

# MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Refreshing and Revitalising our  
Understanding of UK Twinning and  
Friendship Links in the 21st Century

Holly Eva Ryan and Caterina Mazzilli

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/R004137/2].

The authors also wish to thank Queen Mary University's School of Politics and International Relations for its support in realising this project.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the British popular imagination, ‘twinning’ is perhaps most commonly associated with mayoral delegations, civic ceremonies and the post-war peacebuilding project in Europe. However, the model and practice of twinning has also been utilised to develop an impressive array of social, political, economic and cultural relationships that connect geographically remote communities and institutions all across the globe. In this report we situate British twinning practice(s) against the backdrop of an evolving global landscape, while examining some of the main benefits and challenges that formal and informal twinning and friendship links yield for partnered communities. We explore the instrumental, intrinsic and cumulative-generative value of twinning and we highlight common challenges including resourcing and burnout, political differences, intergenerational divides and the need to address structural and socio-economic inequalities that can exist among twinned localities.

The report makes six recommendations for best practice in the British context. These include:

- 1. Raising political awareness among twinning and linking groups and enhancing their capacity for advocacy and campaigning** so that they are better primed to respond to challenges including (but not limited to) austerity, hostile environment and rising nationalism;
- 2. Building fair and balanced organisational structures within twinning partnerships, linking and friendship associations** in order to facilitate the equal representation of communities and help prevent burnout among volunteers;
- 3. Promoting intergenerational continuity** through targeted actions and initiatives to attract and involve younger members of twinned localities;

4. **Preparing for the digital age** by reflecting on what new opportunities and obstacles ‘the digital turn’ will bring in different contexts and types of partnerships;
5. **Creating the conditions for a truly global twinning movement** founded on values of equality and reciprocity, while also maintaining a pragmatic understanding toward the realities of global inequalities, variations and imbalances; and
6. **Establishing a UK-wide knowledge-sharing forum for twinning and linking associations.** Following the examples of other national hubs, networks and knowledge-banks, this body could be tasked with:
  - Improving communication and knowledge exchange among twinning and linking initiatives;
  - Collating information and examples of best practices in twinning and linking at home and abroad;
  - Keeping an up-to-date registry of active twinning, linking and friendship associations;
  - Facilitating the emergence of new links and partnerships;
  - Researching and providing solutions to problems and concerns highlighted by twinning, linking and friendship associations;
  - Undertaking advocacy roles as appropriate to the needs of member associations;
  - Collaborating with similarly constituted national bodies to facilitate learning, exchange and global connectivity.



# PART I



INTRODUCTION

# TWINNING: DEFINING THE TERRAIN

*Jumelage, hermanamiento, stedenbanden, geminação, städtepartnerschaft, adelphopoiesis, partnersteden, tvilling, gemellaggio.* These are all approximate European language translations for ‘twinning’, a concept that aims to capture an array of practices involving the establishment of sustained links between communities usually located in different nation-states. While there is no settled definition of twinning, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) defines it as “the coming together of two communities ... with the aim of facing their problems and developing between themselves closer and closer ties of friendship”.<sup>1</sup> In other parts of the Anglophone world – namely the United States and Australia – the language of ‘sister cities’ is invoked more often than ‘twinning’. However, as we shall see, the sustained links embodied in these relationships are no longer restricted to towns and cities. Hence, not only is the term ‘twinning’ more familiar with our target audience in the UK, it is also more inclusive, taking in a range of relationships that extend beyond the city. These include, for example, school and hospital twins, social enterprises and partnerships between trade unions, churches and technical bodies. As of 2019, it has even become possible to twin your home or office toilet with a household latrine in the developing world as part of a project to promote rural sanitation and public health.<sup>2</sup>

The language of ‘twinning’ gained popular currency with the post war town twinning movement in Europe. Historically it has been used to refer to pairs of cities, towns, municipalities, or districts that have both signed an official twinning pact or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) setting out their status as ‘partners’ and ‘friends’. However, over time things have become more complex. Today, not all twinings have the official designation embodied in a twinning pact or MoU. Some local twinning associations have tried and failed to gain the endorsement of their local city or borough council. In the United Kingdom, the processes for designating an official twin vary but in

many cases, a new twinning arrangement requires the endorsement of the full council. This outcome can prove elusive for a variety of reasons – political, economic and social – which we will examine in greater depth later on in this report. Intractable relationships with local government are one of many reasons that twinning associations and community links may instead choose to ‘go it alone’ and proceed in their day-to-day activities without gaining council recognition. There are hundreds of such ‘informal twinings’ active today, where one partner is based in the UK. These relationships are sometimes called ‘friendship ties’ or ‘community partnerships’, in order to differentiate them from council-endorsed twinings. Our research covers both formal and informal twinings because we regard the latter as an important part of the story of twinning in the British context.

The scope and scale of both formal – or ‘pacted’ – and informal twinings have expanded over time. As demonstrated in Part II, emerging from an initial concern with peacebuilding and reconciliation, the concept and practice of town twinning has been successfully adapted and redeployed in a variety of new contexts and for a range of purposes, from political solidarity and inter-city trade to global education and development cooperation. Alongside this broadening agenda, there have been attempts to update or amend the lexicon of ‘twinning’ in order to mark the shift towards an ostensibly more global and participatory set of activities. The mid-1980’s, for example, witnessed the birth of a self-styled ‘international linking movement’, supported by prominent voices from the development sector. The language of ‘linking’ was selected in an attempt to get away from some of the intellectual and cultural baggage that had accumulated around twinning. The idea was to move away from a model that was increasingly seen as Eurotropic and top-down (council-led) and towards one that could be regarded as more outward-looking and grassroots oriented. In practice however, the linking movement came to embrace many formalised twinings and there was – and is – much blurring of lines. The international linking movement was embodied in the United Kingdom One World Linking Association (UKOWLA), who defined linking as “the process by which communities across the world form sustained partnerships.” Describing the activities carried out under this banner, UKOWLA suggested, “linking ideally involves people to people contact, leading to equal, mutually beneficial relationships across cultures, with the aim of understanding the reality of each other’s lives, and thereby contributing to changes in both of their societies.”<sup>3</sup>

As evidenced from the brief discussion above, the practice of twinning has evolved in form and focus over many years, making it hard to define in a neat and bounded fashion. Some twinning links have been formalised in ‘pacts’ and thereby receive some level of oversight and support from local government. Others remain entirely informal, running off the steam and commitment of volunteers. Whilst traditionally twinning has designated partnerships between towns, cities or other localities, in recent years the practice has broadened to include all sorts of other institutions, organisations and landmarks. Finally, a range of practices that mirror, overlap with and even build upon the tradition of twinning have developed their own lexicon and grammar. This report takes a deliberately broad and inclusive view of twinning: one that encompasses formal and informal relationships, as well as closely related practices, like community ‘linking’.

# REVIEW OF PREVIOUS REPORTS AND RELEVANT GREY LITERATURE

Although twinning, linking and friendship-based relationships have been with us for some time, it was not really until the end of the twentieth century that researchers started to pay attention to the phenomenon. The existing research base on town twinning remains rather sparse. From the policy community, there is a limited 'grey' literature referencing the economic benefits of twinning for local authorities and businesses<sup>4</sup> and some anecdotal reporting on the benefits of twinning for community cohesion.<sup>5</sup> From campaign groups and the media there is rather mixed reporting. Alongside more polemical pieces criticising local government expenditure on travel,<sup>6</sup> there has also been a spate of more measured national reporting reflecting on the relevance of twinning today;<sup>7</sup> and local reporting which offers a useful glimpse into the day-to-day activities of twinning associations and projects.<sup>8</sup>

Within academic circles, the evidence base consists of a handful of works from political geography that underline the history, growth and evolution of municipal internationalism.<sup>9</sup> Although this body of work is insightful, much of it has an intra-European emphasis and it tends to address the macro-trends of twinning uptake as opposed to the micro-processes of twinning practice. In other words, much of the existing academic analysis remains a few steps removed from the day-to-day activities, benefits and constraints experienced by those who have a more intimate relationship with twinning practice. Our report aims to bridge this gulf by translating three years of detailed academic research into an accessible format that encompasses useful reflections and recommendations for civil society actors and local government personnel. In this sense, our report builds upon earlier attempts to chronicle the evolution of twinning and 'take stock' of current practice. These have included: The United Kingdom One World Linking Association (UKOWLA) report, *Community Linking: What Overseas Partners Say* (1988); The Local Government International Bureau (LGIB) report, *Take Your Partners* (2006); The UKOWLA *Toolkit*

*For Linking* (2006); The Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET) *International Health Links Manual* (2009); The UK Government's Foresight *Future of Cities* Reports (2013–2016); and, The Carnegie UK Trust's report, *Journeys of Understanding* (2019).

# REPORT AIMS

Our report reviews and builds upon existing research into twinning and linking, with the aim of bringing the literature up to date and offering a set of key reflections on the benefits, challenges and best practice for linking and twinning in the twenty-first century.

We do not aim to rewrite or overshadow the aforementioned literature and reports. Rather, our goal is to update this body of research with data drawn from organisations, groups and individuals who have been at the forefront of twinning activities in the last 10 to 15 years. Thanks to qualitative data gathered during ‘The Art of International Friendship’, a three-year research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, this report is able to offer:

- An overview of the development and evolution of twinning practice to the present day;
- Insights into the benefits that contemporary twinning and linking projects may yield for communities;
- An outline of some of the main challenges that these projects encounter, together with suggestions about how best to navigate them;
- Recommendations with respect to best practices for new and existing twinning projects.

We anticipate that this report will inform members of local government, active twinning associations, umbrella organisations and informal friendship links as well as local community groups that are considering setting up a twinning link in the future. Whilst our research has predominantly focused on twinning and linking practice in the UK, we understand twinning practice as a translocal

activity<sup>10</sup> that connects and influences partnered localities and their residents at the same time. As such, many of our insights will be applicable beyond national borders and we enthusiastically encourage UK twinning partners to share this report with their counterparts overseas.

# METHODOLOGY

In addition to desk-based and archival research, the report captures the reflections of over 60 participants who sat for research interviews between 2017 and 2019. The interviewees were selected because they had been involved in some kind of twinning or linking activity. Some of these individuals had served in an official role as representatives of local or national government. They had, for example, worked as mayors, councillors or consular officers. Others represented civil society and included the founders, coordinators and members of twinning associations, delegation participants, community leaders and representatives of beneficiary organisations overseas such as charities, schools, hospitals and NGOs. Our interviews sought to capture a wide array of voices and visions vis-à-vis twinning and its related forms.

The accounts of the individuals that were interviewed for this study – who are also variously referred to as ‘interviewees’, ‘participants’ or ‘respondents’ – have been anonymized for the purposes of this report. Each of the semi-structured interviews undertaken as a part of the study lasted between 35 and 75 minutes. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of research that uses a predetermined list of questions, known as an interview guide, but reserves the possibility for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further with ad hoc questioning. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they enabled the researchers to capture rich interview data, encompassing the participants’ ideas, experiences and opinions with regard to twinning and linking practice.

### **Durban, South Africa**

A sign on the beach ordering different races to use different parts of the seafront.  
(Apartheid regime).

Photographer: Liba Taylor

Year: 1984

### **Leeds, United Kingdom**

Demonstrators taking the knee at gathering in support of the Black Lives Matter and Black Voices Matter movements in Millenium Square, in the aftermath of the death of unarmed black man George Floyd in the USA.

Photographer: Tim Smith

Year: 2020



# PART II



TWINNING AND LINKING:  
THE BIRTH AND EVOLUTION  
OF A MOVEMENT

Part II of this report situates British twinning practice against the backdrop of global political, economic and social events and processes. It examines how twinning broadened in scope and uptake throughout the twentieth century before focussing in on some more recent trends and experiments including South-South and intra-national linking. It also situates the evolution of twinning in connection with the rise of social media and digital technologies.

# EARLY EXPERIMENTS AND INFLUENCES

The theory and practice of twinning has at least two distinct origins. On the one hand, it builds on and evolves out of a much older tradition of inter-city diplomacy. As Michele Acuto reminds us, towns and cities are arguably humanity's oldest diplomatic actors. Ancient Mesopotamian and Anatolian cities engaged in regular exchanges of envoys to establish mutual recognition and trade missions.<sup>11</sup> Medieval and Renaissance diplomacy was similarly dominated by city-states. Even after the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, widely marked as the transition to modern sovereign nation-states, many diplomatic activities were conducted by powerful cities. Cities are and have always been linked to other cities and other places, throughout millennia of geopolitical “tangos” involving states, empires and global processes of assimilation, colonisation, war and peace.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, as a social practice forged on overseas cooperation and mutuality, twinning has early antecedents in the writings of nineteenth century anarchists, internationalists and social reformers, from Zamenhof to Kropotkin. In light of this, it is possible to situate twinning within a rather mixed lineage of endeavours to establish private, grassroots forms of local and transnational association.<sup>13</sup> This includes Christian missionary projects overseas, international freemasonry, the establishment of international rotary clubs, abolitionism, esperantism, and early humanitarianism. Although there was much to differentiate among these groups, what unified their endeavours was the priority and importance accorded to non-state action in the resolution of social and political challenges; and, the rising possibilities for unmediated cross-border linkage between peoples and communities.

One of the very first experiments in translocal community partnership to take place in Europe was established in 1920 between Keighley, West Yorkshire, and Poix du Nord in France. Local residents in Keighley recount that some early

commercial contacts were made between these two communities before the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, but the relationship between the two localities developed further in recognition of the devastation that the community of Poix du Nord had suffered following occupation by German forces. Towards the end of the war, Poix-du-Nord suffered eleven days of bombing. In addition to the fatalities and casualties inflicted on residents of Poix, some 90 English soldiers, including many Yorkshiremen, were killed in action trying to liberate the town. Relations between the two communities intensified following this experience, leading to a series of reciprocal visits and commemorative events. In 1920 there was a community fundraiser in Keighley to help reconstruct the Poix du Nord community building, which was subsequently named 'Keighley Hall'. As one member of the Keighley and District Twin Links Association observes, the Hall remains well-used a century on. The gesture of aid and allyship which informed its construction is recorded on a foundation stone recording Keighley's "compassion for the sufferings born by the commune during the German occupation of 1914–1918". While the Keighley – Poix relationship had many of the hallmarks of a 'twinning' it predated this particular lexicon, which emerged towards the end of the Second World War. Initially described as 'a mutual adoption'; Keighley and Poix du Nord signed a modern twinning charter in 1986.<sup>14</sup>

# WORLD WAR II AND THE POST-WAR TWINNING PROJECT

The practice of twinning was catalysed into a movement only after World War II as sub-national governments sought to find new ways to promote peace and goodwill among communities torn apart by recent conflict.<sup>15</sup> The origins of the European post-war twinning movement lie, in part, with a special meeting of French and German mayors at Mont Pelerin, Switzerland, in 1948.<sup>16</sup> This conference led to the formation of the International Union of Mayors for Franco-German Understanding in 1950, and September of that year witnessed the signing of a twinning agreement between Ludwigsburg, Germany, and Montbeliard, France. The 1950's and 1960's saw the establishment of numerous twinning links between localities in Western Europe, alongside a number of broader regional integrationist projects beginning with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1950 and culminating, in 1992, with the establishment of the European Union. The twinings of the post-war period symbolised a desire for peace and reconciliation, predominantly among European nations that had been beleaguered by the war. They reflected a vision of the future that was characterised not just by the absence of war, a condition known as 'negative peace', but rather by the restoration of friendship, trust and exchange between communities. The latter can be better understood in terms of what scholars call 'positive peace', an idea that emphasises the social relations, attitudes, institutions and structures that help to sustain peaceful societies over time.<sup>17</sup>

Although some academic literature suggests that post-war twinning was driven in large part by regional and municipal officials, a deep dive into local government archives and auto-documentation by twinning associations themselves attest to the crucial role that community groups, faith leaders and other civil society actors often played in establishing and maintaining these early trans-local links, many of which would go on to survive decades; even generations. Newcastle, for example, was twinned with the town of Gelsenkirchen, Westphalia in 1947. Both cities were centres of heavy industry with active coal

mining sectors which made them strategic targets for the opposing side during the war. This ‘resemblance’ has long been understood as the basis for the link.<sup>18</sup> However, local residents and historians have recently conjectured that the seeds of friendship between the two localities were actually sown much earlier than previously thought.<sup>19</sup> They suggest the relationship between Newcastle and Gelsenkirchen in fact dates back to at least 1855, when miners travelling from the Northumberland and Durham Coalfield are said to have assisted with excavating the first vertical mineshaft in the Westphalian district. Civilians and civil society actors played a similarly influential role in Coventry’s early twinnings. Coventry, which suffered 41 deadly bombing campaigns during World War II, counts Stalingrad (now Volgograd), Kiel and Dresden among its twins.<sup>20</sup> What these localities have in common is a tragic history. Each suffered periods of heavy artillery and/or aerial bombardment during the war, leaving a high death toll and ruined infrastructure. The first of Coventry’s twinnings was with Stalingrad (now Volgograd). From August 1942 through February 1943, nearly two million people were killed or injured in the Battle of Stalingrad when Germany and its allies sought to capture the city. Like Coventry, Stalingrad was a major industrial city; and, for Coventry, the death and destruction wreaked upon Stalingrad by the German *Luftwaffe* had an unsettling familiarity and resonance. In response to the bombing, a 900-strong group of women from Coventry organised a fundraising drive. In an unprecedented act and gesture of friendship, they had their names embroidered onto a large tablecloth which read: “A little help is better than a lot of sympathy”.<sup>21</sup> They were joined by factory workers and church-goers who donated generously to assist with the purchase of emergency medical supplies.

# TWINNING GOES GLOBAL: PEACE AND RECONCILIATION BEYOND EUROPE

Whilst the model of twinning arguably originated in Europe, an excessive focus on the intra-european dimensions of twinning can obscure the other directions and trajectories that the practice has taken. For example, in North America the post-war twinning model was emulated but with alternative grammar and framing. Following the Second World War, the United States saw the emergence of ‘sister city’ partnerships, initially promoted by President Dwight D. Eisenhower and premised on the notion of ‘citizen diplomacy’.<sup>22</sup> Prior to running for presidential office, Eisenhower had been a Military General and had spent time stationed in Germany. Seeing the devastation, division and pain of war-torn communities first-hand reportedly had a profound effect on Eisenhower, causing him to devote much intellectual energy towards contemplating the conditions and resources necessary for a sustainable peace among nation states. While there were many possible methods by which to promote international peace and understanding, Eisenhower reasoned that “none [could] be more effective than direct, close, and abiding communications between cities, where most of our people now live”.<sup>23</sup> In 1956, Eisenhower organised a White House Conference on Citizen Diplomacy which brought together government specialists and private individuals from all across the United States and organized them into committees aimed at facilitating radical new forms of people-to-people engagement. The sister cities initiative emerged from the so-titled “Civic Committee” which represented the voluntary sector. Its work was quickly folded into the American Municipal Association (now the National League of Cities) which was tasked with rolling out the initiative among some 145,000 municipal governments.

Despite the local emphasis of the sister cities programme, the Eisenhower administration saw it as a central part of US foreign relations, especially with Japan, which went on to develop its own post-war traditions of *shimai toshi* and *yuko toshi*. *Shimai toshi* is a direct translation of the phrase, ‘sister city’,

and is used to designate official links where an agreement exists between subnational governments. The term *yuko toshi* (friendship city), meanwhile, is used to refer to more informal links. The very first *shimai toshi* connection between Japan and the United States saw St. Paul, Minnesota, USA linked with Nagasaki, Japan. The relationship was signed into force on December 7, 1955, on the anniversary of the 1941 Pearl Harbour attack which had ignited hostilities between the two states.<sup>24</sup> The motivation behind the link was to honour the victims of war on both sides of the Pacific and work towards mutual peace, respect and understanding. Whilst Japan's earliest sister city initiatives were linked to peace and reconciliation efforts, the practice received a significant boost from the 1980's as successive national governments under Yasuhiro Nakasone (1982–87) and Noboru Takeshita (1987–89) pursued a new 'internationalisation' agenda (known as *Kokusaika*). As a part of this, prefectural and city governments were tasked with promoting linguistic and cultural exchange with counterparts overseas. Japanese sister relationships with foreign cities and states thus rose from 148 at the end of the 1960s, to 392 by the end of the 1970s, 481 by the late 1980's and 710 by October 1990.<sup>25</sup> As of 2020, 1,765 affiliation agreements have been signed between prefectures, cities, wards, towns or villages in Japan and partners abroad.<sup>26</sup>

# BEYOND PEACE: DECOLONISATION, 'DEVELOPMENT' AND THE COLD WAR

In some countries, nongovernmental umbrella organisations like the United States' Sister Cities International (SCI) or local government associations like Japan's Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) and The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) hold data on the number of active formal twinnings or sister affiliations. Unfortunately, this is not the case in the United Kingdom. In the past, data on formal twinnings was collated by the Local Government International Bureau<sup>27</sup> but the last time any kind of stock-take was done was in 2006.<sup>28</sup> As of 2006, the LGIB counted over 2,000 formal twinning links that had been established in the UK. Fifty percent of these were with towns and communities in France and 23% were with counterparts in Germany. The remaining 28% of UK twinnings, however, included partnerships with constituencies outside of Europe, including formal pairings with towns and cities in Asia, The Americas, Africa and Oceania.<sup>29</sup> The global turn in twinning practice cannot be seen in isolation from major international political processes of the twentieth century, including: decolonisation and the birth of new nation states in parts of the former British, Portuguese, Dutch, Belgian and French empires; The Cold War; and, the emergence of 'development' as a normative project centred around goals of industrialisation and economic 'levelling'.

The decolonisation processes of the twentieth century brought many new nation states into existence. However, these emerging nations, like those that had gained independence in the centuries before, remained dogged by the legacies of colonial extractivism, racialisation and social stratification as well as the underdevelopment of infrastructures and key industries required to participate on a meaningful and equal footing in the global economy. In the 1960s and 1970s, many postcolonial states began borrowing large sums of money from international creditors, including commercial banks, in order to plug the gaps and kickstart national processes of industrialisation. However, towards the end

of the 1970's a spike in oil prices and an increase in interest rates set by the US Federal Reserve spurred a debt crisis and period of economic turmoil which led to the deterioration of living conditions across much of the wider 'developing world'. The developing country 'debt crisis' was followed by a period of harsh macroeconomic adjustment at the behest of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). IMF structural adjustment programmes, as they became known, sought to address spiralling inflation and debt through a one-size-fits-all formula of currency devaluation, elimination of trade barriers and radical cuts to public sector financing. The social costs of these reforms were immense, with price hikes and food shortages provoking riots in Argentina, Egypt and South Africa among other places. In Europe meanwhile, the changing landscape of international development gave rise to small pockets of reflection, contestation and innovation. Spurred on by the publication of *The Brandt Report* in 1980 and the concern that mainstream development thinking – embodied in structural adjustment lending – was moving in the wrong direction, several community groups in the UK sought to establish direct links with communities in the Global South in order to explore alternative trajectories for technical cooperation.

The idea of community 'linking' borrowed directly from the existing model of intra-European town twinning but tended to bypass local authorities in favour of a more direct partnership between civil society groups. Some of the earliest community links were established between Warwick-Bo, Hull-Free-town, Marlborough-Gunjur and Tower Hamlets-Western Sahara. These initiatives were underwritten primarily by a desire to give voice and ownership back to communities in the Global South; and, from the mid 1980's, a series of national and international conferences were organised to promote North-South community ties as a means of 'thinking globally but acting locally'. Representatives from Voluntary Services Overseas, Oxfam and the British Council were to play an important role in these meetings which culminated in the establishment of an umbrella organisation, The United Kingdom One World Linking Association (UKOWLA) in 1985. UKOWLA would go on to act as a knowledge bank for more than 250 relationships between communities in the UK and the Global South. The birth of UKOWLA signaled a decisive departure from the intra-European focus of Britain's existing twinings and popular endorsement for a more internationalist and participatory twinning and linking practice.

Just as the processes of decolonisation and development inspired new actors, directions and objectives in twinning practice, so too did the evolving geopo-

litical theatre of the Cold War. After 1946, the United States, the Soviet Union, and their allies gradually became locked into a long period of rivalry characterized by proxy wars, technological competition and a stark ideological divide. As Cold War rivalries ossified, the character and purpose of some of the existing post-war links shifted. The bond between Coventry and Stalingrad (Volgograd), for example, cut across the so-called ‘iron curtain’ and endured throughout even the tensest moments of antagonism, providing an ongoing line of communication, friendship and understanding between localities in the communist East and capitalist West. Trevor Baker writes that, “[e]ven in 1981, when Leonid Brezhnev was boosting Soviet military spending and Thatcher was steering the UK to the right, a Coventry mayor went out to Volgograd and planted a tree in the city’s Memorial Park”.<sup>30</sup> Such gestures of friendship between peoples signalled the possibilities for future peace and cooperation, even as interstate relations deteriorated markedly.

Another significant shift linked to Cold War geopolitics was the birth of ‘solidarity twinnings’ which emerged to counter the threat of – *inter alia* – foreign intervention, proxy wars and dictatorship overseas. The first and perhaps most significant example of Cold War era ‘solidarity twinnings’ were those that emerged in support of Nicaragua after the 1979 *Sandinista* Revolution. Within this framework, delegations of British volunteers travelled to the Central American state to assist with projects in education, healthcare, agriculture and construction. Against the backdrop of the US-backed *Contra War*, twin towns helped to keep the British media spotlight on the political events in Nicaragua, amplifying concerns about the conduct of US Foreign Policy in Latin America.

Whilst UK-Nicaragua twinnings represent one of, if not the earliest manifestations of solidarity twinning, the practice of linking with communities under siege was later taken up by British anti-apartheid activists alongside more well-known strategies like boycotts and divestment campaigns. More recently the practice has been taken up in the context of Palestinian struggles against annexation and everyday militarism in the Occupied West Bank. Normally driven by the concerns of political activists and social movements, ‘solidarity twinnings’ can be understood as expressions of resistance to local and/or global configurations of power.<sup>31</sup> The public act of connecting with a community under duress has rhetorical power. It sends a message of recognition to those under threat; it also signals to the wider world that an injustice is unfolding. Additionally, solidarity twinning can become a conduit or channel

for practical assistance: fundraisers, skills-based delegations, and international mobilities can all make a meaningful contribution to the material conditions of a partner community that has been beset by conflict, war or occupation.<sup>32</sup>

# SOUTH-SOUTH LINKS

From the historical overview that we have presented thus far it might seem that twinning is a largely ‘Northern’ phenomenon; and, to some extent this is true. For much of the twentieth century, twinning involved the partnering of localities in the high-income industrialised states of the Global North. From the 1970’s these relationships were expanded to include so-called ‘North-South’ links, but more often than not, these ostensibly more global relationships were still initiated at the behest of the Northern partner, with the latter often taking on more of the administrative and financial burden. Bucking these historical trends, recent decades have seen a rise in the number of new links between localities in middle and low-income states<sup>33</sup> and consequently a drive to adapt the twinning model to suit the particular needs and circumstances of communities in the Global South.

There is little, if any, existing academic research into South-South twinning and friendship links and this is unfortunate because, in some respects, these relationships are uniquely positioned to deliver meaningful partnerships that challenge prevailing global hierarchies. Free from the vestiges of paternalism, aid and dependency that can sometimes taint and complicate North-South twinings (See Part IV – *Navigating Inequality*), Southern partners can arguably find and interact with one another on a more equal footing. The *prefeitura* (City Hall) of São Paulo, Brazil has some 45 bilateral and sister city agreements in place and over half of these are with cities or localities in middle- and low-income countries. Elaborating on the purpose of these links, Brazilian officials describe them “diplomatic instruments” available to facilitate “the exchange of knowledge about public policies and projects in various areas such as health programmes, cultural policies and other issues of mutual interest”.<sup>34</sup> They place particular emphasis on the possibilities that these accords provide for future coalition-building, trade and collaboration on key challenges of urban governance. The twinned cities of Cartagena, Colombia and Punta Cana in The

Dominican Republic, meanwhile, have an ongoing learning exchange centred around the promotion of international tourism, cultural heritage and sustainability. For Punta Cana, this means learning more about the ways Cartagena has leveraged its status as a United National Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) world heritage site to help preserve and maintain its colonial-era buildings. For Cartagena meanwhile, there are lessons to be learned about balancing real estate development against ecosystems protections and promoting a unique cultural identity through music, cuisine and the arts. As one official from the *Alcaldia* (Mayor's Office) in Cartagena put it, South-South twinnings are "*less like a friendship and more like being with family*". In other words, since Southern localities often exist within a similar set of structural conditions shaped by prior experiences of colonisation, underdevelopment and partial incorporation to global markets, they tend to have a better understanding of each others' needs, capabilities and constraints.

In focus:

## Leeds — Durban and the Anti-apartheid connection

Apartheid was a system of legislation through which the white minority government of South Africa upheld racialised segregationist policies against the majority of non-white citizens from 1948 until the early 1990's. During this period, major restrictions were placed on the political rights of black South Africans, alongside forced displacement to so-called 'bantustans' and restrictions on movement under the 'pass laws'.

The brutality of the apartheid system was brought to international attention following the Sharpsville Massacre in 1960, when South African police forces started firing at demonstrators, killing 69 and injuring 180 more. Anti-apartheid groups, including the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan African Congress (PAC), had led in the non-violent demonstrations, but following events in 1960 they were outlawed, and eventually turned to forms of armed resistance.

Internationally, private citizens came together as part of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) to oppose the racist South African government and offer forms of solidarity to black South Africans. The AAM sought to influence powerful actors – such as

governments, political parties, trade unions and international organisations – to condemn and isolate the apartheid regime. Their tactics included economic, cultural, trade and sports boycotts, letter-writing campaigns, demonstrations and more.

Like other cities in the United Kingdom, Leeds developed a vociferous and energised local AAM branch which worked tirelessly to bring public attention to the oppressive acts of the South African government. In the 1970's Leeds-based activists organised protests outside the city's main branch of Barclays Bank as part of a divestment campaign geared towards stifling flows of international credit to the regime. In the 1980's, the work of the anti-apartheid movement was recognised by Leeds City Council with the planting of 'Mandela Garden' in front of the Civic Hall. The garden was initially laid out in 1983 when Mandela was still serving a sentence at Pollsmore Prison, Cape Town. It was here in 1994 that celebrations took place as South Africa held its first democratic election, with Mandela becoming the country's first black president.

In the run up to the 1994 elections, at the behest of AAM activists, Leeds City Council began to brainstorm different ways of marking its ongoing support for the new South Africa as the country made its uneasy transition to a multiracial democracy. In 1998, the formal twinning between Leeds and Durban was the culmination of this process. The twinning was a recognition of the close links that had been forged between the two cities through years of activism; and, an expression of solidarity with black South Africans following decades of violence and dispossession. In its early days, the relationship centred on projects promoting citizenship, civil rights and cultural diversity: areas of priority for South Africa's fledgling democracy. However, in more recent years there has been a shift towards collaborations in the areas of food security, education and curricula. In the early 2000s, Leeds City Council's Sport Development Unit and the Faculty of Sport of what was Leeds Metropolitan University (now Leeds Beckett) developed a scheme for university students to volunteer with eThekweni Municipality, which covers the urban centre of Durban. Shortly thereafter, British Council funding became available for school linking projects. Leeds and Durban were able to take advantage of this to develop some 45 schools between the two cities.

# INTRA-NATIONAL LINKS

Thus far we have focussed our sights on the dominant or ‘classical’ formula for twinning, which involves two or more partners located in *different countries*. Yet, twinning can happen within national borders too. Largely absent from existing research and reporting, intra-national twinning or linking has predominantly been trialled in contexts where large cultural, social or economic gaps prevail.

In 2018, for example, communities from Eastern and Western Berbice, Guyana, were twinned as part of an endeavour to improve national and regional social cohesion.<sup>35</sup> Due to the constraining effects of limited infrastructure and structural poverty, many Guyanese have had little opportunity to travel within their own country. Socio-economic stratification has been compounded by large urban-rural divides, an uneven distribution of migrant remittances, as well as inter-ethnic rivalries which have persisted since colonial times and continue to shape the country’s party system, politics and logics of distribution. In response to these challenges, the Berbice twinning initiative sought to increase intra-regional contact and provide opportunities for residents to learn about the common histories of their villages and neighbourhoods. The project focused on the communities of Golden Grove – Lovely-Lass – Onverwagt (East Berbice) and Golden Grove – Nabaclis – Haslington (West Berbice) which have their shared beginnings in the emancipation from slavery and purchase of land by freedmen and freedwomen seeking to carve out a new life outside of the plantations. In 2018, these shared beginnings were explored through a series of cultural events including the ceremonial planting of young fruit trees and a communal feast. A series of organised encounters drew the communities into regular contact with one another and helped to fold or inscribe the particular historical experiences of these villages into a more unified national memory.

However, internal disparities and disunity are not the only motivations for intra-national twinning. Sometimes, towns and cities can gain just as much

from partnering with similarly constituted localities. This was evidenced in 2016 when the Carnegie UK Trust funded the *Twin Towns UK* programme, a pilot linking six towns across the UK to examine how they might develop together. In her reporting, Carnegie Associate Pauline Radcliffe outlined several positive outcomes from the twinning experiment, most of which came about as the result of a cross-fertilisation of ideas among parallel branches of subnational government. These included improvements to digital marketing and social media activity, new commercial enterprises and revenue streams, regeneration and conservation projects, an array of local green initiatives and the upskilling of council staff.<sup>36</sup>

Intra-state twinning initiatives are also regarded as having the potential to facilitate good governance in conflict-affected societies and transitional contexts. The motivation for such projects is directly reminiscent of the post-WWII twinning project, with the difference that the focus has switched from reconciliation between war-torn communities in different states to those that reside within the same national borders. Between 2011–2013, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supported the socio-economic recovery of conflict-affected populations in the North and East of Sri Lanka through a Transition Recovery Program (TRP), focused on school twinning. The twinning programme enabled encounters between pupils from different religious and ethnic groups which were aimed at generating understanding, tolerance and reconciliation. These involved a combination of sports and arts-based workshops in which the children were encouraged to work together, building trust and friendship. The UNDP later trialled twinning in a very different context, partnering with the Local Governance School (LGS) of the *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa* province in Pakistan to facilitate a twinning workshop and pilot exercise themed around ‘Inclusive Capacity Development of Local Governments in Newly Merged Districts’. *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa* is one of the four administrative provinces of Pakistan, located in the North-West of the country where it neighbours Afghanistan. Since the early 2000’s the province has been the site of increased conflict involving a patchwork of armed militant groups and organised criminal networks. Following a vote in 2018 by the National Assembly of Pakistan, several Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATAs) were merged with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. UNDP facilitated the twinning between the long-established Tehsil Municipal Administrations (TMAs) of Kohat, Bannu and Timergarra and the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) of Khar, Miranshah, Sadda and Parachinar. These twinings enabled a series of peer-exchanges to

take place between longer and less experienced municipal officials. The project sought to facilitate meaningful learning encounters and the sharing of best practice within the context of both South-South and intra-national cooperation.

# TWINNING IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

Notably, the UNDP is not the only international agency that has trialled twinning initiatives in recent years. The World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have all adopted and adapted the model of twinning to assist with aspects of their programme delivery.

In 2005, the WHO signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the European initiative *Ensemble pour une Solidarité Thérapeutique Hospitalière En Réseau* (Together for Networked Therapeutic Hospital Solidarity or ESTHER), connecting hospitals in EU member states with those in the Global South. The twinning project revolved around key areas of technical assistance and capacity building aimed at strengthening national HIV/AIDS responses in developing countries. European partners were responsible for delivering training in line with the WHO's "3 by 5" target: to get three million people onto antiretroviral treatments by the end of 2005. The ESTHER project linked 8 European hospitals with health centres in 18 countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. According to Gilles Raguin, a high-ranking global health official and medical doctor who was involved with the project, ESTHER's successes resulted from its comprehensive global vision and long-term approach.<sup>37</sup>

More recently, under the auspices of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere<sup>38</sup> programme, a North Devon Biosphere Reserve was twinned with the Malindi-Watamu Biosphere Reserve in Kenya so that scientists and custodians could learn from one another about the needs and challenges of climate change adaptation, sea level rise and coastal erosion in their respective communities. Continuing with the theme of twinning and sustainability, in 2018–19, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) coordinated a *Twinning of National Ozone Officers and Energy Policymakers for Energy Efficient*

*and Climate Friendly Cooling.* This initiative brought National Ozone Officers (NOOs) from developing countries together for a series of meetings where they were partnered up for a programme of peer-to-peer learning and exchange based around *The Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer*. NOOs are regarded as central to efforts ensuring that signatories achieve and sustain compliance with the Montreal Protocol.<sup>39</sup> The twinning programme allowed for NOOs to exchange experience and reflections pertaining to successful national strategies for phasing out damaging hydrofluorocarbons.

Although quite different in terms of emphasis and delivery, the aforementioned examples all situate twinning as part of a wider repertoire of strategies designed to promote knowledge exchange, collaboration and the sharing of best practice among professional counterparts. As such, when we compare them to the ‘grassroots’ solidarity based connections that emerged in the 1980s or even the very first links which were premised on peacebuilding between towns and their residents, the relationships established within the UN system appear to be more specific, task-oriented and institutionalised. They can be understood as one of the latest transfigurations of twinning and one that has elevated the practice from the local, civic sphere to the inter-governmental plane. In this way, twinning has arguably gained more legitimacy as it has become fashioned into a more standardised, technocratic methodology. It remains to be seen whether these developments foreshadow further uptake of institutional twinning by regional and international bodies.

# THE RISE OF THE INTERNET, DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The turn of the century brought with it staggering advances in information and communications technology which have in turn affected professional, cultural, and leisure activities on an unprecedented scale. Instantaneous transfers of data and capital through web-based platforms have sped up and ‘de-territorialised’ financial transactions,<sup>40</sup> while the advent of social media has given us new ways of knowing about and connecting with others. Few social and cultural practices have been left untouched by these developments and twinning is no exception. The rise of the internet and the accelerated use of digital and social media platforms have created novel opportunities for some and unwelcome anxieties for others.

The gains that twinning associations have made from ‘the digital turn’ predominantly relate to the ease and efficiency of communications. Email, video-conferencing and instant messaging have expanded the range of available options for twinned localities to ‘stay in touch’; they have increased the speed of communication; and, they are often more cost-effective than picking up the telephone. Making information about upcoming events and activities available via the web has also increased the reach of twinning and friendship associations and helps contribute to broader public awareness of such links and what they do. It should also be noted that digital and virtual communication platforms have taken on a particular importance from 2020 as the global Coronavirus pandemic has resulted in worldwide restrictions to travel and in-person social gatherings. In this context email, video-conferencing, instant messaging and social media have been vital to sustaining communications, not just with partnered communities overseas, but also among members and supporters in the local area. The ‘anxieties’ caused by the rise of the internet, digital and social media are taken up in more detail later in this report (See Part IV – ‘*The Digital Turn*’). Briefly, these challenges relate to uneven digital literacy and the prevailing ‘digital divide’, as well as

the depth of interaction and understanding that can be achieved through virtual encounters as compared to the more traditional 'in-person' visits and exchanges.

# SUMMARY

The model and practice of twinning has broadened, deepened and transformed considerably from the post-war period to the present day. It has *broadened* in the sense that it has extended far beyond Europe, reaching virtually every part of the globe. Formal links, normally established by ‘pacts’ or ‘memoranda of understanding’ between municipal or local governments, have been complemented by a range of more informal partnerships, friendship links and project-based activities. The practice has thus also *deepened* in the sense that it is no longer just towns or cities that form relationships under the banner of ‘twinning’ but also schools, hospitals, trade unions, dioceses and other civic, institutional or technical bodies. Beyond this, it is also possible to observe that twinning has *transformed* in various ways. In the first instance, it has graduated from a project of state-led cultural diplomacy and peacebuilding to a much more diffuse set of cultural, economic, social and political practices. In effect, it has undergone a process of gradual democratisation as more and more state and non-state actors have sought to meld and mould the twinning model to meet their own aspirations, agendas, needs and passions.

### **Hastings, United Kingdom**

Two fishermen repair a fishing net near  
the boats on the beach at Hastings,  
East Sussex.

Photographer: David Rose

Year: Unknown

### **Hastings, Sierra Leone**

A young girl carries her father's prosthetic  
arm to him at the Hastings settlement  
for amputees and others wounded in the  
civil war. Thousands of innocent citizens  
were mutilated and had limbs brutally  
amputated by the by Revolutionary  
United Front (RUF) militia during the  
decade long conflict in Sierra Leone.

Photographer: Stuart Freedman

Year: 2004



Hastings, United Kingdom



Hastings, Sierra Leone

# PART III



TWINNING AND LINKING TODAY:  
WHO BENEFITS? AND HOW?

As we saw in Part II, recent years have brought an array of new innovations and directions in twinning practice. However, despite the incredibly rich variety of activity that has been initiated under the banner of twinning, in the UK the practice has recently come under increasing scrutiny from politicians, media commentators and parts of the British public. Questions have been asked about the utility and value of twinning in an age of globalisation, mass tourism and digital communication. Part III of this report seeks to answer these questions, highlighting that twinning activity is best understood as having three interrelated dimensions of value for publics and polities: the instrumental, intrinsic, cumulative-generative. Below, we outline just how we understand each of these categories. We then go on to identify examples of twinning projects and activities that fall into each of them.

# THE QUESTION OF VALUE

In the preceding chapter we highlighted some of the different motivations for and ‘ways of doing’ twinning. We presented something of a global picture, in which the practice of twinning has spread to different parts of the world and been transformed as it is trialled in new contexts. This image of an adaptive, popular practice is not the one we are normally presented with in UK popular discourse. Rather, in the last ten to fifteen years, an array of British officials and commentators have questioned the value of twinning for localities in the UK. Tom Brown writing for the BBC says of town twins: “Most places have got one. Some even have several. But many people know nothing about them”.<sup>41</sup> Other prominent voices, including the Mayor of Doncaster have linked twinning to ‘junkets’ and extravagances at the taxpayers’ expense.<sup>42</sup> Where UK local governments used to be the central promoter of twinning, ever scarcer resources in a climate of austerity, coupled with changing processes of financial rationalisation at the municipal level have led many councils to ‘pull up the drawbridge’ on their translocal relationships. This has taken an array of different forms. Some councils have declared a moratorium on new twinings while continuing to honour existing relationships. Others meanwhile, have been involved in a process of silent ‘untwinning’, whereby the resources, officers and institutional knowledge required to maintain their international relationships are repurposed and/or lost amid wider processes of restructuring and slimming. Where new relationships are still welcomed, there has been a big push towards twinning with localities in fast growing emerging economies such as India, China, and Taiwan. From the British side, the rationale for this is often straightforwardly economic: cash-strapped local authorities pursue these links in the hope that trade and business opportunities will follow through.

The public value of twinning is something that has scarcely been examined by researchers. However, considering both the direction of public discourse around twinning and the fiduciary pressures on local authorities in the United

Kingdom, this is an urgent task. Whilst public value is sometimes conflated with the idea of economic returns on government investment (ie. generating jobs, productivity and income), this is an overly narrow formulation that misses key aspects or markers of utility such as ecological harmony, rising social capital, a functioning democracy and the protection of fundamental human rights. A further unique aspect of twinning practice is that the benefits of the relationship(s) are assumed to run in both directions. That is to say, a successful twinning project can and should generate *mutual gains* for both of the partnered communities, rather than just accruing benefits for the domestic or local constituency. In this way, twinning breaks with other examples of investment and planning by local government: it requires a less nativist and parochial vision of society and favours a more global outlook. In what follows, we distil the benefits of twinning that were identified in our research into three domains or categories of value: the instrumental, intrinsic and the cumulative-generative.<sup>43</sup> Through this exercise we aim to show the breadth of prosocial objectives that might be achieved through twinning as well as some of the complexities and challenges inherent to mapping or ‘measuring’ these benefits.

# THE INSTRUMENTAL VALUE OF TWINNING

Instrumental value accrues when activities are undertaken for a purpose and when they achieve some goal, whether economic, social, cultural or political. In recent years, staggering budget cuts to local authorities in the United Kingdom have resulted in many councils defunding their formal links or placing much greater onus on the ‘economic offer’ of twinning. This ‘offer’ consists of the revenue obtained from trade links and foreign investment that come about as a result of a new twinning pact. It is within this framework that Sino-British twinning, in particular, has accelerated. Data held by CIFRA suggests that some 52 formal partnerships were signed into force between 1980 and 2015, making Chinese cities one of – if not the – most popular choices for Council-endorsed

links in the UK. Within this, there has been considerably more interest in and uptake of Chinese partnerships by Northern English towns and cities than those in the South. Researchers have argued that this is largely attributable to the continuing challenges of de-industrialisation, whereby former centres of British manufacturing have found themselves looking beyond the national government for significant capital injections and creative new pathways to growth. In this respect, the UK appetite for Sino-British twinning can be said to magnify a series of disjunctures or fissures: between national and local government; North and South; as well as tertiary and secondary economies. In spite of the strong appetite for these trade-inspired twinings among UK local authorities, the evidence as to their ‘return’ is mixed at best. In a report for the UK Government’s *Foresight*

*Future of Cities Project*, authors Wu, Zhang and Wang highlight that economic benefits tend to accrue for Sino-British links when there is a longstanding social, civil or cultural basis to them, meanwhile younger links that are based solely on business and trade tend to fare less well.<sup>44</sup> There have also been some

Twinning has *instrumental value* when it exists as a means to an end. Examples of the instrumental goals of twinning practice include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Fostering international peace and cooperation
- Facilitating trade
- Enacting solidarity
- Defending human rights
- Extending material assistance
- Enhancing intercultural understanding
- Promoting peer-to-peer exchange

high-profile cases of ‘failure’ where twinings have been cancelled or annulled because investment has failed to materialise.<sup>45</sup>

Strong emphasis on the economic returns of translocal partnerships risks downplaying the importance of other instrumental benefits that have been associated with twinning practice. Returning to the example of Sino-British twinning, it is notable that both the Chinese and British national governments have used city twinning as a stepping-stone or device to enhance existing bi-lateral relations and amplify aspects of public diplomacy. In 2015, then Chancellor of the Exchequer George Gideon Osborne delivered a speech in Chengdu encouraging Chinese investment in the Northern Powerhouse. In this speech, he explicitly referenced existing twin links as a foundation for future successful collaboration.<sup>46</sup> More recently, at the height of the first wave of the Coronavirus pandemic, Chinese twin cities made headlines for shipping much needed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to their UK partners. Coming at a time when NHS Trusts were reporting shortages, Chinese “mask diplomacy” sped up the acquisition and direction of vital equipment to hospitals and care homes where it was desperately required. These gestures helped to boost the China’s international prestige and image at a time when bi-lateral relations with the UK had begun to sour.<sup>47</sup>

Beyond trade and diplomacy, twinning and linking have served a surprisingly wide variety of instrumental objectives for public sector bodies and civil society actors. With respect to the former, twinning has been used as a vehicle for technical exchanges in the area of ports and waste management by local councils.<sup>48</sup> Hospital links between the UK and developing countries have been utilised to mutual benefit in the strengthening of organisational capacity and clinical expertise,<sup>49</sup> meanwhile school twinings have enabled the trade in ideas *vis-a-vis* curriculum development, supported language-based exchanges, and provided openings for a more global education paradigm that encourages reflection on global supply-chains, sustainable development and imperial entanglements.<sup>50</sup> In terms of the latter, twin links have mobilised communities in response to natural disasters and humanitarian crises such as tsunamis,<sup>51</sup> hurricanes<sup>52</sup> and pandemics.<sup>53</sup> For instance, twinning and linking associations have supported their international partners during both the 2013–2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa and the current Covid-19 pandemic. They have also mobilised communities of solidarity to oppose foreign intervention, dictatorship and land incursions in their partner communities. In these instances, twinings become channels for material and rhetorical support. They provide possibilities

for recognition, as well as witnessing and monitoring compliance with international human rights law. In the longer term, as community connections enable shared testimonies to amass, these partnerships may even come to provide an instructive source of popular social history.

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In focus:

## Hastings – Hastings and the Ebola Pandemic

Ebola virus disease (EVD) is a rare but severe and often fatal illness in humans. It is transmitted to people from wild animals and spreads in the human population through human-to-human transmission. The disease is highly contagious with a fatality rate of around 50%. In 2013, an outbreak of EVD occurred in West Africa, beginning in Guinea before moving across land borders to Sierra Leone and Liberia. It lasted from 2013–2016. In this time, a variety of restrictions on in-person activities were put in place to try and control the spread of the virus. In addition the loss of human life and devastating impact on family and community structures, the restrictions to social and economic activity during the epidemic caused household incomes and educational attainment to drop and poverty to rise. According to the World Bank, the overall impact of the Ebola epidemic on Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone was estimated at some \$2.8 billion.

The Hastings Sierra Leone Friendship Link connects the peoples of Hastings, UK and Hastings, Sierra Leone. It was initially set up to help rebuild Hastings, SL following damage done to the community during Sierra Leone's Rebel War. Since 2007, Hastings and Hastings have been officially twinned, with the majority of collaborations focussed on improving infrastructure in Hastings, SL through fundraising initiatives. The 2014 Ebola outbreak marked a new chapter in the Link's work. Whilst EVD made it impossible to travel to Sierra Leone, the UK based partners maintained regular contact with their friends and sent several shipments of equipment and supplies for the community health centre, which was vital in providing health care for the community alongside the Ebola Treatment Centres. When travel restrictions were finally lifted in 2016, a small delegation from Hastings UK headed to Hastings SL to assess EVD's impact on the community and offer their support to community leaders in putting together a comprehensive recovery strategy.

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# THE INTRINSIC VALUE OF TWINNING

Whilst many – perhaps the vast majority of – twinning activities emerge due to some kind of instrumental need or purpose, it is important to acknowledge that some of the benefits wrought from twinning may also be *intrinsic* in character. The intrinsic value of something is said to be the value that that thing has “in itself,” or “for its own sake.” Historically, philosophers related the concept of intrinsic value to the supposedly universal experiences embodied in the perception of beauty. However, it has now become fairly clear

that standards and perceptions of beauty can be subjective and are guided as much by the media and popular culture as they are by intuition. Contemporary writers suggest that it might be more appropriate to think about intrinsic value in light of our situated or individuated experiences. When it comes to twinning practice, the intrinsic benefits derived by participants are most readily associated with

The idea that twinning has an *intrinsic value* suggests that, as an activity, it is:

- Valuable in and of itself
- Valued for its own sake

their emotional responses or reactions. These can emerge as a result of some kind of concrete gesture or moment of happening, such as an act of gifting, commemoration or the co-creation of art, music, or artefact. But equally they may include the feelings of warmth and worth that are associated with having and holding another person or groups of persons dear to us – in other words, the feelings of mutual care and pleasure that are embodied in the expression of friendship. Twinning delegations and exchanges have spawned a variety of transnational camaraderies and even romances; deep and lasting interpersonal connections that have persisted for many years, in some cases outliving the twinning arrangements themselves. As one of our participants put it, “[*Being friends*] means that we’re equal partners and look upon each other equally rather than as a kind of ‘us’ and ‘them’ ... for twinning to work, you have to have a mutual respect for each other, irrespective of wealth or nationality or position in society. Simply, we respect each other’s way of life and we embrace it together”.

Love and mutual affection between friends are valuable in their own right. However, it would be misleading to draw a strict line of separation between instrumental and intrinsic value. A detailed look at the practice of twinning exposes the categories of intrinsic and instrumental as fuzzy, overlapping and unstable. For example, communities of friends are unlikely to sit passively by in the wake of an external threat or natural disaster befalling those that they love completely and as equals. Rather, the strong affective and social bonds embodied in friendship often serve as the fuel, scaffold and/or stimulus for taking up more instrumental actions. Friends will, where possible, seek to defend, support, or protect one another. Thus, when Hurricane Mitch blasted through Central America in 1998 and put the small Nicaraguan town of Ocotal in the path of danger, long-time friends located in Ocotal's twin town of Swindon mobilised to collect £27,000 worth of aid and lobbied officers at the local Royal Air Force base at Lyneham to divert one of their Hercules planes to drop off the haul on its next journey to the Southern Cone.<sup>54</sup> What we can take from this example and others like it is the lesson that the trust, care and affection implied by friendship can form a solid basis for moral, political or potentially even commercial action.

# THE CUMULATIVE- GENERATIVE VALUE OF TWINNING

The *cumulative value* of twinning refers to how the utility or worth of twinning-related activities amasses and accrues over time. Whilst some twinning-related activities have an immediate and tangible effect on one or both partnered communities, the value of other activities reveals itself only over time and sometimes in ways that are uneven, contingent or unexpected. Some activities allow for both possibilities. On the one hand, there are innumerable projects with specified targets, timeframes and deliverables actioned by twinning associations and their international partners each year. Examples of this might include fundraising to help a partner community with the construction of monuments, gardens and facilities such as schools and clinics. In such cases, the completion and subsequent use of the new construction is a fairly straightforward marker of its utility. On the other hand, the value of twinning can also emerge in more gradual and less tangible ways. Through our interviews for example, we came into contact with dozens of individuals who had visited their partner community as part of a twinning delegation. Sometimes these were school based exchanges that they had participated in as children. For others it was a journey they had undertaken as part of a gap year, for leisure, or as part of a workplace exchange. Although these participants recalled enjoying their experiences at the time, for many of them, the full value of these visits only came into clear focus retrospectively as they were able to reflect on the ways that their past encounters with twinning had come to shape their later lives. Several articulated how the experience of connecting intimately with another culture, people and locality had initiated a gradual shift in their worldview, priorities and/or aspirations. In some cases, twinning experiences had ramifications for the career trajectories and political leaning of the participants; in others, it affected their tendencies towards charitable giving and future international travel.

Like the cumulative value of twinning described above, the *generative value* of the practice also forces us to think about ‘the temporal’; or, the ways that the value of twinning relates to time. Specifically, when we speak of the generative value of twinning we are referring to the ways that the practice can open up (or generate) new possibilities and pathways for social, cultural, economic and political action. We can observe the generative value of twinning at three levels: the global, the subnational and the individual or micro-level.

## 1. The global level

In the first instance, we can see how twinning has directly or indirectly influenced the emergence of other models and examples of subnational cross-border cooperation. Growing literature on globalisation and multi-level governance emphasises the ‘unravelling’ or ‘untangling’ of nation states in the 21st century and the rise of towns and cities as “critical engines driving the global economy, global information flows, and the worldwide mobility of goods and people”.<sup>55</sup> In this context, cities are increasingly recognized for their distinct role in international relations and, in recent years, there has been a significant growth in the number of so-called ‘city networks’ that have emerged to tackle contemporary governance challenges in ways that bypass or circumvent national governments. Key examples include the C40 cities initiative to tackle climate change, the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) group and the Rockefeller Funded 100 Resilient Cities network. These and other experiments in city networking have sometimes been conceptualised as examples of ‘paradiplomacy’,<sup>56</sup> a process by which the constituent units of a sovereign state are able to conduct their own diplomatic engagement with another state or its constituent units for the pursuit of their own interests.<sup>57</sup> However, practices of paradiplomacy are themselves an outcrop, product and extension of the kinds of activities that have taken place for many years as a part of experiments in town twinning and sister-city partnerships.<sup>58</sup>

## 2. The subnational level

Secondly, evidence of the generative value of twinning at the subnational level can be found in related projects and spin-off initiatives such as new charities, NGOs, and school or hospital links. This point recalls what geographers define as ‘hub’ or ‘network’ effects: where links initially formed by

a core group (in this case, the twinning/linking association) accelerate the formation of other connections between the two communities. We came across innumerable examples of these in our research. One of these was *Twin Cafè*, an initiative that emerged out of the formal twinning between Sheffield and Estelì (Nicaragua). *Twin Cafè* is so-named because the idea for the enterprise emerged when a student delegation from The University of Sheffield travelled to Estelì. There they met with local cooperatives including coffee farmers and several members of the group became motivated by the idea of creating a fair-trade coffee company that would benefit the communities of both twin towns. The group began to import green coffee from a small farmer's co-operative in Miraflor, an elevated region just outside Estelì, paying the farmers a premium for the coffee, which is then roasted and packaged in Sheffield. The *Twin Cafè* initiative has expanded from its early origins and now supplies over twelve local stockists in Sheffield and the surrounding areas, with proceeds being repatriated to Nicaragua to support various social projects in Estelì.<sup>59</sup>

### 3. The micro/individual level

A third and final aspect of twinning's generative value relates to the ways that these international partnerships can be seen to generate power and influence, even at an individual level. The work of the political philosopher Michel Foucault,<sup>60</sup> and especially his depiction of power as a relationship between forces, can help to make sense of this dynamic. Foucault sought to demonstrate that power exists in everyday relationships and transactions. There are a number of examples from our work that would indicate that there is some truth to this in the context of twinning. For example, the post-war twinning project was premised on the creation of translocal connections that unsettled the idea that the relationships between neighbouring European states should be defined by enmity and antagonism. This was primarily achieved by bringing individuals from supposedly 'opposed' communities together to re-discover that they had more in common culturally and socially than they might have thought. In this way, the power of twinning as a force that could challenge dominant power-narratives was used to support the post-war peacebuilding effort. The production of alternative narratives and worldviews has continued to play a central role with respect to later experiments in twinning for political solidarity for example, wherein the decision to connect with a population overseas often embodies an organised and collective form of opposition to the local,

national or international status quo.<sup>61</sup> In fact many of today's twinnings and sister city relationships are underpinned by ideological connections and/or humanitarian concerns that are essentially at odds with official international, national or city-level political agendas and policies,<sup>62</sup> especially when the latter follow ideologies of nationalism and xenophobia. These examples offer subtle hints at a world that might be otherwise. Twinning practices challenge dominant narratives by eroding stereotypes and commonly held assumptions about people, cultures and places. They do this by providing an alternative set of experiences for individuals to base their 'common sense' assumptions on. Connecting to other communities can challenge what a person believes and what they take for granted, thus generating bigger changes in their thinking and life choices. In sum, by paying closer heed to the generative value of twinning, we are not just forced to confront the dominant discourses that shape our lives, but we also have a glimpse of how twinning can usher in processes of change both in people and communities.

# SUMMARY

Part III's discussion about the value(s) of twinning takes up some of the questions and challenges that have been posed by media pundits and politicians: *What is the value of twinning? Who benefits?* We started with a brief meditation on the meaning of public value before moving on to explore examples of twinning activities that have delivered utility to participants and publics. These examples are organised into three categories which highlight, respectively, the instrumental, intrinsic, cumulative-generative value of twinning. The instrumental value of twinning refers to benefits that emerge when activities are undertaken for a purpose, thus achieving some tangible or intangible goal. Twinning has been pursued for the widest range of purposes, from pedagogic experiments in global education to peacebuilding and political solidarity. However, in recent years, many local authorities have placed a heightened onus on the 'the economic offer' of twinning at the expense of other social, cultural and political gains. The risk of following this strategy is not only that a wide array of 'prosocial' community-based pursuits become way-sided in favour of courting business leaders but also that the synergies between trade creation and civic, social or cultural activities are missed too. The intrinsic dimension encapsulates the idea, expressed by many of our participants, that connecting with a community overseas has worth in and of itself. That is to say, twinning can – and is – sometimes undertaken on account of love, care and amity, rather than on the promise of some future gain. Our final category, the cumulative-generative, sought to draw attention to the ways that the benefits and utility of twinning emerge over time, potentially unlocking new pathways for social, economic or political action.



### **St. Petersburg, Russia**

A young lesbian couple embrace each other in the street, an act that has the potential to expose them to physical or verbal attacks.

Photographer: Mads Nissen

Year: 2014

### **Milan, Italy**

Young women sunbathe on a ridge between two canals that run from the centre of Milan to outlying villages including Cassinetta di Lugagnano. Cassinetta di Lugagnano is a 'model town' in Lombardy, one of the most urbanised regions of Italy. Since 2002, a project called 'Programma Urbanistico a Crescita Zero' (Urban Programme of Zero Growth) has been focusing on renovating old houses instead of building new ones, thus creating new living space without causing urban sprawl.

Photographer: Alfredo D'Amato

Year: 2012



St. Petersburg, Russia



Milan, Italy

# PART IV



TWINNING AND LINKING TODAY:  
CHOICES AND CHALLENGES

Part III demonstrated that twinning and linking can bring an array of benefits to local and national publics. Nonetheless, connecting with a community or locality abroad can also yield a variety of challenges. The aim of Part IV is to outline some of the main obstacles and dilemmas that are faced by twinning and friendship associations today, together with some reflections on how groups have sought to navigate, address and accommodate these challenges within their work.

# WORKING WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Whilst some formal twinings have come about on the initiative of a mayor, state ambassador or local councillor, the vast majority of these relationships start life as a translocal voluntary network. Some of these friendship links later choose to pursue formal recognition in the form of a twinning agreement or pact, while many others choose to 'go it alone'. In this section we consider some of the factors that can influence the decision to work with local authorities, including some of the potential benefits and pitfalls of doing so.

Although the precise mechanisms for gaining formal twinning recognition vary from case to case, some general rules do apply. Firstly, there has to be a record of significant and sustained contact between two localities together with both parties' agreement as to what exactly they want to achieve through formal twinning. Secondly, there must be agreement between the subnational or local administrative districts into which the would-be twins fall. The best way to begin this process is for one or (ideally) both parties to initiate a dialogue with their local authority and submit a written proposal. Gaining agreement however, is not an easy process. It depends in part on the characteristics of the political system(s) in question. For example, local authorities that operate within highly centralised systems may have less autonomy than those in federal or highly decentralised systems. As such, they may need to seek further counsel or approval from national ministries before acting on a proposal. Moreover, within local authorities themselves there can be variation with respect to decision-making powers. Sometimes a great deal of decision-making power is concentrated in one figure such as a Mayor, whilst in other cases power is distributed across an elected governing council or committee who must agree unanimously or by majority that a proposal is sufficiently beneficial to their constituents.

Local government in England, for example, has been the subject of a constant re-structuring process over several centuries. Currently, it operates under either

a one tier system – known as unitary authorities, or a two tier system – featuring a combination of county and district councils<sup>63</sup> that oversee different aspects of local life. In some cases there is a third tier of town and parish councils that are responsible for smaller local services such as parks, community centres, allotments and war memorials. In theory, any tier of local government can be ‘twinning’. In most cases, matters pertaining to existing twinings will be looked at by a working group or subcommittee but new proposals to twin will be put to the full council (a meeting of all council members) for a decision. Councillors provide a bridge between local residents and the council. While they are primarily beholden to their wards, most are also established representatives of political parties which means that their views and voting patterns may fall along ideological lines. This can be a stumbling block for twinning, since the practice normally implies, at a minimum, an ideological disposition towards internationalism which might not be shared among all political parties. As one local councillor highlighted in their interview, it can take years for a twinning proposal to be accepted by the council and there are no guarantees. They added “...and nowadays, there’s the dreaded word ‘money’ – as soon as that comes into the equation, we have to look really closely to see if we’ve got the finance because everyone’s going through austerity cuts. So the truth is that it has become a very tough environment if you are looking to have a formal twinning approved”.

Given the time lags, political obstacles, and budgetary restraints, one might be tempted to ask, *is it worth it: just what do friendship associations stand to gain from seeking out formal status?* Our participants outlined a variety of potential benefits to be derived from achieving recognition in the form of a twinning agreement between subnational governments. These can be broadly summarised in terms of i) publicity; ii) legitimacy; and, iii) financial or other forms of support to assist with the day-to-day running of the link. First of all, a formal town twinning comes with elevated status. It is enshrined in a bilateral agreement that in turn implies the endorsement or ‘buy-in’ of elected officials in both localities. Once a new twinning is signed into force, it will often benefit from increased local news coverage and interest, it may gain an official presence on the councils’ websites; the connection may even be marked with a commemorative plaque, road sign, street name or display space in the town hall. In essence, the formalisation of links usually implies a significant publicity boost which can be especially useful for those partnerships which have been set up with a particular cause or campaign in mind. Secondly, the endorsement of the council comes with an implied legitimacy. The formalisation of twinings moves them from the realm of private association to a kind of quasi-public relation

where there is an implicit mandate to represent and act on behalf of residents, thereby promoting inclusivity and participation. In the United Kingdom, all correspondence and any resource allocation between the council and twinning

Data from our interviews suggests that council-led trips to twinned localities are usually undertaken for one or two reasons:

**i. Fact-finding and technical exchange**

Within this category we include exchange visits of housing officers, waste planners and electoral observers travelling to meet with their counterparts and trade on ideas, expertise and best practice for solving local challenges.

**ii. Municipal diplomacy**

Municipal diplomacy refers to the institutions and processes by which local or sub-national governments engage in relations with other actors on an international political stage. On the one hand, municipal diplomacy is about making international representations on issues of significance to local populations. On the other, it is premised on the ability of local governments to build effective working relationships with international counterparts in order to come up with shared solutions to the major challenges of our time.

Effective working relationships do not emerge in a vacuum. They require time, cultivation and careful attention to differing standards of etiquette and propriety across cultures. As such, successful municipal diplomacy may require official visits and congresses, receptions and even acts of gifting.

association becomes a matter of public record. This added transparency can augment public trust in both the local authority and the twinning association. Moreover, the sense of ceremony and officialdom that accompanies council-organised delegations can sometimes improve municipal international affairs by making overseas counterparts feel welcomed and respected. Finally, whilst not all formal twinings receive financial assistance from their local authorities, some do. Usually this is in the form of funding for a twinning or international links officer. These officers of the council usually act as the liaison between multiple twinning associations and their overseas partners. They generally have oversight with respect to the organisation of twinning events and activities, including the engagement of council representatives and external organisations to ensure that events receive sufficient support and are not in contravention of any of the council's overriding principles. They may also assist twinning associations with grant-writing, fundraising and collating insights around best practice. Other in-kind support such as the free use of meeting spaces and access to printing may be available to twinning associations too. However, as of 2020, there is no uniform approach to resourcing; and, what support previously existed has been fast dwindling in a context of budget-cuts and austerity (see '*Resources*' below).

Whilst many of our participants were keen to point out the possible benefits of working closely with subnational government, a number of them also noted that the involvement of local or national officials may not be desirable or appropriate in all instances. Some expressed particular concerns about negative public perceptions of formal twinning which have been circulating in the press and online forums in recent years. Among these participants there

was a sense that the ceremony and pageantry that often accompanies official Mayoral delegations and receptions is a bit outmoded and excessively lavish,

with damaging effects for public opinion. These participants noted the ways in which negative public perceptions have been further catalysed by media and reporting that associate twinning with unnecessary expenditures of public funds, even when examples of such practices remain few and far between.<sup>64</sup> As a consequence, there is a feeling, particularly among some of those involved with the more informal community links, that the participation of state officials – whether ambassadors, councillors or the Mayoralty – can sometimes do more harm than good.

This sentiment is perhaps evidenced most clearly when a political dispute or clash of values arises between formally twinned localities. Such disputes can escalate and even destabilize long-term relationships. In 2012 for instance, Milan broke off ties with St Petersburg<sup>65</sup> after the latter introduced homophobic legislation citing the “propaganda of homosexuality”. In July 2020 the Dutch town of Nieuwegein also unanimously voted to break ties with its Polish sister city of Pulawy, after the mayor of Pulawy signed a declaration in favour of turning the city into an ‘LGBT-free zone’.<sup>66</sup> In 2019, city councillors in Newport voted to sever ties with the Chinese city of Wuzhou after a public petition called attention to the controversial Yulin Dog Meat Festival. Yulin neighbours the city of Wuzhou and each year thousands gather there to mark the summer solstice by dining on the meat of dogs and cats that have been captured, caged and butchered in conditions that are widely regarded as inhumane.<sup>67</sup> Breaking ties in this way can be considered an important political and normative gesture: a way of using the moral weight of international friendship to apply pressure on foreign governments to guarantee the rights and freedoms of their citizens; and, to alter their behaviours vis-à-vis the environment, non-human animals and ecosystems.

However, some of our participants argued that breaking ties in such a manner can sometimes be counterproductive. It can have a chilling effect on the relationship, closing down avenues for future ‘grassroots’ dialogue and exchange, particularly in political contexts where local governments act as community ‘gatekeepers’. They underline that coercive laws, legislators and regimes are often transient, whilst the communities living under their control are not and may have more to benefit from forms of long-term cooperation and assistance than a short-term, symbolic act. As a political strategy then, the act of ‘breaking ties’ carries risks. First, it arguably locates friendship with the municipality or subnational government rather than with the community itself. This runs the risk of leaving the latter unsupported in the longer term as it potentially

vies against forms of intimidation, violence and authoritarianism. Second, is the possibility that the act is perceived as an example of foreign interference in domestic political affairs – an outcome that could lead to escalation and even retribution of some kind.

All in all, these situations may be sensitive and extremely tricky to manage. For this reason, they are best assessed and addressed on a case by case basis by individuals who have an intimate knowledge of the social and political landscape in question. Nonetheless, there are some basic questions that twinning associations can ask themselves to help decide how best to navigate political disputes involving their partner communities. For example:

- Has your partner community asked you for any concrete forms of assistance?
- Will publicly criticising the local or national government place your friends and contacts in that community at an increased risk of harm?
- Will it be possible to maintain effective ties with your partner community if the formal (council to council) relationship is dissolved?
- If so, will aspects of your organisational structure, communications or project activities need to change to accommodate this shift?

# RESOURCES

Twinning and linking is resource intensive work. Activities are predominantly structured around the ideas of exchange and reciprocity, which in turn implies that *something*, some resource moves from one locality to another. This resource could be human, cultural, ideational or material, and this variation is reflected in the manifold forms that twinning has taken since the post-war period. Resourcing twinning and friendship links can yield a variety of challenges, from questions of power and hierarchy among partners (See ‘*Navigating Inequality*’, below) to questions of day-to-day book-keeping, accounting and sustainability. Among our research participants, ‘the resource challenge’ took on a particular set of meanings, linked to dwindling local council budgets and future uncertainty over Britain’s relationship with the European Union.

As we have alluded to previously, the last decade has seen substantial cuts to local government funding in the UK. This has had a significant effect in terms of support available to formal town twinings in particular. After the 2008 financial crisis, recession and subsequent collapse in government revenues, the UK’s public deficit rose significantly. Public spending increased from around 41% of GDP to 48% of national income between 2006–7 and 2009–10, and revenue fell to 37%.<sup>68</sup> Between 2010 and 2017, the government reduced funding to local authorities in England by 36% as part of its ongoing plans to tackle the deficit.<sup>69</sup> The effect of these cuts has been ever more challenging in a funding environment in which local authorities must continue to deliver a range of frontline education and care services which they have a statutory obligation to provide. Within this context, support for cultural and leisure-based activities has seen a dramatic rollback. Prior to 2011, the main form of council support available to twinning associations in the UK was administrative. A good proportion of councils employed an in-house twinning officer to support their international outreach and activities with partners. However, as one of our participants explained, these individuals “*were often the first ones [to go] when the budget*

*cuts came – or – they had their job roles changed and they became European officers, international officers or similar”.* Among those that have retained their jobs, many have been required to go part-time and others have had their job portfolios widened extensively such that twinning has become only a very small part of their role. All of this reflects wider trends of economic rationalisation, job restructuring and cutting to staffing levels which have been observed at the local council level across the UK since at least 2010.

*Just how does this affect twinning?* Our research discerned a notable difference in the frequency and scale of activities undertaken by the minority of twinning associations that maintain access to an international links coordinator or twinning officer and those which are run entirely by volunteers acting in their spare time. The administrative burden linked to fundraising, or organising international exchanges or projects on the ground in partner communities can weigh heavily on volunteers, who may not have the requisite training or expertise to realise plans for large events or projects by themselves. Groups with access to dedicated twinning officers, meanwhile, are more likely to benefit from hands-on assistance with events and marketing, more effective communication and exchange with other twinning associations and better access, knowledge and capacity for making applications to outside funders.

One of the consequences of defunding or eliminating the work of twinning officers is a corresponding loss of institutional knowledge within local authorities. This is most clearly evidenced when trying to place enquiries with UK metropolitan, district and county councils about their existing twinings. Although formal agreements remain in place, and there may even be an active local twinning association, in many instances the councils themselves no longer hold up to date information about the activities of their twin towns or contact details for the individuals that maintain the relationships on a day-to-day basis. Defunding the work of twinning officers can also set a vicious cycle into motion for twin towns. Where the defunding of officers results in fewer events and opportunities for the public to participate in twinning activity, this can fuel suspicions or allegations that the relationships themselves are not working on behalf of the community but rather just a small group or elite faction.

Cognisant of the restraints on local authorities, many twinning associations have taken to exploring new avenues for resourcing their work. Some have introduced annual membership fees or ringfenced a proportion of their annual income to employ a secretary, communications officer or similar. Others still

have applied for charitable status, making them eligible to apply for a wider variety of grants. There are many advantages to being a charity, including eligibility for tax relief and enjoying a good level of public trust. However, charitable status also comes with restrictions. For instance, registered charities can only pursue activities and purposes that the law recognises as being charitable, they must have a board of unpaid trustees and are subject to annual reporting requirements. In the UK, charities are also restricted from partaking in certain political activities.<sup>70</sup> They are allowed to campaign for a change in the law, policy or decisions but only when such a change would serve to further the charity's purposes. They cannot exist to pursue an explicitly political purpose, however.<sup>71</sup> For this reason, charitable status is not a suitable option for all twinning associations.

With Britain's impending withdrawal from the European Union, diversifying funding sources has become an even more urgent task for twinning associations. Like other British NGOs, public bodies, research organisations and cultural institutions,<sup>72</sup> Britain's formal twinings have previously been eligible to apply for a variety of grant opportunities administered by the European Commission.<sup>73</sup> At the time of writing, however, there is great uncertainty about the terms of any future EU withdrawal deal and the likelihood of a 'no-deal' Brexit looms large. A no-deal Brexit, or one that fails to set out clear pathways for future cooperation in the public, cultural and voluntary sectors, will have a detrimental effect on twinning associations, at a time when many are still riding out the effects of a decade of austerity.

# 'COMPASSION FATIGUE' AND 'BURNOUT' AMONG TWINNING ORGANISERS AND VOLUNTEERS

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes that compassion is “a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune”.<sup>74</sup> While empathy refers more generally to our ability to understand the emotions of another person and feel their suffering, compassion is understood to take over when those feelings and thoughts implore in us a desire to help. Many of the formal and informal twinings that persist today are underpinned by such a desire: to assist another community or group of persons because we perceive them to be in need. However, feelings of compassion are neither stable nor unwavering. Another set of challenges identified by the participants in our study related to what we term, ‘compassion fatigue’ and ‘burnout’. These are explained further below, together with some reflections on strategies that could be taken to avoid the latter.

Historically, ‘compassion fatigue’ was a problem that was most commonly seen among healthcare professionals, the emergency services, humanitarian officers and other frontline workers. This is because their work puts them in situations where they routinely bear witness to traumatic events, either directly or through client work. Working in proximity to extremes of violence and human suffering can take their toll on the psyche, leaving professionals affected and possibly even damaged by their work. However, in today’s world, where every tragedy is broadcast instantaneously through our computers, smartphones and televisions, compassion fatigue is no longer a problem exclusive to the medical profession. It has gradually emerged as a more widespread social phenomenon linked to globalization processes. Speaking of public responses to natural disasters and aid campaigns, Birgitta Hoijer suggests that today we find ourselves “... inundated with graphic images of the unimaginable suffering of millions. We can fathom the suffering of a few, but a million becomes a statistic that numbs us”.<sup>75</sup> Twinning is a relational and social activity that often involves developing deep and lasting friendships with others. Participants often develop close

personal relationships, especially as a result of exchange visits that involve hosting, chaperoning and collaborating to produce new projects and events. This closeness is, on the one hand, a useful building block and foundation for successful cooperation and sustained connection, but, on the other hand it can become a source of pain, tension or remorse, particularly if/when a partner community faces a catastrophic event such as a natural disaster, a war, or an epidemic. Compassion fatigue manifests in different ways. For some, the suffering of others becomes too much to handle and it provokes a strong emotional response and a need to step back from any further interaction. For others it manifests as a gradual blunting or dulling of feeling and an inability to muster an empathetic or compassionate response. This can lead to cynicism, disengagement, or an unwillingness to assist others.<sup>76</sup>

‘Burnout’ differs from compassion fatigue but it can nonetheless have significant effects on twinning organisers and volunteers. Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion that is usually brought on by prolonged or repeated stress. Burnout can result from overwork, such as putting in excessively long hours or taking on too many tasks. But it can also manifest when volunteers lack support or feel as though they are working towards an impossible goal. Unlike compassion fatigue, burnout does not necessarily imply that our view of the world has been damaged or blunted, or that we have lost the ability to feel moved for or on behalf of others. Rather, it calls for a reassessment of workload and work-life balance in order to protect the mental health and wellbeing of those engaged in the day-to-day work of twinning.

# AGEING LINKS AND INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION

Beyond the challenges associated with politics, resourcing and burnout, there was also broad recognition that – with some notable exceptions such as school or university-based links – attracting younger participants has become increasingly difficult for twinning and friendship associations in recent years. This is a concern, both terms of ensuring the longevity and continuity of the links and in terms of their ability to adequately ‘represent’ the interests, needs and concerns of their communities. Twinning associations, friendship societies and the volunteers that sustain them are the lifeblood of these international partnerships. And, without committed groups to drive forward action in the future, the links will inevitably lose traction and may eventually disappear.

When asked why twinning and friendship associations struggle to recruit and retain younger members there was some divergence of opinion among our interviewees. A number of our older respondents reasoned that young people are pulled in too many directions, blaming globalisation, the internet and an increasingly consumerist culture: *“With so many competing global causes – from the wars in Syria and Yemen to the struggles of the Rohingya in Myanmar – brought to our screens and devices, it’s much harder to convince young people of the need to commit to one issue, community or locality for the long-term”*. Whilst there may be some truth to this observation, a rather different set of challenges were described by younger participants who identified structural obstacles and a misalignment of values or expectations as some of the main reasons for parting with twinning and friendship initiatives.

- **An inter-generational mismatch of attitudes, interests and values**

Findings from our interviews revealed that young people do not view twinning as an ‘active’ form of socio-political engagement but rather as a fairly passive community pastime. In certain instances, this can be off-putting

for otherwise socially and internationally conscious young people, eager to engage in meaningful forms of solidarity and activism. Moreover, there was a perception that twinning associations are currently dominated by a white, middle-class, middle-aged demographic that feels out of place for younger people whose existing experiences of social activism tend to be immersed in a more diverse pool of people. This is in no way intended as a criticism of twinning associations, merely a reflection of how the practice is interpreted by a younger generation that has grown up with multiculturalism as the norm. These perceptions together feed into a narrative that the current composition and *modus operandi* of twinning associations is outdated and concerned primarily with historical conflicts and issues as opposed to current affairs and live discourses.

- **Structural and continuity obstacles**

For many of those who did engage with links through school or university associations, the challenges to continued engagement manifested in a different way; primarily through structural obstacles relating to their institutional affiliation(s). Many of our younger interviewees emphasised the role that school/university links played in helping to facilitate their contact with counterparts in twinned communities while they were enrolled on courses. However, many reported that once their courses were over and they lost access to the institutional support network provided by their school or university, this then also resulted in a loss of contact with twinning counterparts.

# VISAS AND HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

For the vast majority of twinning, linking and friendship associations, exchange visits and international delegations constitute central activities around which many other ancillary activities revolve. Many links include an annual visit or exchange in which residents from one locality have the opportunity to travel to their 'twin'. However, participants from different parts of the world do not travel with the same ease. Their freedom of movement is tied to where they live, with bilateral relations, passport and visa regulations determining how they are received by foreign states. While travel between European partners or between states in the Global North is generally – though not exclusively – problem-free, UK twinings with localities in the Global South have experienced a series of obstacles related to visas and heightened restrictions on travel.

Since 2012, the UK Home Office has adopted a 'Hostile Environment' policy, designed to tighten controls on inward migration and on migrants already in the country. When compared to the relative ease of international movement of previous decades, increased restrictions on the movement of people have made it harder for representatives from twinned localities in the Global South to attend events in the UK as equal counterparts. Among the obstacles encountered by international visitors are: prohibitive fees, protracted application processes (which can often involve visiting a third country to present documents at a designated visa application centre), requirements for financial guarantors and last minute decision-making by the Home Office. These obstacles make it hard to plan and execute any periodic or mirrored activities, like two-way visits and exchanges. They also work to compound and entrench the inequalities that exist between partners in the Global North and South in a manner that runs contrary to the more horizontalist ambitions of twinning and linking.

# THE DIGITAL TURN

In Part I, we discussed the expansion of the Internet and the birth of social media, hinting at some of the ways that these developments have transformed social relations and divided opinions among our participants. Although digital platforms offer a variety of new and interesting possibilities for virtual encounters, we find that on the whole, twinning and friendship associations have made quite limited inroads with respect to their use of the internet, digital and social media. The reasons for this are explored further below.

Firstly, some of our participants articulated anxieties about the utility of digital technologies and web-based platforms in light of the prevailing ‘digital divide’ and growing awareness of risks such as cybercrime, hacking and online surveillance. The ‘digital divide’ refers to the gap between those who have ready access to computers and the Internet, and those who do not. Despite a huge growth in connectivity worldwide, unequal access to technologies and bandwidths within and across countries and unequal levels of digital literacy among populations still pose barriers, determining who can use these tools and how they might be used. These barriers do not just affect populations in more impoverished communities overseas, they manifest much closer to home. In the UK, the number of adults who have either never used the internet or have not used it in the last three months, is roughly 5.3 million, or 10% of the adult UK population.<sup>77</sup> This percentage rises when we just look at older UK residents. Approximately 28% of adults over the age of 60 are estimated to be digitally illiterate, which has knock-on implications for access to services, as well as social, cultural and leisure activities. Given that members and participants of twinning and friendship links in the UK tend to be skewed towards older age brackets, there remains work to be done with these groups to ensure accessibility, comfort and confidence in the use of digital tools. The issue of confidence among users relates directly to the potential security risks that are posed by moving more interactions online. These types of risks include, but are not limited to cyber-

crime, cyberbullying, privacy breaches and online surveillance by hostile or illiberal governments. Participants have, for example, reported difficulties in getting to grips with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliance and discerning real social media accounts from bots and dummy accounts.

However, these were not the only reasons that participants articulated for their reluctance to engage with ‘the digital turn’. Secondly, and perhaps even more crucially, many of those interviewed were keen to express what they thought might be lost if twinning evolved to include more virtual interactions and encounters. As they highlighted to us, the vast majority of twinning relationships – formal and informal – have historically been grounded in the possibility of two-way mobilities and face-to-face exchange visits. During these reciprocal visits, travelers are usually accommodated in homestays and they receive a warm and full induction to the life and culture of their partner community. People-to-people exchanges do important work in terms of generating emotional attachments and grounding new interpersonal relationships among the populations in twinned localities. From the perspectives of our respondents virtual and digital experiences simply do not and cannot offer the same level of access, immersion and engagement with the sights, sounds, tastes, smells and textures of another community or locality. Many of the twinning and friendship associations that we spoke to during the course of our research were resolute in their assessment that there could be “*no digital replacement for face-to-face exchange*”.

And yet, we do not have to think about digital twinning in such zero-sum terms. The work of Michel Laguerre,<sup>78</sup> for example, demonstrates that the uptake of digital tools among twinning groups in fact sits along a spectrum. At one end of this spectrum we see groups that utilise technologies such as email and social media to complement more ‘traditional’ models of twinning/linking. This minimalist approach sees little qualitative change to twinning practice resulting from the use of digital technologies, with twinning associations adopting digital tools only where they provide an obvious efficiency gain in the organisation and conduct of existing activities. At the other end of the spectrum we have the more transformational examples, where in-person travel may be sidelined in favour of an altogether more virtual experience. Whilst examples of such wholesale digital twinings are in fact quite few and far between, perhaps the most emblematic is the European e-twinning project for schools. eTwinning is funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ programme. The initiative was initially launched in 2005 as part of the European Commission’s eLearning Programme and since 2007 it has been fully integrated into the

European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme. It presently involves some 700,000 educators from 36 European countries and 8 neighbouring countries. As an online community it offers a place for educators and their students to communicate with one another, collaborate, develop joint projects and share resources.<sup>79</sup> The purely digital format of the e-twinning presents some obvious practical and safety advantages for those working with school-aged young people: it is free and gives young people access to communities and classrooms abroad without the financial burden and additional safeguarding risks that are associated with group travel. Digital exchange between schools can and has been successfully folded into the educational journey in a variety of ways. For example, UK students learning a foreign language have been paired with counterparts abroad who are learning English for oral and listening practice; 15 -19 year olds from six countries have been combined to form a virtual book club;<sup>80</sup> and, there have also been successful examples of collaborative learning on the topics of human rights, citizenship and democracy.<sup>81</sup>

# NAVIGATING INEQUALITY: POWER AND ETHICS IN NORTH-SOUTH TWINNING AND LINKING

As we have seen, the practice of twinning has gradually extended to all continents and consists of a wide variety of partnerships premised on the ideas of exchange and, importantly, *mutual gain*. But, the question of mutual gain is a tricky one, especially in scenarios where partnered communities are radically different in terms of their socio-economic profile, access to resources, international mobility and long-term needs. Navigating such inequalities and ensuring that the relationships between partnered localities do not reinforce or worsen existing global hierarchies remain ongoing challenges for twinning and linking practice, a fact that was highlighted by several of the participants that we interviewed.

Critical reflection on inequality, power and ethics in twinning and linking practices first came to the fore with the birth of UKOWLA in the mid 1980s. In the decades prior to this, twinning had been largely characterised by partnerships among localities in the Global North, and the imperatives behind these partnerships were linked to the goals of peacebuilding and international cooperation. As a result, these early experiments in translocalism tended to emphasise what the localities had ‘in common’ as opposed to how they differed. This changed with the emergence of the international linking movement. As we underlined in Part II, the linking movement borrowed directly from the existing model of intra-European town twinning but tended to bypass local authorities in favour of a more direct partnership between ‘grassroots’ or civil society groups. It promoted efforts to connect with localities in the Global South as a pathway for exploring alternative trajectories for technical cooperation and long-term sustainable development. The movement was consolidated with the birth of UKOWLA, which emerged from discussions that took place at the National Conference for Overseas Links, hosted by Hull City Council in 1985. The third of its kind, this conference attracted over 100 attendees, with representatives from active North-South partnerships. The aim of the meeting was to “hear, in

detail, about what each link was doing and to guide the links in the direction of mutual learning and understanding *rather than aid*" (emphasis added).<sup>82</sup>

The idea that wealthier countries should offer aid to poorer countries took off in the late 1960s, as humanitarian crises reached mass audiences on television for the first time. Emergency aid to alleviate the suffering of those affected by natural and manmade disasters was supplemented by longer term developmental aid targeted at improving the economic development and welfare of developing countries. However, the effectiveness of aid in reducing poverty and achieving other related developmental outcomes has long been questioned, with economists and political scientists drawing links between development aid and corruption, instability and inertia.<sup>83</sup> While some members of the linking community shared these concerns, their main objection was related to the ways that aid can lock participants into a hierarchical 'donor-beneficiary' relation which casts the Global North in the role of gracious benefactor and the South as vulnerable and/or needy recipient. The ambition with linking then was to pioneer more horizontal relationships between communities in the North and South, with each partner poised to learn about the history and culture of the other, predominantly through programmes of visits and exchanges.

The strong desire to avoid any conflation of linking with 'international aid' or even 'charity' was also evident in the choice of keynote for the Hull Conference. Manmohan 'Moni' Malhoutra, then Assistant Secretary General of the Commonwealth, spoke with an extremely guarded enthusiasm about the burgeoning movement. In his speech he celebrated the possibilities for enhanced communication, exchange and learning through linking but he also put some difficult questions to the new community links. Malhoutra's incisive questions placed a spotlight on the difficulties of crafting equal and unmediated community partnerships in a postcolonial context, where one side remains structurally disadvantaged by the particularities of its violent and partial incorporation into the global capitalist system under colonialism.

In focus:

## The National Conference for Overseas Links, Hull (1985)

Manmohan Malhoutra, Assistant Secretary General of the Commonwealth addressed crowds at the Hull Conference in 1985, with the following challenges:

- Is friendship without aid enough, or will people in developing countries become disappointed and disillusioned by being offered the thin gruel of exchange and friendship rather than something more tangible and material?
- If material assistance is given, is it directed professionally at those points where it can be of most use or is it dissipated on projects that warm the hearts of the donors without really benefitting their recipients?
- Can people in the developed world ever truly understand the wholly different order of necessities and realities in a poor developing society? In such basic matters as shelter, food, water and power, schools and hospitals, the realities and the expectations are quite different, the worlds are far apart, say the critics, and there is a gulf of incomprehension which will remain unbridgeable.
- Is the link bound to be a one-sided relationship, that of giving on the one hand and receiving on the other?
- Can linking ever be more than a middle-class activity, highly selective and symbolic only? Or can it really reach those parts that others cannot reach?

Some 35 years on from the Hull Conference, UKOWLA and the wider linking movement have fragmented, meaning that much of the earlier critical and collective reflection driven by the organisation and its members has not been readily available to newer twinning and friendship associations. And yet, Malhoutra's provocations remain as relevant as ever. Despite significant development gains globally which have seemingly raised many millions of people out of absolute poverty, there is mounting evidence<sup>84</sup> to show that the gap between the world's richest and poorest countries is in fact widening. Among the 34 member states

of the OECD, the richest 10% of the population are earning nearly 10 times that of the poorest 10%. According to Oxfam, in the years between 2009 and 2018, the number of billionaires it took to equal the wealth of the world's poorest 50 percent fell from 380 to 26. Inequality between countries is compounded by growing inequality within them too.

One set of difficulties repeatedly highlighted by interviewees involved with North-South links related to the ways that these community partnerships had sought to resolve or negotiate wealth disparities. Despite the early aversion to 'aid' among these groups, over time more divergent views have amassed around the question of gifts, loans and donations. Some respondents still question whether it is appropriate for twin towns and community links to engage in acts of giving. These participants argued that the one-way transfer of wealth or goods undermines the principle of horizontality and risks straying into areas of activity better left to development professionals or charities. Others however, perceived a blanket moratorium on material assistance not only difficult to uphold in practice but also potentially counterproductive. A significant proportion of respondents based in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa reasoned that, if twinning and linking was to really *work* and achieve the 'buy in' of partners in the Global South, then these relationships should not only acknowledge the economic disparities between partners but *actively seek to reduce them*. For British partners, such appeals and rationalisations from friends can be hard, if not impossible, to refuse. But, more to the point, recalcitrance to such appeals arguably does little to promote equality since it requires everyone to play by the rules and preferences set by the wealthier European partner.

Navigating inequality within twinning and linking partnerships is by no means easy and there is no silver bullet or fast and readily available formula for 'getting it right'. Rather, what is required is a flexible and open approach that enables both communities to feel heard and to pursue activities that suit their needs, means and circumstances. In this context, the notion of 'mutual gain' can and should be interpreted broadly. Twinned or linked localities may stand to gain quite different things from the arrangement. What remains crucial however, is an ongoing commitment to reflect critically and collectively on existing disparities and seek to avoid activities or approaches that further entrench them. Whilst our focus in this discussion has been on acts of giving or 'aid', this kind of constant reflexive questioning should also apply with respect to the narratives and framings that are used to describe the work of twinning and linking associations. Keen attention should be paid to language and imagery used in communications and

marketing materials to ensure that it does not reinforce hierarchies, stereotypes or caricatures that disempower Southern voices and communities.

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In focus:  
North-South Linking and the Politics of 'Aid'

In the fragment below, one participant from the Global North recalls a challenging conversation with Southern partners which raised important questions about voice, power and expectations vis-à-vis linking.

"When we first started the link, it was very much based on the exchange of people between the two communities. ... [However, after] we'd been at this relationship for a period of maybe five or six years, people in our partner community began to say to us, 'you know, this is all very well, this exchange of people, and this relationship building, and so on and so forth. But actually, you've got to accept that we are a poor community with acute material needs. 25% of our children are dying of preventable diseases under the age of two, from diseases such as gastroenteritis, malaria, whatever. Only 10% of our women are literate, we can't get access to small loans to develop businesses in our community. We don't have access to clean water or electricity, all our water comes from open wells ... You know, you need to accept that we are a poor community compared with you. And we therefore think that you ought to help us to develop.'

Initially we said 'no no no! come on, this is not about aid its about reciprocal relationships,' at which point they very pointedly responded, 'if this relationship is one of equality, you should be listening to what we're saying - we have a nice African saying, which is that we were given two ears and only one mouth, so you should use them well and listen to what we're saying.' And to cut a long story short, we ended up entirely agreeing with what they were saying. This led us to set up a small NGO ... and through that [we were able to explore the needs of different sectors of our partner community, settling on] a development program, which included access to clean water, ... encouraging early childhood development, ...a women's literacy project, [and] ...a health education program."

# SUMMARY

Part IV sought to outline the principal challenges that twinning and friendship associations face today. The aim of this discussion was not just to raise awareness of the obstacles but also to outline some of ways that twinning organisers and participants have sought to navigate and overcome these. We started by looking into some of the pros and cons of working with local authorities, with an emphasis on providing relevant insights for those links that have, or have been thinking about making a bid for formal twinning status. We then discussed the question of resources, with an emphasis on the considerable cuts to local government budgets that have been imposed over the last 10 years and the ways that this has affected formal links. Our discussion then moved from economic resources to human resources as we highlighted some of the other factors that can inhibit the continuity of twin links, such as compassion fatigue and burnout among volunteers and a lack of intergenerational collaboration. Lastly, we turned our attention to questions of inequality, first reviewing some of the developments that have taken place in the digital sphere and then turning to the issues of power, voice and representation that often materialise in the context of North-South twinning and linking.





# PART V



RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR BEST PRACTICE IN  
TWINNING AND LINKING

In this report we have sought to provide an up to date overview of twinning and linking in the British context, including reflections on the benefits and obstacles to maintaining translocal links in the twenty-first century. Part V brings our report to a close by drawing on the analysis presented in Parts II-IV above in order to outline several key recommendations for best practice in twinning and linking. These recommendations may not be applicable or useful in each and every case but they are nonetheless the outcome of a series of reflections on what can be done to assist twinning, linking and friendship associations seeking to find a way forward in the early twenty-first century.

## **1. Raise political awareness among twinning and linking groups and enhance their capacity for advocacy and campaigning**

As we have seen from earlier parts of this report, twinning and friendship links can achieve quite a wide variety of social, economic, cultural and political goals but they do not so in conditions of their own choosing. The resources available to them and their ways of working are directly shaped by the wider policy environment in which they operate. In recent years, this has been evidenced most clearly in the effects of the austerity and ‘hostile environment’ agendas, which have had a direct bearing on the efficacy and continuity of twinning and linking projects. There is one rather obvious conclusion that we can draw from this: whilst twinning and friendship links themselves may not be motivated by political concerns, they are unavoidably impacted by politics. As such, they have a crucial stake in the kinds of decisions that are undertaken and promoted by local and national government and should feel adequately empowered to voice their needs and concerns as the shifting policy landscape throws up new challenges.

In recognition of this, parts of the twinning and linking movement in the UK have, in the past, attempted to form advocacy networks to try and influence existing and emerging policy agendas. One example of this is Building Understanding Through International Links for Sustainable Development (BUILD), whose primary goal was to promote North-South community linking as a model for peace, prosperity and development, bringing such partnerships “*into the mainstream in the UK to the point that no one can escape life without at some time being touched by an international, cross-cultural partnership whether at school, higher education, through their local authority, town or village, corporate organisations, hospital, social, arts or sports clubs, faith institutions etc.*”<sup>85</sup> BUILD was instrumental in the estab-

lishment of an all-party parliamentary group “Connecting Communities”, which was launched in 2003 under the Chairmanship of Kevin Barron MP. At its height the APPG had a membership of 26 MPs and Peers, which allowed members of BUILD to access to senior politicians and make the case for expanding the funding opportunities for North-South school links and health partnerships. Whilst the BUILD model would not work for all issues, agendas or political moments, there is nonetheless a pressing need to raise levels of political awareness among twinning and linking groups and enhance their capacity for advocacy and campaigning so that they can – collectively – make themselves heard in the forums that count.

## **2. Build fair and balanced organisational structures within**

The work of twinning, linking and friendship associations is largely driven by volunteers. Over time, the emotional, physical and intellectual investment put into twinning activities can lead to ‘burnout’. It is therefore vital that workload pressures are shared equally among committee members, with the high intensity roles – such as chairperson, secretary or treasurer – rotated periodically to give the most active volunteers a period of respite. Regular rotation of committee roles is important not just in terms of allaying workload stress and exhaustion. It is also important for ensuring that new faces, fresh ideas and alternative approaches are allowed to blossom and evolve within the link. As far as practicable, twinning associations and their coordinating committees should seek to be representative of their communities. That is to say, they should seek to involve a healthy mix of different age-groups, genders, social classes, ethnic and religious identities, abilities and professions. Where possible, they should encourage the establishment of parallel structures in their partner communities, whilst being cognisant of the need to respect differing cultural and organisational norms.

## **3. Promote intergenerational continuity**

The history of twinning that we presented in Part II showed a dynamic global movement that has evolved and adapted over many decades to meet the geopolitical, social and economic challenges of a world constantly in flux. However, without new members and fresh perspectives, twinning and linking organisations will inevitably become outmoded, lose momentum and eventually disappear. This seems to be a particular concern in the UK, where a large number of the twinning organisations we spoke to admit-

ted that recruiting younger members has become increasingly difficult. Addressing the challenge of intergenerational continuity will take time, resources, research, and willingness to adapt. Our own research suggests that there may be some level of mis-understanding between older and younger twinning participants, particularly around the economic and time pressures that younger people face today and how this inhibits their ability to take on sustained voluntary roles. In the first instance then, twinning associations should look to correctly diagnose the problem, perhaps by organising a series of focus groups with younger people in their communities and using these semi-structured conversations to gain a deeper understanding of what appeals (and what doesn't) about getting involved with twinning and linking initiatives. Beyond this, associations that are keen to work more closely with schools and universities should seek to connect with others that have successfully established such relationships in the past. In this way, existing wisdom can be passed among twinning associations and likely hurdles or stumbling blocks can be anticipated and planned for in advance.

#### **4. Prepare for the digital age**

Digital platforms and technologies are becoming more prominent in our lives with each and every day that passes. Twinning associations have made a number of efficiency gains from the 'digital turn'. For example, the use of email and social media has sped up communications and, in many cases, allowed these organisations to reach a much wider audience. In the last year, the global coronavirus pandemic has seen the wholesale shift of key sectors to new modes of online working. With travel restrictions and social distancing rules in place, online virtual environments provide the only feasible avenue for twinning associations to maintain regular contact with both their members at home and their partners abroad. These new ways of working come with their own challenges. Concerns about privacy, security, and the exclusionary effects of 'the digital divide' warrant particular attention. In some parts of the globe, nongovernmental umbrella organisations or local government associations have sought to allay the concerns of twinning and linking organisations by bringing them together to discuss the challenges and opportunities of going digital. For example, in July 2020, Sister Cities International organised its very first online conference with the overarching theme of, 'Reimagining Citizen Diplomacy: New Connections in a Virtual World'.<sup>86</sup> The conference was free to attend and it

acknowledged the many different ways that SCI's members had mobilised digital technologies to 'stay in touch' with international partners during the pandemic. Similar opportunities for discussion, knowledge-sharing and collaborative learning would be beneficial in the UK context, where of the many small voluntary organisations that make up the twinning movement have found themselves muddling through alone. Moreover, the construction of a central archive or sharepoint for toolkits and templates on – *inter alia* – basic internet skills, cyber security, online privacy and relevant legal obligations such as those that exist under the GDPR would be a useful time saving initiative for UK twinning organisations, avoiding the replication of labour among groups and addressing, at least in part, the somewhat patchy landscape of digital literacy.

## 5. Create the conditions for a truly global twinning movement

In Part IV, we retraced the steps that organisations such as UKOWLA took to distance their activities from the more 'mainstream' paradigm of development established by international agencies. Rather than providing 'aid', their goal was to establish abiding cultural relationships forged on mutual understanding, trust and translocal technical cooperation. It was hoped that in the longer term, these partnerships would contribute to sustainable development and an economic levelling between the North and South. Whilst UKOWLA was noble in its aims, disavowing 'aid' proved more complex than it seemed, with some Southern partners challenging the proposition that economic assistance should be off limits in twinning arrangements. Debates about whether acts of charitable giving constitute a 'help' or 'hindrance' persist today among organisers and participants in North-South linking. Some argue that acts of giving further entrench patterns of dominance established under colonial regimes, while others posit that sometimes acts of giving are necessary for addressing or redressing those very imbalances. These are, at their core, deliberations about power, ethics and the normative underpinnings of twinning and linking. In crafting the conditions for a truly global twinning movement – one that promotes equality and more horizontal social relations the world over – such questions cannot and should not be ignored.

Navigating inequality within twinning and linking partnerships is a huge challenge and there is no replicable formula for getting it right in every context. Nonetheless, there are certain principles and actions that can help. In the first instance, it essential that twinned localities are clear with one

another about their concerns, expectations and ambitions for the link. It can help to agree some ground rules about what types of ‘exchange’ are to take precedent and what is outside the scope and ability of the groups in question to deliver. While these kinds of conversations should take place with the full and unencumbered participation of both sides, it is also important to be realistic about prevailing global hierarchies and the ways that they shape group dynamics. For instance, we might ask: *Is there a history of colonial domination among the twinning partners? Are the legacies of that history still felt today? How might those legacies influence perceptions? How might they promote reticence or – conversely – superciliousness in processes of communication, negotiation and exchange? What can be done to overcome these legacies?* In short, what is required is a constant reflexive questioning to help expose and problematise persisting disparities in wealth and status; and, a commitment to try and avoid activities, narratives and approaches that further entrench them.

It is our view that the principles and objectives enshrined in recommendations 1–5 above would be most effectively realised within the scope of a nation-wide knowledge-sharing forum, organisation or network for twinning and linking associations. Our final recommendation below, captures this aim.

## **6. Re-establish a UK-wide knowledge-sharing forum for twinning and linking associations**

Every twinning, linking and friendship association is unique. As our report has demonstrated, differences exist with respect to the structure, focus, size and formality of these relationships. And yet, in spite of their differences, these projects do share in some common characteristics, experiences and challenges. They all involve two or more partners and they are unified by a logic of exchange. They tend to be internationalist in orientation and they revolve around the belief that *mutual gain* is not just a possible outcome of community-based partnerships but a desirable one. Furthermore, as shown in Part IV, there are a number of common challenges or obstacles that twinning and linking initiatives face today, from resourcing and poli-

tics to intergenerational relevance and digital literacy. Whilst many groups face these challenges in relative isolation, there is potentially much to be gained from collaboration and information sharing among twinning and linking associations on a national level. In many countries around the world, nongovernmental umbrella organisations like the United States’ Sister Cities International (SCI) or local government associations like Japan’s Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), Spain’s Federation for Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP), The Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) and The Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) already serve this kind of function. Not only do these bodies hold data on the number of active twinnings or sister affiliations, but they act as a kind of ‘hub’ or ‘switch-board’ where prospective twins can connect; and where knowledge-sharing can occur in a coordinated manner through a combination of research, conferencing, workshopping and publications. Sister Cities International (SCI), for example, operates as a 501c US based non-profit organization and serves as the national membership organization for individual sister cities, counties, and states all across the United States. As a network it unites tens of thousands of self-professed ‘citizen diplomats’ and volunteers in nearly 500 member communities with over 2,000 partnerships in more than 140 countries beyond the US. SCI works “*to strengthen the sister cities network by providing essential services, programs, and resources to help members find partners as well as to expand and improve activities*”.<sup>87</sup> Among these, it organises regular workshops and events, including an large annual international conference; it targets younger participants with a parallel youth leadership summit and a young artists’ and authors’ showcase. SCI’s “Cities Seeking Cities” program is available to members to provide hands-on assistance in establishing new sister city, county, or state partnerships. Furthermore, the organisation provides its members with toolkits and editable templates<sup>88</sup> for commonly prepared documents like partnership agreements and visa support letters for visiting partners.

In the UK, similar initiatives do exist but on a much smaller scale. For example, the Britain-Palestine Friendship and Twinning Network, the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign and the UK and Russian Federation Twin Cities Forum each provide spaces where twinning and friendship initiatives can engage with one another. Larger UK-wide registries or databases have existed in the past, pioneered by the Local Government International Bureau (LGIB) and UKOWLA, but none are presently being

maintained. The problem with this is not just that we have no reliable data on the number of twinings (formal or informal) that are currently active in the UK, but also that there is no accurate data to be filtered upwards for use by regional umbrella organisations such as the CEMR, which is charged with promoting, monitoring and developing new and existing forms of twinning within and beyond the European Union.<sup>89</sup>

As a result, we believe that it would be beneficial for a national knowledge-sharing forum on twinning and linking to be re-established in the UK. This umbrella organisation, hub or network should have the specific objectives of:

- Improving communication and knowledge exchange among twinning and linking initiatives;
- Collating information and examples of best practice in twinning and linking from organisations and projects at home and abroad;
- Keeping an up-to-date registry of active twinning, linking and friendship associations;
- Facilitating the emergence of new links and partnerships;
- Researching and providing solutions to problems and concerns highlighted by twinning, linking and friendship associations;
- Undertaking advocacy roles as appropriate to the needs of member associations;
- Collaborating with similarly constituted national bodies to facilitate learning, exchange and global connectivity.

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