Between local governments and communities

Knowledge exchange and mutual learning in Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish municipal partnerships

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10. Recommendations

Based on the research findings the following recommendations are applicable for the various actors that participate in C2C partnerships. First and foremost, the main stakeholders are local governments but these lessons are also relevant for the other actors, like NGOs, international support agencies, local private sector etc.

1. Mutual learning can be increased by actively looking for these opportunities within the exchange, based on equality and openness to learn by the involved partners.

The research findings indicated that the desire to link international cooperation to domestic issues, like ‘dealing with diversity’, is one of the driving forces behind the establishment of municipal partnerships for Dutch local governments. Support programmes focusing on strengthening governance in the Netherland’s partner countries have in a way inhibited learning by the Dutch actors. In other words, the exchanges between the Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish partnerships were heavily influenced by the support programmes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the associated policy focus on strengthening local governance in the South. The objectives for the Dutch municipalities were more closely linked to policies in which the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Kingdom Relations plays a key role. If mutual exchange is to be facilitated, policy coherence is required in such a way that both objectives for partners in low-income and middle-income countries and objectives of high-income countries are met. This research in itself could serve as a case study for other international partnerships, as the linkages between local government to some extent are forerunners in the desire to connect international exchange to ‘enlightened self-interest’, which is an important focus of the current international cooperation policy of the Dutch national government.

2. Adequate use should be made of the potential of local governance networks to strengthen broader governance arrangements.

The research has shown that two governance network models were dominant in the Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish municipal partnerships, the classic local government network model and the multi-actor network model, while there also was a potential to strengthen broader governance arrangements and involve higher government levels. City-to-city cooperation can have an important leveraging effect, and this strength could be recognized and fostered in order to extent the role and impact of these partnerships. Internal dissemination (within organizations) and external dissemination (between organizations) could be encouraged and stimulated to make sure the obtained knowledge is embedded within the organization and more people
benefit from the lessons learned. Also knowledge institutions could be better engaged to institutionalize the newly acquired knowledge, to foster learning and disseminate useful practices.

3. The strength of peer-to-peer learning should be better utilized in capacity building efforts, by fostering equal exchanges and the openness to learn.

Whereas ‘good governance’ is becoming less important in Dutch international cooperation, as set out in the new policy paper by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerie BZ 2013), it is embraced by international organizations as an important condition for supporting development processes and alleviating poverty in low-income and middle-income countries. For instance, it was proposed as a separate target (‘Ensure Good Governance and Effective Institutions’) in the report on the so called ‘Post 2015’ agenda by the UN High-Level Panel of Eminent Personalities (UN 2013). The strength of peer-to-peer learning models in governance arrangements could be utilized to strengthen governments and institutions worldwide.

The model of peer-to-peer learning is also used in various other exchanges (e.g., in the exchange between lawyers and labour organizations), and it could still play a stronger role in the exchanges between organization that operate in the same field. For these exchanges, valuable lessons could be drawn from the literature on mutual learning in municipal partnerships and local government network models.

4. Basic involvement of local governments in the support of civil society organization should be ensured, in order for civil society initiatives to take root and flourish.

As a result of budget cuts, government bodies in the Netherlands as well as other Western European countries are increasingly pulling out of service provisions, and placing more trust in the initiatives from civil society. The research findings have shown that many grassroots initiatives have emerged in the city-to-city networks, whereby voluntary hours and personal funds were contributed. The findings also indicated that there is a clear need to support the initiatives in migrant source countries, especially on social issues and welfare. Many of the initiatives lost momentum and stalled along the way, as the CSOs did not have the capacity to continue the exchanges by themselves. In most cases, at some stage and in some form, they needed support from government bodies. The linkages between local governments are particularly important as they provide legitimacy, status and in many cases the involvement of local government bodies are formally required (e.g. receiving official approval to build a garden). Even during this period of fiscal austerity and budget cuts, some commitment and support by local governments is required for these civil society initiatives to succeed. The Dutch have a strong reputation in the multi-actor arrangement and policy processes based on consensus. These strengths could be well applied in the ongoing decentralization and democratization processes in Morocco and Turkey as well as in (other) amiddle- or higher income countries.
5. Piece meal actions are not sufficient; adequate investment of time and other resources as well as long-term engagement are required for mutual learning processes to be successful.

Building up trust and getting to know each other are fundamental in human interactions. Working internationally brings with it additional challenges to overcome cultural and language barriers and the lack of knowledge of the other context. These challenges are faced by both local governments, private sector actors that seek to build an international business base, international governmental and non-governmental organizations, and others. In the exchange between local governments especially, adequate knowledge on governance arrangements is required; an issue that might seem straightforward but is in practice often overlooked could make the exchange less efficient. It should also be recognized that sufficient capacity should be made available for the learning to take root. On the one hand, learning occurs naturally, and interactions and informal discussions alone can already trigger valuable forms of learning. On the other hand, for attaining deeper learning on work processes in which tacit knowledge is exchanged the exchange needs to be facilitated and barriers need to be bridged. Another ‘obvious’ message often overlooked in practice is to formulate clear objectives and realistic expectations of the desired outcomes.

6. Local governments could take a stronger position in formulating international relations and act more as actors instead of ‘re-actors’

The shifts in international relations policies of Dutch local governments are related to general developments in international cooperation, like the shift from solidarity with low-income countries towards ‘enlightened self-interest’. At the same time local governments have, to some extent, also been forerunners with an increased focus to connect international relations to their own objectives due to the fragile political and public support for C2C cooperation. Cities could more firmly shape international relations. There are several interesting examples of city networks whereby cities have taken the lead to work internationally with the objective to contribute to social or sustainability issues, like the C40 network an alliance between 40 megacities focusing on reducing green house emissions.

7. Include migrants and migrant organizations in exchange partnerships, in order to take advantage of the benefits of transnational linkages and networks.

The research described the relevance of involving migrants in the transnational exchanges between the Netherlands as a destination country, and Morocco and Turkey as migrant source countries. At the same time, it was also recognized that a limited number of migrants were involved (usually persons already employed in the Dutch municipality or organization). Better use should be made of (1) informing a wider public
regarding the exchanges; (2) actively involving more migrants in the partnerships; and (3) drawing on the strengths of their knowledge and networks. By reaching out and taking advantage of the existing transnational linkages and networks, the partnerships are expected to inform and involve more people, strengthen support for these partnerships locally, and increase their efficiency and impact.