engage sufficient resources with the correct professional capacity and background to implement joint projects;
- Continuity in staffing – as opposed to constant staff turnover and general mobility – is a requirement for success;
- Partnership expenses such as travel and accommodation require dedicated funding and budgeting, which may be constrained within the context of regular municipal budgeting modalities. Therefore, the support of a third party (by means of donorships etc.) is of paramount importance. In addition, such involvement places an obligation on the actors to perform and to achieve set objectives; and

CONCLUSION

Municipal international relations are currently integrally linked to municipalities' strategic operations. In the case of Buffalo City, from the preceding description, it is evident that its international relations activities are designed to integrate optimally with its strategic objectives and concomitant projects. From the information assimilated from this municipality it may be deducted that their partnership with Gävle has proven to be enriching, especially as far as capacity development, local economic development, sports and city promotion and marketing is concerned. In the preceding exposition relating to lessons learned from Buffalo City's engagement with Gävle, other municipalities, which may be considering similar partnerships or those who find themselves on the brink of finalising some type of partnership, may take cognisance thereof. Although in a strict sense, municipal international relations is not a totally new phenomenon, it seems to have changed and adapted to the environment as dictated by globalisation and generally internationalisation trends. This research article does not propose to deliver the ultimate in knowledge concerning municipal international relations. Rather, an attempt is made to propose that municipal international relations may assist to strengthen municipal public administration practice for the purposes of achieving sustainable development. Research in this regard should continue to ascertain the longer term impacts in this regard.

SOURCES

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