

# “Sister City” Partnerships in Urban Management: An Analysis of Cooperation between Cities

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IN RELATION TO THE UNITED NATIONS’  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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GP3 INSTITUTE FOUNDATION | MARCH 19, 2025

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## I. Introduction

This research project identifies a few examples of collaborations between cities, also named “Sister City” Partnerships (SCPs), in relation to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in specific number 11 on “Building Sustainable Cities and Communities”. Key to this SDG is effective, efficient and sustainable urban management that is future-proof, and adapted to climate change.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this project is to explore whether examples of such collaborations already exist, and if so in what form. Up until now, we namely had not identified any example of such a cooperation, but partnerships like this could be very interesting in regard to achieving this SDG. By identifying examples of Sister City Partnerships, I will also delve deeper into the eventual legal and cooperation modalities that enable the partnerships. By analyzing examples of such collaborations, I will attempt to answer the research question: *How can “Sister City” Partnerships (SCPs) contribute to achieving UN SDG 11 on Building Sustainable Cities and Communities?* To answer this question, I will first explain what these SCPs entail and how they have developed over the years, as well as explain the concept of urban management and the UN SDGs. I will describe some characteristics of SCPs and discuss their role in international relations. Then I will describe three examples of City-to-City (C2C) collaborations on urban management and discuss their (dis)advantages compared to cooperation on the international or regional level. Finally, I will conclude by discussing the potential and limits of such partnerships for public-private initiatives to enhance the implementation of the SDGs.

## II. Theoretical Framework

According to an OECD report on city-to-city cooperation, it has recently evolved from bilateral twinning to more sophisticated arrangements.<sup>2</sup> Historically, the first partnerships of European municipalities with peers from abroad were mostly formed after World War II to reconnect the populations of formerly hostile countries. These municipal partnerships were later expanded to countries in the Global South. In 1971, the United Nations General Assembly formally recognized those city partnerships as an international cooperation mechanism.<sup>3</sup> In the following years, bilateral municipal twinning evolved into more sophisticated structures, including multi-stakeholder partnerships involving civil society, local public agencies, academia and the private sector, among others. According to the OECD, C2C partnerships are a key vehicle of Decentralized Development Cooperation (DDC).<sup>4</sup> DDC has shifted from vertical North-South partnerships to a variety of modalities, including South-South and triangular cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for many cities to engage in international and city-to-city cooperation, notably for economic and material benefits. Since 2022, city-to-city partnerships have gained a new dimension because

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<sup>1</sup> “11: Sustainable Cities and Communities,” The Global Goals, Global Goals, <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/11-sustainable-cities-and-communities/>.

<sup>2</sup> OECD Urban Studies, *City-to-City Partnerships to Localise the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2023, p. 11, [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/city-to-city-partnerships-to-localise-the-sustainable-development-goals\\_d2fe7530-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/city-to-city-partnerships-to-localise-the-sustainable-development-goals_d2fe7530-en.html).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 16.

of the war in Ukraine, with an eye to reconstruction of destroyed cities. City-to-city partnerships have the potential to affect urban governance and sustainability from different angles and can improve local government performance, while at the same time encouraging citizen participation in urban decision-making.<sup>6</sup> In particular, they can be a tool to advance the UN 2030 Agenda and collectively address common challenges. Oftentimes, Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) stand closer to citizens than national governments and therefore are more likely to meet local needs.<sup>7</sup> A key principle of DDC is reciprocity, meaning that actions should be beneficial to all partners<sup>8</sup>, which also captures the essence of the 2030 Agenda.

Furthermore, the OECD report provides an overview of three main frameworks that can be used to enhance city-to-city partnerships to localize the SDGs.<sup>9</sup> These are:

- i) the OECD Checklist for Public Action to Localize the SDGs;
- ii) the G20 Rome High-level Principles on city-to-city partnerships for localizing the SDGs (hereinafter the G20 Principles); and
- iii) the European Commission (EC) programme on Partnerships for Sustainable Cities.

However, this project aims to explore SCPs outside of this framework, and thus outside of greater regional cooperation networks that foster sister-to-sister partnerships. While doing so, it will especially look for examples of such partnerships on urban management.

“Urban management” is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of activities, all with the aim of planning and regulating urban areas based on ecological studies.<sup>10</sup> It places responsibilities on the government, such as creating green spaces, inventing a strategy for land-use regulation, and implementing environmental education programs to enhance biodiversity and human well-being in cities. According to Mattingly (1994), for urban management to succeed, those who are responsible must be given a clear view of its meaning and substance.<sup>11</sup> If different perceptions of “sustainable cities” exist, how can public and private life cooperate effectively? For this, the UN’s role is very important. The UN being an overarching international organization, it can clarify its goals in the different Member States, both in private as well as in public organizations. Mattingly highlights well that simply putting old concepts in a new jacket is insufficient. However, according to him, a new approach can come off the ground when we start to hold the “managers” of urban development accountable and start to see the concept of urban management as actively managing objects, meaning urban activities. So, to make urban management effective, we must instill a sense of responsibility on the “managers” of our cities and provide those

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>10</sup> “Urban Management,” Science Direct, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/urban-management#:~:text=Urban%20management%20refers%20to%20a,human%20well%2Dbeing%20in%20cities>.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Mattingly, “Meaning of urban management,” *Cities* 11, no. 3 (June 1994): 201, [10.1016/0264-2751\(94\)90060-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0264-2751(94)90060-4).

managers worldwide with an adequate understanding of the duties that come with creating sustainable cities.

Another interesting study on Sister City Partnerships, is Marike Bontenbal her PhD research from 2009, called "*Cities as Partners: The Challenge to Strengthen Urban Governance through North-South City Partnerships*". In her research, she stressed how local governments had already increasingly been recognized as actors in international development cooperation in the decades before publication of her study. Back then, already 70% of the world's cities were engaged in some form of international cooperation, with a big part of them connecting developed and developing countries, also referred to as "North" and "South". According to Bontenbal, municipal partnerships were increasingly perceived and employed as instruments for cities and communities to assist one another through knowledge sharing, the transfer of resources and technology, and joint cooperation.<sup>12</sup> She explains how the concept of urban governance recognizes that decision-making power exists both inside and outside of local government institutions, involving both public and private partners, and diminishing the distance between both spheres. She highlighted how, in order to achieve real development, people and institutions need to be brought together, which is why city-to-city partnerships are so important, as local governments stand closer to their citizens.

In her research, Bontenbal specifically explores the relevance and potential of North-South C2C cooperation, with the goal of strengthening urban governance in the South, as well as the underlying factors affecting its potential. These factors include (supra)national policies and legislation, local political and organizational conditions needed for municipalities to operate internationally, actors involved with their responsibilities and relations, and the conditions that are crucial to build capacity and knowledge exchange in a North-South context. She specifically researched four C2C partnerships involving cities in Peru, Nicaragua, South Africa, the Netherlands and Germany. Her conclusion was that C2C cooperation is in fact successful in improving the effectiveness of local government to supply good service delivery, while it proves more difficult to strengthen civil society to demand good services. This potential is, however, vulnerable, as there does not exist an official municipal mandate for international cooperation. This is also part of the reason why the amount of C2C partnerships, at least in the Netherlands, significantly reduced. More and more, cities became responsible for government tasks, while possessing limited budget. Many of them feel like their responsibilities increased, while funds were decreased, so they chose to focus more on their core tasks instead of forming new cultural sister city bonds with cities abroad. Another aspect is that the number of regional partnerships has skyrocketed the past years, with initiatives like C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN), the Global Network of Smart Cities (SCEW) and many EU projects that stimulate city to city partnerships but often include a minimum of three or four cities per project. While we see, at least in the Netherlands, that political resistance, little financial

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<sup>12</sup> Marike Bontenbal, *Cities as Partners: The Challenge to Strengthen Urban Governance through North-South City Partnerships* (Academische Uitgeverij Eburon, 2009), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/27715425\\_Cities\\_as\\_Partners\\_The\\_Challenge\\_to\\_Strengthen\\_Urban\\_Governance\\_through\\_North-South\\_City\\_Partnerships](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/27715425_Cities_as_Partners_The_Challenge_to_Strengthen_Urban_Governance_through_North-South_City_Partnerships).

resources and insufficient knowledge of poverty and development processes undermined this role for cities, new initiatives – often in a regional context – emerge, and cities also try to enhance the UN SDGs by declaring themselves “Global Goals Municipality”.

### III. Characteristics of “Sister City” Partnerships (SCPs)

Sister City Partnerships are formed for a variety of objectives. This ranges from shared history, to geographical proximity, to a cultural bond, or because they share the same challenges or goals and want to exchange knowledge, promote economic growth, or have a joint approach to urban problems. Each city has its own motivation to enter into such a partnership. The form in which such cooperations are realized also varies widely, with various models of cooperation existing. C2C cooperations take place in a rather light form, such as exchange programmes or policy advice, or in a more intensive way through shared technologies and joint projects involving various actors, such as the mentioned urban management case studies. The document underpinning a partnership also varies but seldom is legally binding. Often it is in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), Letter of Intent (LoI), or Twinning Agreement (e.g. between Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, and Burlington, Canada.<sup>13,14</sup> When two cities officially form a partnership, they often sign a partner agreement, and cooperation takes place on various aspects. But if the cooperation is purely focused on a specific project, like urban management, the cities can draw up a separate document/contract with agreements for this. One thing that always comes to the fore in an urban partnership, is the importance of mutual learning: how cities can exchange knowledge and experience on urban management practices.

### IV. “Sister Cities”: A New Form of International Cooperation?

While diplomacy and cooperation primarily occur at the national level, we increasingly see city-to-city partnerships coming off the ground. It is not a new concept, but my prediction is that this type of diplomacy and cooperation will only increase in the future, as our world is rapidly globalizing and cities urbanizing. When cities grow bigger, the urge for them to form their own partnerships also increases. Increasingly they are seen as entities of their own, and many cities are internationally well-known metropolitan regions. The Urban Management Centre, with their slogan “*Making cities work for everyone*”, aims to connect cities to tackle shared problems related to urban governance.<sup>15</sup> While oftentimes this type of cooperation is based on the exchange of knowledge, expertise and experience, this research project aims to find city partnerships concluded on a legal basis, like a “local treaty”. For this, I have reached out to many different municipalities and provinces, ministries, and (international) organizations. Because if the forming of a partnership extends beyond “merely” sharing

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<sup>13</sup> City of Burlington, *A Twinning Agreement between the Cities of Apeldoorn, the Netherlands and Burlington, Ontario, Canada*, 2005, [https://www.burlington.ca/en/arts-culture-and-events/resources/Apeldoorn-The-Netherlands/Apeldoorn\\_and\\_Burlington\\_twinning\\_agreement.pdf](https://www.burlington.ca/en/arts-culture-and-events/resources/Apeldoorn-The-Netherlands/Apeldoorn_and_Burlington_twinning_agreement.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> “Stichting Apeldoorn Burlington Comite,” Partnersteden Apeldoorn en Burlington, Apeldoornburlington, <https://apeldoornburlington.nl/>.

<sup>15</sup> “Over 25 Years of Building Capacities and Shaping Inclusive Cities,” Urban Management Centre: making cities work for everyone, Umcasia, <https://home.umcasia.org/>.

information towards the closing of a legal agreement, interesting questions in the face of urban development (and other SDGs) could arise. For example, we could ask ourselves whether this type of collaboration is more efficient than national cooperation. For instance, it would be logical to assume that it is way more efficient to let similar cities with similar conditions work together, instead of nationwide involvement in these issues.

## V. Case Studies of Urban Management SCPs

In this section I will discuss three examples of Sister City Partnerships that are, among other things, aimed at urban management and designing future-proof cities.

### SCP 1: Barcelona (Spain) & Maputo (Mozambique)

#### *General*

The first interesting partnership I would like to highlight, is that between the city of Barcelona (Spain), and Maputo (Mozambique). These two cities have cooperated since 2007, and several friendship and cooperation protocols have been signed, having led to multiple technical and municipal cooperation exchanges, including development projects implemented by NGOs from Barcelona in Maputo. There has been bilateral collaboration in the fields of Urban Projects and Planning, Archives, Libraries, Municipal Markets and Public Health. The latest agreement was signed in May 2022, namely a new three-year protocol focused on municipal cooperation. This marks the fourth agreement signed between the two cities, to face shared challenges, especially in relation to the climate crisis, including collaboration on environmental protection, organic food and peri-urban agriculture. The latter concept is defined by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization as "agriculture practices within and around cities which compete for resources (land, water, energy, labor) that could also serve other purposes to satisfy the requirements of the urban population".<sup>16</sup>

The relationship between both cities began around 2000, when representatives from Barcelona visited Maputo after the great floods it suffered. Barcelona was willing to offer help, and the first formal agreements were signed five years later.<sup>17</sup> Since then, projects on urban planning, waste management, the climate crisis and urban resilience have been completed. One of the main elements of the new three-year protocol is the "urban air quality control network" to prevent air pollution, in which the Barcelona Public Health Agency will support the design of the Mozambique network.<sup>18</sup> This project falls within the Covenant of

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<sup>16</sup> "Urban and peri-urban agriculture," Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO, <https://www.fao.org/unfao/bodies/coag/coag15/x0076e.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> "Agreement with the capital of Mozambique renewed until 2025," Info Barcelona, Barcelona, published May 31, 2022, [https://www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/en/agreement-with-the-capital-of-mozambique-renewed-until-2025\\_1180920.html](https://www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/en/agreement-with-the-capital-of-mozambique-renewed-until-2025_1180920.html).

<sup>18</sup> "Barcelona i Maputo renoven la seva col·laboració fins al 2025 per a la protecció del medi ambient, l'alimentació ecològica i l'agricultura periurbana," Servei de Premsa, Ajuntament Barcelona, published May 31, 2022, <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/premsa/2022/05/31/barcelona-i-maputo-renoven-la-seva-collaboracio-fins-al-2025-per-a-la-proteccio-del-medi-ambient-lalimentacio-ecologica-i-lagricultura-periurbana/>.

Mayors in Sub-Saharan Africa initiative (CoM SSA), which started in 2015. This is a major catalyst for local climate action in the region, with political commitment from over 350 local governments. The purpose is to support local governments in implementation of projects, as well as unlocking climate finance.<sup>19</sup>

The authentic city-to-city connection between Barcelona and Maputo is perceived as a great success by the United Cities and Local Governments working group on Capacity and Institution Building (UCLG CIB). In the field of urban planning and management of the public space, the collaboration mainly consists of transferring knowledge and best practices with the accompaniment of the Area of Urban Habitat of Barcelona.<sup>20</sup> What makes this relationship special, is that the collaboration has been both intensive and extensive, going beyond merely representing an institutional relationship between the two municipalities, because it involves several departments of the City Councils, making it a very integrated partnership. It is authentic as well, as inter alia universities and NGOs are actively involved too. This ensures that the projects go beyond the scope and image of the municipalities themselves. After all, if you want to ensure comprehensive cooperation, you need to include society as well. Residents of Maputo that have benefited from the projects know of the strong alliance, but even citizens that aren't normally involved in such programmes are aware of the special bond.

### *UN-Habitat Project*

The main element of this partnership is the UN-Habitat Project, with its main goal of ensuring residents their land rights. UN-Habitat stands for “United Nations Human Settlements Programme”, which aims to promote social and sustainable urban development. The NGO Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor, together with public authorities, local partners, and Arquitectura Sin Fronteras (ASF) has completed projects to ensure residents their right to habitation, as well as making sure the settlements could function as accessible neighborhoods by developing them. They have done so by a method called “6 steps to DUAT”, which seeks access to land through involvement processes and negotiation between public authorities, who own the land legally, and residents. DUAT is a UN-Habitat term for land rights, or land tenure.<sup>21</sup> During this process, residents renounce parts of their informal plots in order to obtain legal rights to a portion of the land, after which legal borders and a legal framework are established.<sup>22</sup> This way, streets with adequate widths and functional public spaces are

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<sup>19</sup> Covenant of Mayors in Sub-Saharan Africa, COMSSA, <https://comssa.org/en/about>.

<sup>20</sup> “An authentic City-to-City connection: The success of Barcelona and Maputo!,” News, UCLG CIB Working Group Capacity and Institution Building, CIB-UCLG, published November 16, 2020, <https://2fwww.cib-uclg.org/news/authentic-city-city-connection-success-barcelona-and-maputo>.

<sup>21</sup> UN-Habitat, *Evaluation of the UN-Habitat Programme for Achieving Sustainable Urban Development, Phase I*, March 2017, p. 89, [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/1550482600wpdm\\_ASUD%20Evaluation%20Report%203%202017\\_LOW-RES%20150119.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/1550482600wpdm_ASUD%20Evaluation%20Report%203%202017_LOW-RES%20150119.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> CIB UCLG, *The Habitat Project: Maputo, Mozambique*, [https://2fwww.cib-uclg.org/sites/default/files/architecture-guide-to-the-un-inhabitable-development-goals-vol\\_2\\_123.pdf](https://2fwww.cib-uclg.org/sites/default/files/architecture-guide-to-the-un-inhabitable-development-goals-vol_2_123.pdf).



developed. By means of this method, several neighbourhoods in Chamanculo, a part of Maputo, have obtained DUAT and seen a revival of the streetscape as a social space.

This city-to-city partnership also has a relation to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. The Habitat project in the Chamanculo-C neighborhood in Maputo is included in the International Union of Architects (UIA) guide "*An architecture guide to the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals*" for the World Architecture Congress 2023.<sup>23</sup> This ASF project aims to defend the right to the city in informal settlements in Maputo, based on urban planning and access to land tenure in a participatory way. Without collaboration of the Barcelona City Council, this Habitat project wouldn't have been possible. Other involved actors are: IPTAC, OAM, WSUP, Radio Maxaquene, Mapeando meu Bairro, ICHaB, SELAVIP Foundation, CivicWise and of course about 7,500 neighboring families from the Chamanculo-C neighborhood.

The cooperation developed between 2013 and 2017 with Maputo was evaluated by the International Justice and International Cooperation department in Barcelona in 2018, and stressed was the important role of civil society in this partnership. Emphasis was placed on the criteria: impact, sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness, and to see whether the goal of gaining knowledge that is applicable for future collaborations between the two cities, as well as other cities, was achieved.

### *Mobility and public transport*

Moreover, Barcelona collaborates with Maputo on the improvement of mobility and transport in the metropolitan area. With a population of around three million inhabitants, Maputo faces major challenges in its metropolitan mobility. Greater Maputo is home to 80% of the country's vehicles, but there is lack of parking space. The population grows rapidly, peripheral areas are occupied unplanned, there is high demand and low supply of transport, and its management is insufficient. There is also increased aggression against women on public transport. A team consisting of staff from public space, mobility and cooperation from the AMB (Metropolitan Area of Barcelona) traveled to Maputo in the context of the project "*Metropolitan management of sustainable and inclusive mobility in Greater Maputo: contributions to the operations of the Metropolitan Transport Agency*", developed by the Maputo City Council, the Metropolitan Transport Agency, Architecture Without Borders (ASF) and the AMB.<sup>24</sup> AMB provides technical contribution, with specialists sharing their knowledge and expertise to realize the rehabilitation of two pilot public spaces, the planning of bike lanes, the analysis of concessions to private transport cooperatives, the development of criteria to improve the quality of public transport, and support for the mobility and gender

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<sup>23</sup> "Arquitectura sin fronteras en la guía arquitectónica para los 17 Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible de la ONU," Noticias, Catalunya asfes, published November 4, 2020, <https://catalunya.asfes.org/arquitectura-sin-fronteras-en-la-guia-arquitectonica-para-los-17-objetivos-de-desarrollo-sostenible-de-la-onu/>.

<sup>24</sup> "L'AMB contribueix a la millora de la mobilitat a l'àrea metropolitana de Maputo, Moçambic," Mobilitat a Maputo, AMB Cat, published September 23, 2019, <https://www.amb.cat/ca/web/amb/actualitat/noticies/detall/-/noticia/mobilitat-a-maputo/8304302/11696>.

team involved in the project. Maputo is very willing to tackle these challenges, and organized the II Sustainable Mobility Week, i.a. in collaboration with UN-Habitat and the AMB, companies and organizations. During this week, challenges and proposals for mobility in Maputo were highlighted. Here, AMB shared its governance model and two experiences, namely: metropolitan connectivity of urban public space and public-private management of the collective transport system.<sup>25</sup>

## SCP 2: Rheden (the Netherlands) & Duhok (Iraq)

### *General*

The second city-to-city partnership I would like to discuss, is that between Rheden (the Netherlands) and Duhok (Iraq). In October 2024, the mayor of Rheden went on a working visit to North-Iraq, in collaboration with VNG International (VNGi). VNG stands for “Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten” (Association of Dutch Municipalities), whose international branch facilitates projects between Dutch municipalities and local municipalities in foreign countries. Reason for this working visit, was its participation with local knowledge and experience in a programme in Duhok Governorate, a province in Iraq.<sup>26</sup> Aim of the visit was to explore whether steps could be taken to set up a compost production site and help think about plastic recycling in Duhok. Another component of the visit was strengthening cooperation within the Triple Helix, a model that brings together governments, businesses and educational institutions.<sup>27</sup> During the visit, the mayor held talks with ministries, the city of Duhok, and the Dutch Consulate in Iraq on strengthening local democracy and the role of municipalities. Moreover, he spoke at a conference on local economic development and experiences from Rheden and the green Arnhem-Nijmegen Metropolitan Region in the Netherlands.<sup>28</sup> A notable moment during the visit, was that the Duhok Governorate annexed a panel of Rheden municipality to their gallery of honor of sister cities. The cooperation between the two municipalities started in January 2022 and continues until the end of 2026, however, they are already exploring a follow-up period.

### *Sustainable Development through improved Local Governance (SDLG)*

Visits like these have taken place more often, in both directions. The long term “twinning partnership” between Rheden and Duhok is part of the programme “Sustainable Development through improved Local Governance (SDLG) Iraq”. Underlying the partnership is a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This is a type of agreement between two or more parties, and expresses a convergence of will between the parties, indicating an intended common line of action. The cooperation is thus not based on a legal basis, to which, for example, binding agreements could have been attached. The main purpose of the partnership

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “Burgemeester Carol van Eert op werkbezoek in Irak,” Studio Rheden, published October 9, 2024, <https://studiorheden.nl/2024/10/09/burgemeester-carol-van-eert-op-werkbezoek-in-irak/>.

<sup>27</sup> “Rhedense Triple Helix Veluwezoom en de Global Goals,” Rheden4GlobalGoals, published February 1, 2019, <https://rheden4globalgoals.nl/rhedense-triple-helix-veluwezoom-en-de-global-goals/>.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.gmr.nl/>

is the exchange of knowledge in the field of economic development, waste management, water management, and strengthening public administration.<sup>29</sup> The SDLG Iraq programme is just one element of the SDLG project, which is a 5-year Strategic Partnership between the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and VNG International, focusing on four thematic priorities: Security & Rule of Law, Migration & Displacement, Own Source Revenue & Local Economic Development and Water Management. It is currently being implemented in fourteen countries.<sup>30</sup> The overall objective is “To empower local governments and their representative bodies to shape a more sustainable future for their communities”, and the partnership is funded by the Dutch MFA. For this project on Urban Management, theme 4 (Water Management) would be most relevant, as its aim is for local governments to be able to deliver on their agreements and executive policies to manage healthy, safe and social equal lives for all on lands with climate and water-related risks, to achieve water security and water safety for people and ecosystems as well as climate mitigation and adaptation. However, unfortunately, in Iraq the SDLG programme focuses mainly on Migration and Displacement. SDLG programmes that do focus on the Water Management theme, are i.a. enrolled in South Sudan, Mozambique, and Benin.<sup>31</sup> The specific objective of Iraq in this programme is to improve responsiveness by Iraqi subnational governments and local service provision departments to host and displaced communities’ needs in adaptable service solutions.<sup>32</sup> During the discussions between VNGi and Duhok, it was stressed that climate change and its impact on water are of high priority in all areas for the local governments in Iraq, and VNG identified these aspects in their Political Economy Analysis and integrates them while developing their training activities.<sup>33</sup> While the programme in Iraq is mainly focused on making local authorities more resilient in areas with a large influx of displaced people within their territories, this also means that besides governance structures and community support mechanisms, services, markets, livelihoods, and infrastructure mechanisms too are in need of development to further resilience.<sup>34</sup> For example, the SDLG programme supports local authorities in applying Geographical Information Systems, improving Crisis Management, Solid Waste Management, Public Transport and Public Infrastructure, as well as in job creation through the establishment of small enterprises. VNGi’s approach targets local and regional governments within Iraq, as well as community members and vulnerable groups.

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<sup>29</sup> “Long term twinning partnership between Municipality of Rheden and Governate of Duhok,” VNG International, <https://archive.vng-international.nl/node/952>.

<sup>30</sup> “SDLG: Sustainable Development through improved Local Governance,” VNG International, <https://www.vng-international.nl/sdlg-sustainable-development-through-improved-local-governance/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “Iraq, Sustainable Development through improved Local Governance,” VNG International, <https://archive.vng-international.nl/iraq-sustainable-development-through-improved-local-governance>.

<sup>33</sup> “Validation workshop for Sustainable Development through effective Local Governance in Iraq,” VNG International, <https://archive.vng-international.nl/node/822>.

<sup>34</sup> “Building sustainable futures by improving local services to displaced people in Iraq,” VNG International, [file:///Users/h.polinder/Downloads/DIGITAL%20Flyer%20Building%20Sustainable%20futures%20-%20SDLG%20Irak%20bijlage%201%20\(1\).pdf](file:///Users/h.polinder/Downloads/DIGITAL%20Flyer%20Building%20Sustainable%20futures%20-%20SDLG%20Irak%20bijlage%201%20(1).pdf).

It is dedicated towards four outcomes, namely:<sup>35</sup>

- i) Improved mandate of the subnational governments and local service provision departments in the intergovernmental relationship.
- ii) Improved subnational governments and local service provision department decision making processes, policies and services.
- iii) Improved leadership within subnational governments.
- iv) Empowered social groups and improved citizenship.

To achieve this, they cooperate with different ministries and deconcentrated units on the ground. The programme builds on strong partnerships and cooperation over multiple years, consults NGOs and other civil society organizations, and coordinates with international partners. In terms of Integrated Water Management, technical assistance and knowledge transfer occurs primarily through coaching and training municipalities in Iraq. In that sense, the Sister City Partnership is mainly based on exchange of knowledge and best practices, as the Netherlands has an internationally recognized exemplary position in water management. A specific example of this training on the Water Management theme that is also based on a “twinning partnership”, is the working visits and coaching between the municipality of Rheden and Duhok, which is a very special bond that is not seen in all other VNGi SDLG programmes. VNGi is, for example, also involved in the Netherlands Water Partnership (NWP), which is a network of around 180 internationally oriented Dutch organizations working in the water sector, with members including private companies, NGOs, governmental organizations and knowledge institutes. Private sector water scarcity is also increasingly straining Iraq, which is exacerbated by refugees and conflicts, resulting in serious security risks.<sup>36</sup> Another problem in Duhok that could be targeted by the twinning partnership – and in broader sense the VNGi programmes – is the overwhelming volume of waste generated daily. A study by A. Kamal highlights how improved solid waste management in Duhok City could solve the lack of waste segregation.<sup>37</sup> For this to succeed, policy reforms that encourage source separation of waste to convert it into reusable resources are necessary, and the Netherlands as a big player in circularity could play a role in this. Tackling this would mitigate environmental impacts and improve resource recovery. Progress in this field has already been made since 2020, when the VNGi MASAR (Maintaining Strength and Resilience for Local Governments in Iraq and Lebanon) team was first approached with this challenge by the Duhok Governate.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “Blog: Private sector vital to reduce water crisis risk in Lebanon,” Blog, Netherlands Water Partnership, published February 21, 2019, <https://www.netherlandswaterpartnership.com/news/blog-private-sector-vital-reduce-water-crisis-risk-lebanon>.

<sup>37</sup> Aland Kamal, “Solid Waste Management in Duhok City – Transforming Waste into Resources,” 2017, [https://www.academia.edu/41582896/Solid\\_Waste\\_Management\\_in\\_Duhok\\_City\\_Transforming\\_Waste\\_into\\_Resources](https://www.academia.edu/41582896/Solid_Waste_Management_in_Duhok_City_Transforming_Waste_into_Resources).

<sup>38</sup> “Solid Waste Management in Duhok and Semel Districts,” Iraq, MASAR: Maintaining Strength and Resilience for Local Governments in Iraq and Lebanon, MASAR Project, <https://masarproject.com/activity/solid-waste-management-in-duhok-and-semel/>.

### SCP 3: Utrecht (the Netherlands) & León (Nicaragua)

#### *General*

Finally, I would like to discuss the partnership between Utrecht (the Netherlands) and León (Nicaragua). While this partnership is no longer intact, it is a great example of a successful cooperation between two cities on urban management. Due to this partnership, an attractive and colourful new district in León, Nicaragua's second city with a population of 20,000 people at the time, was created. The two cities engaged in a twinning relationship in 1983, with the main similarity of both being university cities. Both cities at the time were about the same size, with approximately 250,000 inhabitants.<sup>39</sup> It was named by UN-Habitat as a best practice for municipal international cooperation.<sup>40</sup> Utrecht assisted the local government of León with multiple municipal tasks, such as urban water management, strategic planning, urban expansion, reforestation and urban mobilization. For this cooperation, Utrecht financially contributed €500,000, which was multiplied twentyfold due to the blending of funds mechanism. Utrecht has conducted multiple projects with other cities as a member of both VNG International (see above) and PLATFORMA, the European network of local and regional authorities for development.<sup>41</sup> This specific notable program between León and Utrecht started in 1998 as a project for the urban expansion of the South-East part of León and was finished between 2015-2017. A project manager for the city of Utrecht at the time said that there had been a strong demand in housing in León. According to initial plans, the houses would be destined for low and middle-income people. Land was purchased for 5,000 house plots initially. The complete production of house plots consisted of buying the land, designing new neighborhoods, constructing roads and a rainwater management system, reservation of areas of public services (school, public health, centers, parks), as well as the construction of infrastructure and participation of the population.

Although the SDGs were only adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as the new global sustainable development agenda for 2030, and thus not as prominent around 2000 as they are today in 2025, a starting point for the project back then was already the sustainable design of neighborhoods, based on rainwater management as a guide for the use of land and streets. In 1992 already, the first directions for a global partnership in sustainable development were drafted during the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with the aim of improving human lives and protecting the environment.<sup>42</sup> This intention was advanced when the UN Member States unanimously adopted the Millennium Declaration at the Millennium Summit in September 2000 in New York, which ultimately led to the eight Millennium Development Goals, the forerunner of the SDGs. It is thus no wonder that international partnerships were

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<sup>39</sup> "Utrecht-Leon initiative boosts Nicaraguan city," Global Europe, Euractiv, published December 4, 2015, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/utrecht-leon-initiative-boosts-nicaraguan-city/>.

<sup>40</sup> "Stedenband Utrecht-Leon: Leon Zuidoost," Utrecht Leon, YouTube, published March 16, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpWy0ZthFdk>.

<sup>41</sup> PLATFORMA: Local & Regional International Action, [https://platforma-dev.eu/?parent\\_id=0&thumb=meetings&lg=en](https://platforma-dev.eu/?parent_id=0&thumb=meetings&lg=en).

<sup>42</sup> "The 17 Goals," Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, United Nations, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

already focused on improving living conditions, sustainable development and climate adaptation. It is quite logical that such a partnership raises the question who owns the project. A key priority of the initiative was citizen participation, with the local population participating in all phases of the program, from planning to execution to maintenance. After approximately eight years, the strategy became more ambitious, and plans were developed to build an entire district where people would feel comfortable, safe and could enjoy life. However, sustainability and environmental care remained key priorities of the project.

Besides citizen participation, local experts in Nicaragua were hired to share their expertise on topics as capacity building and management. Exchange of knowledge was achieved through working visits from the Léon team to Utrecht, while members of the Utrecht project team participated in trainings and studies in Nicaragua and other central American countries to stimulate exchange of knowledge within the geographic area. Other actors like NGOs and international organizations have been involved as well, mainly in additional projects such as latrines, a community house, schools, parks and an orphanage. To boost economic development and social programs in the region, local organizations provided loans. Thanks to the success of this project, 20,000 people were able to live comfortably and safely in the district. According to Etienne de Jager, project manager from Utrecht, there hasn't been a case of any other project of such magnitude in Central America. The ultimate goal was for the project to become completely independent, so that Utrecht's role would become redundant over time and the project would continue itself. The Dutch city of Utrecht spent about €100,000 per year on the project, totaling half a million euros. The money was mostly used to build streets and lightning, but the World Bank and the city council of Léon participated too. Moreover, money obtained from selling the houses has been used as a revolving fund, with which Léon could buy new land and develop new areas, to continue the process. It was perceived as quite a performance that an entire district was built with that (small) amount of money, but the mechanism of blending of funds functioned as a catalyst and multiplied Utrecht's financial contribution by 20. This is interesting and could be used as an example for future public-private partnerships in the field urban management. By using catalytic capital from philanthropic or public sources, private sector investment in sustainable development could be increased.<sup>43</sup> While initially most inhabitants of the district came from low and middle-income classes, the area improved and slowly began attracting higher-earning families, improving the social mix and reducing social class segregation.

A significant part of UN SDG number 11 is to realize safe and affordable housing (target 11.1), with the goal of “ensuring access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums” by 2030.<sup>44</sup> Thanks to the Utrecht-Léon initiative, which also accounted for the absence of slums, the Nicaraguan city had been declared the safest city of Central America. Besides being a safe city, it may also be awarded for being a very green city. The municipality of Léon also teamed up with Utrecht Centre for the Environment

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<sup>43</sup> “Commission says blending of funds produces ‘huge’ results,” Global Europe, Euractiv, published October 2, 2015, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/development-policy/news/commission-says-blending-of-funds-produces-huge-results/>.

<sup>44</sup> [11: Sustainable Cities and Communities], [Global Goals].

(Milieucentrum Utrecht) to create a more sustainable environment worldwide by planting forests in proximity of the city, which can be related to SDG 11 target 11.7: “providing access to safe and inclusive green and public spaces”.

### *Other initiatives*

Besides this special city-to-city partnership, PLATFORMA has helped European local and regional governments to form decentralized development cooperation. Since 2008, it deepens the dialogue with European institutions and increased recognition of decentralized cooperation efforts. Its 34 members include associations of decentral governments at the national, European, and world levels, as well as individual cities and regions. Its secretariat is hosted by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR). Decentral governments play a major role in raising awareness about the importance of development cooperation among citizens, and help sharing knowledge to make aid more effective and efficient.<sup>45</sup> EURACTIV has written about more examples of local cooperation on climate and development in a report.<sup>46</sup> The municipality of Utrecht is one of the 141 Global Goals municipalities in the Netherlands,<sup>47</sup> which means they link their local policies to the United Nations’ SDGs.

### *Summary*

If we look at the proposed goals and results of these three partnerships, they all seem quite successful in helping local governments in developing countries with their urban planning projects. Each project succeeded in involving citizens, and creating sustainable progress that endures, making the role of the supporting municipality increasingly redundant and the receiving municipality more capable of realizing their own projects. Great success factors are the involvement of multiple partners, both public and private, and sufficient funding, while challenges mainly lie in the financial flows from the state to supporting municipalities for these types of projects, which depends mainly on political choices, as well as limited time on the municipalities’ side due to increasing responsibilities. Another “challenge” is the rise of more regional initiatives like C40, where projects like these are increasingly led from a more coordinated level on a larger scale, with more cities involved. However, this may not detract from the outcome and efficiency of the projects, but it reduces these kinds of unique C2C partnerships that are not regionally coordinated, which might have higher cultural value attached to them.

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<sup>45</sup> [Utrecht-Leon], [Euractiv], [2015].

<sup>46</sup> “Towns’ and regions’ cooperation on climate and development,” Global Europe, Euractiv, published November 30, 2015, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/special\\_report/towns-and-regions-cooperation-on-climate-and-development/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/special_report/towns-and-regions-cooperation-on-climate-and-development/).

<sup>47</sup> “Overzichtskaart van Global Goals gemeenten,” VNG, <https://vng.nl/artikelen/overzichtskaart-van-global-goals-gemeenten>.

## VI. Advantages of SCPs for Urban Management

Having analyzed a few examples of C2C partnerships in urban management, what stands out most is how important they are for sharing knowledge and best practices. Of course, each city and each partnership is unique, but forming such relationships can inspire others to do the same. While conducting my research, this is also what I heard a lot from municipalities. They told me that often when a disaster strikes, and one municipality sets up an initiative to raise funds, oftentimes other municipalities follow to give off a good example and because their citizens find it important. A similar trend can be noticed with the “Global Goals” municipalities. When one sets the example of implementing the goals in their local policies, others follow. It is a snowball effect, where they encourage citizens, companies, and schools to participate as well. By forming SCPs on urban management, and evaluating and sharing results, local governments can inspire others to take on similar projects. This can be done in collaboration with partners like VNGi, or simply bilaterally. Moreover, encouraging and involving private partners and citizens drives innovation and technology. When multiple actors work together on a shared goal, joint innovation and adoption of new technologies in cities will be realized. Besides these practical benefits, SCPs also foster cultural exchange. In all three cases, it was quite special when these working visits took place. Normally, such events happen only on the national level, so when a municipality operates internationally, it attracts attention from citizens. It gives off a sense of social cohesion and understanding in city development. Finally, SCPs can help cities to expand their international network. Oftentimes, we see that the twinning relationship starts from a cultural or historical background and then extends to other areas of cooperation, generating new opportunities in trade, tourism, education and other fields.

## VII. Challenges and Limits of SCPs

While SCPs can lead to effective results and new opportunities in the field of urban management, there are also some factors that can challenge and put limits on the relationships. For example, cultural and administrative differences, like in governance systems and policy approaches, can complicate cooperation. Another challenge could be differing priorities and interests. When these aren't fully aligned, it can complicate the relationship. Yet, even if this were the case, most SCPs are based on a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) or Letter of Intent (LoI), which symbolizes the willingness of both parties to achieve something. There is always the risk of one-sided benefits, and it is important that it is ensured that both cities benefit equally from cooperation. Usually, it is clear from the beginning that the relationship primarily benefits one party, while it costs the other party time and funding, but the benefit for the supporting municipality is often the exemplary function it receives in achieving the Global Goals. I feel like especially in the Netherlands, municipalities are very focused on sustainability and green development and often want to be the “best boy in class”, so they are happy to spend time and money on such projects when able to. Finally, limited resources and capacities can pose a challenge in effectively managing partnerships, especially for smaller cities. However, I have not



encountered such problems while analyzing my case studies. Chances that small challenges arose are positive, but it seems like the greater goal and shared intention was always big enough to overcome them. Besides that, the role of partners like VNGi can also act as a kind of mediator, should such problems arise.

## VIII. Future Directions and Recommendations

In view of the current challenges in achieving the UN SDGs, especially in the field of urban management, the following can be learned from the case studies. Most municipalities and organizations I spoke to indicated that town twinning as it used to exist is now rather rare. This is mainly due to the lack of funds and time. Focus should thus be placed on improving the effectiveness of SCPs, e.g. by improving communication, more structural cooperation, such as in collaboration with partners like VNGi, and obtaining joint funds for projects that can easily be multiplied by the blending funds mechanism, like in the case of Léon. When forming new SCPs, sustainability and inclusiveness should be key principles. The main question of a project should always be how future partnerships can contribute to more sustainable and socially inclusive cities, with an eye to the role of climate change and social justice in urban management. Finally, the role of technology in these types of partnerships needs to be enhanced. SCPs like the ones analyzed are pretty “outdated”. While they are still inspiring, especially for projects in less developed countries, SCPs focused on urban management in the more developed countries can be enhanced by harnessing modern technology. Data analytics and programmes such as “Digital Twinning”<sup>48</sup> can majorly improve collaboration in urban management and help create the cities of the future.

## IX. Conclusion

While there are countless relatively new initiatives surrounding the concept of Sister City Partnerships in relation to urban management, like C40, the USDN, SCEW, and EU initiatives, original town twinning from a cultural or historical background has become scarcer. However, this project attempted to highlight three of such Sister City Partnerships that proved successful. While in all three cases there was intensive collaboration with multiple stakeholders, with both public and private organizations involved, the partnership was never based on a legally binding document, but rather on a Twinning Agreement, Memorandum of Understanding, or Letter of Intent. Generally, cities are cautious to commit to legally binding agreements, but this might not matter, as there are numerous examples of successful city-to-city partnerships in which both parties clearly express their willingness to achieve shared goals. With global and regional initiatives on urban planning skyrocketing, often requiring a minimum of three or four cities involved, and all intertwined with concepts such as the Global Goals, UN-Habitat and the 2030 Agenda, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between all of them. Which initiative is driven by which organization? The fact that most of them lead back

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<sup>48</sup> “Urban strategy: Local digital twins for sustainable mobility and liveable cities,” Liveable cities and regions, TNO, published April 24, 2023, <https://www.tno.nl/en/newsroom/insights/2023/04/urban-strategy-digital-twins-mobility/>.

to the UN SDGs is not surprising, and it is also not new, as forerunners of the SDGs like the MDGs and general directions for global partnerships in sustainability have played a prominent role in past Sister City Partnerships in the past. However, sustainability is becoming increasingly important due to rapid globalization, urbanization and climate change. While I am positive there are countless more initiatives between two cities like the ones I discussed, they are often pretty hard to find. For my research, I had contact with many municipalities, provinces, ministries and regional & international organizations, but since partnerships between two municipalities have drastically decreased, most current employees also don't know exactly what these partnerships were like in the past. Municipality websites are often not easy to navigate, and not always complete in their information. Especially official documents about twinning partnerships are not always published.

To conclude, to answer the question '*How can "Sister City" Partnerships (SCPs) contribute to achieving UN SDG 11 on Building Sustainable Cities and Communities?*', they have proven successful in multiple aspects of urban management. The cases I discussed focused on a variety of projects, such as waste management, water management, public transport, building green spaces, as well as houses and town planning. Nonetheless, it seems like original C2C partnerships based on a cultural or historical background that adapt to today's challenges such as climate change and urban management seem less frequent, making room for more regionally or internationally coordinated initiatives that foster C2C cooperation within those bigger initiatives. Here, a regional organization or international organization like the EU stimulates the forming of partnerships between multiple cities to achieve these goals. Besides that, there is a clear trend where cities themselves are eager to profile themselves as "Global Goals Municipality", implementing local policies based on the UN SDGs. It is not always clear that it is based on the SDGs, but cities are eager to become greener, such as Sheffield's "Grey to Green" initiative.<sup>49</sup> Whether this trend of decreasing original C2C cooperation is unfortunate, can be debated. Sure, culturally and historically formed town twinning relations are special, and appeal to residents, but leave the question whether those type of collaborations are the right form to address today's global challenges. Maybe, the new forms of cooperation that emerge on urban management, coordinated within greater global initiatives, are more effective in achieving the SDGs and involving citizens and private partners in it. The "Global Goals" can be perceived as a "trend" most are eager to hop on, and in which businesses can find a revenue model through government subsidies. This shift provides great opportunities for public-private organizations like GP3 Institute Foundation. Bigger initiatives involving more stakeholders increases chances for projects, whereas this might be more limited in Sister City Partnerships. The role of public-private stakeholders remains relevant, and from the case studies we saw how important it is to involve different actors in projects to make them successful. To conclude, restrictions for this project were i.a. the limited amount of information available on these partnerships, and the fact that it was easier for me to find information from the perspective of the Netherlands. Opportunities for further research lie in exploring Sister City partnerships with municipalities from other countries, as well as studying greater metropolitan regions, such as Mumbai, Shanghai, Singapore and Medellín, to name a few. Attention can also be paid to the concept of "Digital

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<sup>49</sup> "Grey to Green Sheffield," GreyToGreen, <https://www.greytogreen.org.uk/>.

Twinning” and “smart cities”, posing a whole new dimension of C2C cooperation and town planning. In any case, hopefully this project has provided a good picture of the effectiveness of SCPs on urban management, posing as an example for future collaborations.

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