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Theory, Cases and Implications of International City-to-City Cooperation Governance

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Abstract

City-to-city cooperation offers relatively less-developed cities a workable route to new governance institutions and to tangible improvements in residents' living conditions. City partnerships operate on two levels at once: they intervene in the institutional arrangements of city government and, separately, in the associational life of civil society, returning benefits to both. Four international partnerships—among them Amsterdam with Villa El Salvador, Utrecht with León, Treptow with Cajamarca, and Alphen aan den Rijn with Oudtshoorn—each left a measurable mark on the governance of every partner involved. These partnerships were guided by a coherent body of urban governance theory while also being shaped by national, ethnic and local-territorial conditions. Analysing the theory and the four cases together yields lessons that Chinese local governments can apply when drawing on international city cooperation to renew their own governance practice.

Keywords: urban development; urban governance; city cooperation; ICT; participation; C2C

1. Introduction

International partnerships between cities have proliferated, giving rise to what is now termed city-to-city cooperation (C2C). It has been estimated that some 70 per cent of the world's cities hold partnership arrangements,[1] and China alone has established 2,022 twinning relationships with 131 countries.[2] Such cooperation can improve the administrative institutions of local government, raise the quality of urban life, and is particularly valuable for cities undergoing renewal in lagging regions.[3] Because developing countries are still learning how to urbanise and are doing so at speed, the theory behind international city-to-city governance cooperation deserves systematic study. Hewitt and colleagues[4] argue that city cooperation and urban governance are necessarily connected. Innovating urban governance out of international city cooperation requires both theoretical guidance and a pragmatic reading of local conditions. Since cooperation has already produced demonstrable successes internationally, it represents "a road worth taking". This paper first sets out the principles of international city-to-city governance cooperation, then examines four cases, and closes with a methodological discussion.

2. Theory and Methods of International City-to-City Cooperation Governance

International city-to-city governance cooperation has entered the purview of economics, sociology and political science, largely because of two decades of economic globalisation and of the growing tendency for governance ideas to be adapted to national and ethnic conditions. Information and communication technology (ICT), the infrastructure of globalisation, has made settlement and communication feasible among stakeholders, and in doing so has supplied the technical preconditions for governance; the city has become both the economic zone and the governance arena of ICT.[4] Investors among those stakeholders pay close attention to the recognition they enjoy from the city's population at large, since they need economic returns insulated from shifts in the political environment. International city-to-city governance cooperation therefore begins in the economic sphere but extends from relations of production into social relations. Its governing ideas are plain and answer directly to the needs of economic development.

2.1 Streamlining administration and devolving power: repairing the relationship between local government and civil society

Streamlining administration and devolving power has been one of the entry points of urban governance internationally. Over recent decades, city cooperation has pressed for the transfer of administrative authority from the state to local government, granting the latter greater autonomy. Devolution is intended to secure the efficient allocation of public resources and the effective delivery of services, and thereby to answer the needs of the poor at the institutional level.[5] The

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scholarly consensus holds that devolution, citizen participation and poverty reduction are the central tasks of urban governance,[6] and that the core of governance today lies in resolving the conflicts generated by urbanisation and in improving the relationship between local government and civil society.

Though devolution is beset by bottlenecks and difficulties, sustained commitment can deliver progress on at least two fronts. First, it can improve relations between local government and civil society, confer new responsibilities on stakeholders, and strengthen the capacity of local institutions to respond to the poor in their areas.[7] Second, a growing consensus holds that urban governance is indispensable to sustained development and to poverty reduction.[8]

2.2 Good governance: attending to the needs of the poor and to citizen participation

Good governance comprises devolution, the construction of efficient local government and the encouragement of citizen participation. Its purpose is to narrow the distance between the public and the private spheres so that the needs of the poor receive greater weight.[9] At root the roles of citizens and of institutions are similar, so that individuals and institutions alike can, and should, cooperate in the pursuit of good governance. Achieving good governance in international city cooperation requires local government, institutions and citizens to take part in decision-making together, and establishing such a cooperative mode of decision-making presupposes that both sides hold symmetric information.[10] Cooperative decision-making should concentrate on two things: building a civil society capable of expressing citizens' demands, and building a local government that is accountable and able to meet public service needs. Strengthening citizen participation and government accountability can improve urban governance: if participatory governance cannot reach power and politics, participants' voices will be ignored, and where reform of the political system cannot affect citizen participation in decisions, reform merely preserves the status quo.[11]

Meeting the needs of the poor calls simultaneously for strong state governance and a strong civil society; the question is how the two are to be reconciled. At the level of state governance, Grindle holds that the aim of capacity building is a "good government", and identifies three components: capacity building directed at human resource development, through staff training and technical development; the strengthening of institutional structure and organisational culture; and reform of institutions and mandates, encompassing policy, legal and institutional change.[12]

A national governance system ultimately finds its footing in urban governance. Narrowly understood, municipal government is the provision of services; broadly understood, it is the developer of a community. That is to say, municipal government should give expression to citizens' needs and should guarantee that the dividends of development are shared justly. Local government not only provides services to residents but also cultivates local factors of development and may itself become an administration of sustainable development.[13] Any development necessarily raises the question of the poor, and an institutional response and system of accountability toward the poor means that people can hold government bodies to account—which is also what makes local government a regional developer.[6] Steps to strengthen government's sense of responsibility, improve accountability and increase transparency toward citizens have already been taken at the technical and instrumental level in the course of urbanisation, but they require further reinforcement.

On building a strong civil society, much of the literature concentrates on citizenship, political participation and voice. Hordijk, for example, distinguishes citizens who hold political power from those who hold behavioural power: the former are passive in decision-making, the latter directly active, and urban governance should encourage the latter.[14] Cornwall and Gaventa separate users-and-choosers from makers-and-shapers.[1] Mitlin proposes that a successful factor in local participatory governance is a city's procedural capacity to offer distinct interest groups clear channels for participation.[1] Building the organisational capacity for deliberation and participation is central to citizens' exercise of power and to their influence over decisions. Where municipal government provides mediated mechanisms for participation, non-governmental and community-based organisations can understand and narrow the differences between citizens and government. Guiding citizens to learn, and building civil society organisations, is a further important strategy for strengthening participatory urban governance.[15]

2.3 How city cooperation gives rise to urban governance

Building strong local governance and participatory governance has directed interest toward the effects produced by cooperation between cities. How does C2C affect local governance, and by what means can the external impetus of city cooperation strengthen the sense of responsibility among urban stakeholders and dissolve the barriers between them? Three conditions should be met if city cooperation is to arrive at urban good governance: first, that cooperation can demonstrably affect administration and services; second, that it has significance for cultivating citizen participation in local governance; and third, that the formal and informal influence of local government and of civil society are mutually recognised.[1] The basic premise is that C2C has a distinctive feature: it treats every actor with an interest in urbanisation as both a partner in, and a beneficiary of, urban intervention policy. There is thus reason to believe that city partnerships can affect urban governance from several directions. First, city cooperation can raise the capacity of local institutions, including the ability of municipal government to solve problems of urban management and service delivery, and can promote the transfer of governance expertise and technology between cities—not only among technical practitioners but also among local

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politicians and administrators.[16] Second, city cooperation aims to supply services to communities, in school education and sports facilities for instance, and above all to supply services to the poor within them. Only on that footing will social and grassroots organisations willingly pursue the interventions that cooperation makes available, for example the strengthening of residents' committee capacity.

3. Four Illustrative Cases of International City-to-City Cooperation Governance

International city cooperation is common; cases of cooperative governance are not. Governance touches on political identity and participation, and on ethnic and cultural tradition. The four cases below follow the empirical sampling analysis carried out by Marike C. Bontenbal of the Department of Human Geography and Planning at Utrecht University in 2005, 2007 and 2013.[1] The cities selected met the following criteria: that urban governors genuinely encompassed both local institutions and civil society; that new institutions in the less-developed partner were in the process of formation through devolution and public-sector reform; and that the objectives of the economic partnership were tied to institution building, poverty reduction and regional development in urban governance.[11]

3.1 Villa El Salvador: financial and environmental governance through C2C

Villa El Salvador's partner city is Amsterdam. In recent years the two have exchanged municipal staff and mounted a number of overseas missions.[1] The first cooperation project, running from 2004 to 2006, addressed financial management, since weak financial administration had been obstructing investment plans and Villa El Salvador had accordingly proposed financial reform through city cooperation. Staff exchanged between the two cities discussed municipal financial regulation, budgeting, auditing and the raising of municipal taxes. Amsterdam helped install computers and software and provided training. As a result, municipal staff could obtain and audit financial information, and both service delivery and fiscal revenue improved. Growing financial transparency, owed to continuously updated financial information, raised the satisfaction index among citizens, while the municipal authority gained a budget plan it could rely on—reliance resting on the recognition of the people.

A second municipal undertaking in cooperative governance, from 2004 to 2010, strengthened environmental services. Learning from Amsterdam, the municipal department designed an environmental management plan, launched a waste-recycling campaign to separate and concentrate refuse, and issued green vouchers to citizens. A green voucher is an incentive: residents who separate solid waste receive vouchers that can be traded and used to reduce their refuse tax. The scheme raised environmental awareness and improved waste separation. Private waste collectors gained income from wholesale buyers, and the cost of waste management fell.

3.2 León: strategic planning for urban expansion through C2C

Cooperation between Utrecht and León on urban development strategy began in the 1990s, and the León city council approved the plan in 1996.[1] The plan set out a vision of urban development and defined a series of strategies, among them improving rural infrastructure and rebuilding the former colonial city centre. Known as the Mastu Plan, it established a series of precedents that others could follow. Urban expansion should be reconciled with the interests of all parties, and reconciliation began with consultation of non-governmental organisations; in 1999 the city council approved the incorporation of consultation into the strategic plan. By 2004 municipal planning had drawn together municipal government, civil society and the private sector, allowing all parties to participate in decisions and to negotiate investment returns jointly. The plan, which ran for ten years (2004–2014), supplied instrumental solutions for municipal operation and also raised the capacity of staff in technical departments and in physical planning. Planning urban expansion through city cooperation was a first for Nicaragua and made León's municipal planning a pioneering example.[17]

Since 1988 the Utrecht municipal government has supported León's urban expansion blueprint through a long-term arrangement known as the LSE programme, covering 5,000 plots and 15,000 dwellings, with infrastructure for low-income residents planned to 2020. A revolving fund from Utrecht has supported municipal land surveys and loans for self-built housing. The programme met a large volume of housing demand and also prevented illegal land occupation on the urban fringe. On the whole, the LSE programme did much to strengthen institutions, municipal organisation and administrative capacity. In 2004 Utrecht subcontracted local consultancy training in leadership skills, management methods and administrative decentralisation, and considered the transition from technical transfer to eventual independent operation. An important step was the merger of the LSE programme office, which rested on Dutch–Nicaraguan consultation, into the León municipal development office, encompassing the whole of municipal works.

3.3 Treptow and Cajamarca: environmental governance through cooperation

German international city cooperation has features of its own: Germany offers developing countries opportunities to study environmental governance.[1] Representatives of partner cities can follow German environmental development and environmental programmes. Treptow, for instance, launched a funding programme that brought partners from Cajamarca, Peru, into German work processes, internships and observation of organisational methods for a year of capacity training.[1] The training covered environmental management, eco-efficiency, public participation and the cultivation of environmental

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awareness. Participants gained detailed insight into German procedures and also exchanged experience drawn from their own countries. The three Cajamarca professionals—two from the municipal government and one from the water utility—formed a group, and were asked to demonstrate wastewater treatment processes and administration, grounding capacity building in technique and operation.[1] In 2000 Treptow and Cajamarca organised a conference on water resources and wastewater treatment, which concluded that water is bound up with environmental and with social problems. Water pollution caused by mining was the focus of attention for professionals from both cities. Not content with exchanges among governmental organisations, the German side ran, between 2005 and 2014, several training courses of one to three months for representatives of non-governmental organisations on environmental degradation. A basic premise on the Treptow side was that social problems caused by mining must be addressed through cooperation between government and social organisations, since governance by government alone may overlook the interests of vulnerable groups and ultimately unsettle German investment.[1]

3.4 Oudtshoorn: introducing a municipal management system through C2C

Oudtshoorn, South Africa, and Alphen aan den Rijn, the Netherlands, established cooperative governance under which Alphen helped Oudtshoorn implement a performance management system (PMS). The impetus for cooperation was recognised by Oudtshoorn's legal community: in 2000 the city's legal system required that, for the sake of fairness, all municipal systems introduce the PMS. The 2000 government development white paper of Oudtshoorn embedded 16 PMS items as a basic management instrument in each year's municipal reform plan, while a further 17 PMS items were treated as instruments for evaluating local government, for assessing the level of governance committees, and for service delivery. Initially the PMS project did not enjoy support from all quarters in Oudtshoorn, but the results of cooperation between the two cities and the fairness with which the project was run enabled the municipal authority to complete the plan. With Alphen's help, and over a two-year project, Oudtshoorn ultimately put the PMS system into operation. Through the transfer of knowledge, technique and capacity, participants in Oudtshoorn's urban governance gained the ability to develop the PMS themselves.[1] Alphen in turn gained commensurate commercial opportunities: having implemented the PMS successfully with external expertise, it subcontracted the training of municipal, managerial and legal staff to a consultancy, whose advisers also helped to set up practical components and to standardise municipal works. The PMS assessment system allocates responsibility unambiguously, encompassing objectives, dates, project monitoring mechanisms, reporting and review cycles.[1]

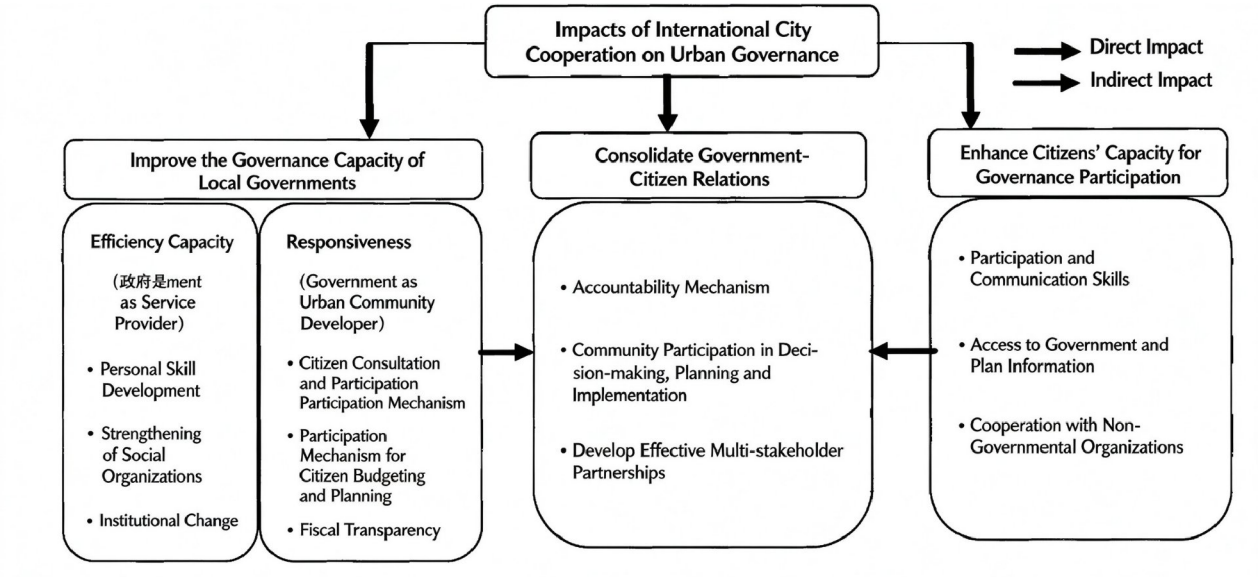


Figure 1 Influence of international city-to-city cooperation on urban governance (adapted from Ref. [1])

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4. Implications of International City-to-City Cooperation Governance

4.1 Commonalities among developing countries innovating urban governance through city cooperation

Each of the four cases has features of its own, but the commonalities among these developing countries in innovating urban governance through international city cooperation are these: strengthening local government governance, strengthening the capacity of civil society, and improving the relationship between local government and society.

As to the actors who shape urban governance—whether as makers, implementers or beneficiaries—the municipal authority is the core of both C2C and urban governance;[11] government, that is, retains a leading position in urban governance throughout.

Citizen participation is an important component of C2C projects. In León and in Cajamarca, the cooperation projects recognised citizens as the long-term makers and implementers of urban governance rather than as users and choosers. Cajamarca attended not only to strengthening the governance capacity of local government but also to encouraging the capacity of civil society. The reasoning is that only when the capacity of civil society is strengthened will civil society organisations contribute to urban governance in negotiations with other organisations and with government.

C2C projects attend to improving the relationship between government and civil society. Germany chose private individuals to attend training on the relationship between social organisations and government; the direct effects are difficult to demonstrate, though indirect effects are well evidenced. The point is that only a partnership built across several sectors can achieve high responsiveness and participation. Villa El Salvador's contracting out of urban waste collection to private waste firms shows that environmental governance requires public–private partnership. Oudtshoorn's PMS project drew civil society into financial planning and oversight, and municipal finances ran transparently, so that both government and society could readily control and supervise them.

4.2 Research angles deserving attention

Civil society remains insufficient as a protagonist of urban governance, in both the global North and the global South. Although the four cases have their limits, civil society as protagonist has still not matched the role played by government. In the examples selected, the participation of civil society did not give rise to clear results, and there is little evidence that northern civil society practice in urban governance can be cloned onto partner cities in the South. Sometimes the pursuit of civil society participation in governance is regarded as amateur assistance.[18] Cooperation is therefore confined to improving living conditions in the partner city rather than to resolving citizen participation in the city at an abstract level.

The success of international city cooperation is inseparable from the friendship on which the two cities rest, as with Utrecht and León. Civic initiative in Utrecht matched civic initiative in León. Over the years many community-based organisations (CBOs) have cooperated in León, in building management, organisational skills, writing business plans, microcredit and strategy design. Other city cooperation organisations have worked on preventing child prostitution, promoting sport and preventing crime. The strength of cooperative organisations can be regarded as a precondition for negotiating capacity and for influence over local decisions. Cooperative foundations have taken part in community capacity building and in the León development committee,[1] functioning as a permanent external adviser.

The more fundamental problem is that resources and knowledge in current city cooperation flow from economically strong to economically weak countries. Participatory governance, for instance, even where the weaker party has generated much innovation, remains chiefly rooted in the traditions of strong-city communities. Some studies have found counter-movements: creative practices flow from weaker cities to stronger ones, as when Latin American participatory budgeting travelled to Europe. Such a form means that cooperation is no longer merely C2C but a form of development cooperation, of mutual learning and reciprocal partnership.[16]

The four cases offer almost no insight into local electoral systems or political representation, and this is a deficiency. The likely explanation is that politics is a sensitive subject between partner cities and that developed cities are reluctant to engage with it. Since politics is bound up with history and culture, an external partner's involvement in it is contentious in itself. Confining cooperation to technical capacity building makes achievements easier to see. Scholarship has begun to examine the role of urban democracy and politics in resolving disputes;[16] other C2C cases may yet supply interventions in urban governance along the political dimension.

The term "best practice" should be used with caution in international city cooperation. First, such cooperation also brings bottlenecks and defects, and it may be precisely these that damage international city partnerships. Second, the achievements and successes of cooperation also depend on the institutional capacity, resource base and political stability of the partner cities. A thorough understanding of C2C urban governance requires a comprehensive assessment of local government, participation, tradition and civic culture, operating mechanisms and planning instruments.

4.3 Implications of international city-to-city cooperation for urban governance in China

The successful cases in which international city cooperation has innovated urban governance offer lessons for urban governance in China. First, urban governance should give priority to the needs of low- and middle-income groups. In

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governance theory it is widely held that the fruits of urban development must first answer the needs of the poor, and that this must be built into urban development planning from the outset—that the interests of some must not be sacrificed in the name of development, and that development must not precede governance, since the resulting conflicts would be difficult to resolve. These ideas have strongly influenced practice: among the cases above, some built infrastructure specifically for the poor, and some invited the poor to help draw up municipal financial plans. China has begun to attend to these questions. The Decision of the Third Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee states that "the urban–rural dual structure is the main obstacle restricting the integration of urban and rural development. The systems and mechanisms must be improved, a new relationship between industry and agriculture and between town and countryside formed in which industry promotes agriculture, the town leads the countryside, industry and agriculture benefit each other and town and countryside are integrated, and the broad masses of farmers enabled to participate in the process of modernisation on equal terms and to share in its fruits".[19] Second, international city cooperation respects established ideological and political factors in practice. Although Western scholars study the relation between political factors and urban governance in theory, in practice cooperation between partner cities rests on the existing political and cultural foundation and does not disturb existing political structures; the cooperation between Utrecht and León is a good example. Given China's national conditions, seeking urban governance through city cooperation should "adhere to systematic governance, strengthen the leadership of Party committees, give play to the leading role of government, encourage and support participation by all sectors of society, and bring about a benign interaction between government governance, social self-regulation and residents' self-governance".[19] This is conducive to social stability and to the harmonious development of cities. Third, resolving conflicts over land, housing and the environment requires attention to the participation of social forces. Although government leads, if it takes on everything—even dominating the pattern of interests in the role of developer, or dominating public opinion with expert views—social conflict will intensify, and governance policy that lacks public support will not endure. New methods that combine urban governance with the Party's mass line should be sought.

5. Conclusion

City-to-city cooperation is not a transfer of ready-made solutions but a negotiated relationship in which institutions, knowledge and legitimacy are exchanged between partners who begin from unequal positions. The four cases show that the benefits are real—reformed municipal finance, environmental service design, strategic planning capacity, a functioning performance management system—while also showing that they rest on conditions that are easy to overlook: a genuine friendship between the cities, the institutional capacity of the weaker partner, and a willingness on the stronger side to move from instruction toward independence. They also show what cooperation has so far declined to touch. Politics, electoral systems and representation remain outside its scope, and the flow of ideas is still predominantly from North to South. A research agenda that takes these silences seriously, and that treats the weaker partner as a source of innovation rather than only as a recipient, would make the framework considerably more useful to cities still building their governance institutions.

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