

## **Local Governments as International Players: Examining Town Twinning as a Mechanism**

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**Abstract.** It is commonly perceived that diplomacy and international affairs are the domain of national government. This paper argues that non-state actors specifically, local government units (LGUs), can also be effective international players in bringing about stronger ties in the region by means of enhanced bilateral cooperation between towns and cities especially within the ASEAN region. This paper explores how local governments can forward their development objectives by establishing linkages with other local governments in different countries. Referred to as town twinning, it is a tool by which LGUs can obtain resources from “sister-cities” and foster mutual understanding and local development through business, trade, technical, cultural, and educational exchanges. The main question that guides this paper is: In what ways can local governments units meet their local development needs through town twinning as a mechanism? Using document analysis and a case study approach, the paper discusses the processes and outcomes of town twinning arrangements of selected LGUs in the Philippines. The paper presents the potential for increasing flows of material resources and human capital for LGUs through this approach. It also proposes that local governments especially within ASEAN need to proactively maximize the benefits of town twinning arrangements to attain a greater sense of community within the context of local and regional development.

**Key Words:** Town twinning program; Sister-city; Local development; Diplomacy

### **Introduction**

Diplomacy is a foreign policy tool which is used to achieve development and is commonly perceived as the domain of national government and its foreign policy implementing body which is the Foreign Affairs Department or Ministry. Yet the wide scope of development requires the participation of various sectors including local government units (LGUs) for they too have a stake in national and local development. As they pursue their own concerns they have become active players in external relations by means of their foreign linkages.

In light of current global trends, non-state players take on a larger role in nation building and world affairs. Moreover, the trend towards decentralization in which greater power and authority are given to local governments to conduct their own affairs, makes local governments even more significant in both national and global affairs. Although they are not widely recognized as players in international affairs, by examining town twinning as a mechanism, one cannot ignore their significance in forging partnerships in promoting diplomacy for development.

### **The Concept of Town Twinning**

Town twinning gained ground after World War (WW) II when countries aimed to restore diplomatic relations and reconnect citizens through cultural and education exchange (Cities

Today, 2014). Although its origins in Europe can be traced even before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after WW II, community leaders there have realized that the intra-European warfare was pointless. Due to this reason, France and Germany initially had agreed to work on reconciliation, long-term fraternity, and creative active twinning. This later on involved other countries in the region and the practice spread throughout the world so that by 1950, more than 11,000 cities entered into town twinning agreements among 159 countries. (Zelinsky, 1991).

Twin towns or sister cities are borne out of legal agreements between local governments that are geographically apart and politically distinct but have the same interest to pursue people-to-people exchanges to foster understanding and cooperation. Before cities or towns enter into the agreement, it must first consider their similarities such as shared culture, economic, cultural, recreational, and ideological concerns and historical connection. Though town twinning has been traditionally used for cultural, diplomatic, and education development, there is a need for them to expand their partnerships today for economic development.

### Town twinning in the Philippines

In the case of the Philippines, town twinning is conducted both locally among local government units and internationally with Philippine local government units partnering with local governments in other countries. The Philippine Sisterhood Program started in 1981 as a partnership program for local government under the Office of the President and then Department of Local Government. Its objective was to urge all LGUs to support and actively participate in establishing meaningful international sisterhood relationships with provinces, cities, and municipalities abroad. By doing so, this could lead to lasting relationships where projects and exchanges of mutual interest can be forged in the areas of investments, education, culture, tourism, and sustainable development.

Town twinning or sister city arrangements refer to an official partnership between two local government units (LGUs) of two nation-states, forged through the signing of a memorandum of agreement or any official document usually by the elected public officials of the two LGUs (Jose, n.d.). It is a concept whereby towns or cities in geographically and politically distinct areas are paired, with the goal of fostering human contact and cultural links (Stephen, 2008). The partnership is not only limited to cultural understanding but expands to business, trade, education, and technical exchanges. This kind of partnership among LGUs enhances people-to-people diplomacy leading to cultural, social, professional, and economic activities between citizens of parties involved. Its benefits redound to the development of the locality by allowing an exchange of ideas and resources with cities and citizens of countries in a more direct way.

There are steps which LGUs need to undertake towards formalizing a town twinning or sister-city agreement. First, a committee is formed representing members in the community from business, academe, youth, media, and other sectors which discusses possible areas of affiliation with the proposed sister-city. Background information is prepared which include types of business activities in the locality, human resource profile, school system, cultural institutions, and types of projects the community is ready to undertake.

The twinning committee then submits the affiliation proposal to the LGU for endorsement by the mayor and council. When the LGU decides to proceed, an executive committee is appointed responsible for carrying out the program. A protocol of intent is drafted by the city

government signifying the intention to establish sister city relations. This is sent to the proposed sister city through diplomatic or foreign posts.

Once the two parties decide to match, the city council drafts a resolution expressing the desire to enter into a town twinning or sister city agreement. After the exchange of resolutions, the formal signing of the agreement takes place.

#### City of Manila's Town Twinning Experience

The capital city of Manila has engaged in partnering with cities with other countries since the 1960s. It has 35 sister city affiliations with countries in Asia, Europe, North America, and Latin America.

An example of an active sister-city it has is with San Francisco City, California, USA. The ties between Manila City and San Francisco City could be traced back over 50 years ago, when the San Francisco- Manila Sister City Committee was formed in 1961. To strengthen the mutual agreement between the two cities, the San Francisco-Manila Sister City Committee, together with the Philippine Consulate General organized the Mabuhay Manila business, cultural, and rebuilding mission in 2014. The mission primarily aims to renew the friendship, economic, and cultural ties between the two cities. It is the first business mission between the two cities which focuses on providing opportunities in the Philippines for infrastructure development, public-private sector partnerships, green technology and renewable energy, disaster mitigation, entrepreneurship and development of tech start-ups, merchandise trade (import-export), government procurement and internationally-funded projects. In February 2014, San Francisco contributed relief efforts in the areas destroyed by Super Typhoon Haiyan by providing emergency response experts and relief funds. Its areas of cooperation expanded to emergency preparedness and management, information and communications technology, and biotechnology.

Manila City has also been affiliated with three cities in Japan namely, Yokohama City since 1965, Takatsuki City starting 1979, and Nantan City in 1985. The sister-city agreements aim to provide consultation on sister city affiliations and international exchange with regard to the needs of the region. In 2012, 100 participants from Manila attended the Japan Travel Seminar and Business Meeting to foster a stronger network and relationship between Japan and the Philippines. They organized travel seminars and business-to-business meeting sessions discussing the markets within the ASEAN region.

Moreover, Manila and Taipei City, Taiwan have a long-standing relationship and cooperation over the years. High officials among the two countries meet occasionally to discuss sister-city activities and are currently strengthening their education and cultural cooperation. Taipei has donated fire-fighting equipment and medical emergency equipment to the city of Manila. Taipei is also willing to help Manila in developing the city government's wireless broadband and networking technologies. Moreover, Environmental Protection Administration Taiwan collaborated with Manila-based NGO Clean Air Asia for consultations on the newly-established Cities Clean Air Partnership city-level partnering and certification program. Taipei aims to promote cultural exchanges and development between the two cities.

Over the past 40 years, the bilateral cooperation between Guangzhou, People's Republic of China and Manila has been considered as the most successful example of educational, cultural, and people-to-people exchange between China and the Philippines. Once concrete

example of this is the scholarship that Filipino-Chinese business tycoon Lucio Tan gives to Chinese schools in the Philippines. Scholars are sent to Guangzhou, and other cities in China such as, Xiamen, Shanghai, and Beijing. Moreover, Guangzhou organized trade fairs and campaigns that focus on trade and investment, tourism, technological development, strengthening its ties with Manila City. Guangzhou also provides support in improving the management of public facilities, traffic, system, and sewage treatment.

#### Cebu City's Town Twinning Arrangements

Another Philippine local government that has an active town twinning program is Cebu City located in the Central Visayas region. Similar to Manila, Cebu City has started establishing links with other cities as early as the 1960s. From its first agreement with Kaoshiung, Taiwan, it has expanded its sister-city arrangements with other local governments in the Netherlands, USA, Spain, South Korea, People's Republic of China, Australia, Canada, and Indonesia.

For example, in the case of Kaohsiung, Cebu was able to get a donation of 300 vehicles from this sister city. Cebu City officials also visited Kaohsiung to exchange ideas with their counterparts on local government administration. These ties between Cebu and Kaohsiung are strengthened with annual exchanges of cultural and business delegations.

With Harlemermeer, Cebu was also able to secure vehicles, particularly trauma vans and ambulances for the city. Paramedic training for Cebuano rescue teams was conducted through this sister-city arrangement. As a gesture of goodwill, Harlemermeer has given flower seeds to Cebu City in support of the thriving local cutflower industry; while Cebu City in turn gave Harlemermeer mango seeds given that Cebu is known for its production of high quality mangoes that are exported throughout the world.

#### Prospects and Challenges

Town twinning should be considered as significant in that aside from fostering goodwill and greater understanding through direct interactions of local governments and communities involved, it has also paved the way for the influx of trade, business, tourists for both parties.

As seen in the case of Manila and Cebu, their town twinning agreements allowed them to have resource inputs in terms of scholarships, equipment, technical skills and know-how, and business opportunities. Cebu, for example, has benefitted a lot from the paramedic training and ambulance vans that have been sourced through this program. This has a significant bearing on the capability of the city government to provide much-needed health service and emergency response to its constituents. For the part of the city of Manila, the sister-city program's contribution to education is of vital importance. Scholarships provided to the city's youth through these partnerships help improve Manila's human capital. Furthermore, capital assets, promotion of trade, business, and tourism is directly conducted by means of linking up with counterpart LGUs and communities overseas. In this sense, sister-cities can serve as conduits for resources to local development.

While there is much potential for this mechanism for local governments as international players and participants in diplomacy, there are challenges to making full use of town twinning by local governments.

For one, the political will of the local chief executive or the mayor is an important factor. If the mayor is proactive and sees the benefit of linking with cities beyond its national borders,

then town twinning can be priority. If otherwise, this mechanism will not be given as much emphasis.

Another challenge is in the allotment of budget for this endeavor. Pursuing diplomatic, cultural, and business exchanges can be expensive in terms of communication and representation costs. The creation of a protocol office for local governments to take care of administrative matters for town twinning would require additional budget for its operation. More so, the gap in knowledge when it comes to the conduct of diplomacy at the local government level can serve as a constraint. Bureaucratic bottlenecks within local governments have to be cleared for town twinning to take off.

The central government can support town twinning mainly in two ways. One is through a directive from the Department of Local Government endorsed by the Chief Executive. If there is an imprimatur from the highest echelons of power declaring it a priority program, then it can enroll local governments to follow suit. Such was the case during the Ramos administration (1992-1998) when local and international town twinning flourished because of the administration's support. Second is through closer coordination and assistance of the Department of Foreign Affairs and its regional consular offices. This national line agency that handles foreign relations can very well assist local governments on information needed concerning the local governments of countries with whom they would like to partner with. It can also provide support and information on protocol in diplomatic practice which local governments need.

## Conclusion

Town twinning is a mechanism which allows local governments to be active players in diplomacy. Local governments have a role to play in fostering solidarity and understanding across the regions while securing external resources for local development. Especially at a time where budgetary limitations are faced by local governments, town twinning can help augment whatever financial or material needs there are without having to dip into national coffers. It takes increased awareness and innovation in local administration for local chief executives to seize the opportunities posed by town twinning programs. Nevertheless, this instrument of local policy-making underscores how local governments can take on a larger role for regional and international cooperation.

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