Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

Learning and mutuality in municipal partnerships and beyond: a focus on northern partners

Journal Item

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

oro.open.ac.uk

Learning and mutuality in municipal partnerships and beyond: a focus on northern partners

Hazel Johnson* and Gordon Wilson

Development Policy and Practice, MCT Faculty, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK

h.e.johnson@open.ac.uk and g.a.wilson@open.ac.uk

Phone: (0044) (0)1908 655708

Fax: (0044) (0)1908 654825

Learning and mutuality in municipal partnerships and beyond: a focus on northern partners

Abstract

North-South municipal partnerships that are based on practitioner-to-practitioner collaboration are explicitly concerned with joint learning and knowledge production for more effective practice. Such partnerships assume a principle of mutuality – northern and southern partners are both assumed to gain from them, whether in similar or different ways. Research suggests that the processes of learning and knowledge production in North-South municipal partnerships pose challenges to mutuality both as a value and as an incentive. However research has frequently focused on the challenges of learning by the southern partner(s) and, while recognising its importance, less analysis or reflection has been done on northern learning. However, if there are to be effective and sustainable partnerships, the investigation and promotion of northern learning is also required, as well as greater understanding of the action learning spaces in which it occurs. This article examines two partnerships in UK and Uganda, and the processes of learning and related institutional development for the northern partners. The article considers how peer exchange and learning can extend beyond the initial boundaries of cooperation, and suggests how research on mutuality and social learning can be further progressed from an institutional standpoint.

Key words: learning, mutuality, municipal partnerships, action learning spaces, institutionalisation

1   Introduction

There has been a growing interest in, and development of, North-South partnerships of many types: from city-city links, to partnerships between schools and community groups, as well as links between diasporas and home countries or towns. Accompanying these developments are activities of NGOs and government organisations and quangos that promote and support such partnerships, although, in the UK, there is still some way to go with respect to government aid for local government links. As well as being a means to engage in southern development, such partnerships are seen as a mechanism to promote global citizenship and mutual learning. They include the practitioner to practitioner municipal partnerships, which we focus on in this article.

The origins of practitioner to practitioner municipal partnerships in the UK can be traced back to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. A chapter of the Agenda 21 action blueprint that arose from this Summit on the urban environment pointed out as key concerns for cities and towns such as overcrowding, inadequate housing, inadequate access to clean water and sanitation, growing amounts of uncollected waste, and deteriorating air quality. This 'brown' agenda was defined as the most immediate and critical environmental problem facing cities in the South.

One specific aspect of Agenda 21 was the promotion of North-South partnerships to demonstrate the global nature of sustainable development and the interdependency of communities and nations (Rossiter, 2000, p.13). These ideas, combined with growing concern about the 'brown agenda', led to the idea of specifically developing municipal partnerships between northern and southern towns and cities. In the UK this idea was taken on board first by the Local Government Management Board (LGMB) and then by the Local Government International Bureau (the LGIB), and, in the cases behind this paper, in conjunction with the Uganda Local Authorities

Association (ULAA). These bodies initiated and sustained the idea of partnerships based on 'practitioner to practitioner' learning which they contrasted with twinning. Such partnerships were also given a boost by a programme of funding in the European Commission.

Practitioner to practitioner municipal partnerships were initially conceptualised by the European Commission as a form of knowledge transfer from North to South. This transfer was to take place through technical assistance from the UK, training and work experience attachments for Ugandans in the UK, local projects to improve the urban environment and services in Uganda, and community/NGO/local government linkages to support services delivery and increase community participation (Pasteur, 1998, p.22). The practitioner to practitioner methodology was based on the idea of professional equivalence and relative parity of status and collegiality. However there was also an aspiration of Northern as well as Southern learning. It was expected that the learning benefits for the North would be principally 'soft': greater cultural awareness, friendship and mutual understanding. Rossiter (2000) also points out that northern partners have the potential to learn from the South about innovations in decentralised government, self reliance strategies and user involvement in service provision (ibid., pp.26-27).

Practitioner to practitioner municipal partnerships are based on the idea that tacit as well as codified knowledge can be shared. Tacit knowledge is assumed to be shared in the process of officers working together, conversational learning, learning by doing, learning by feedback etc. Codified knowledge may be shared in rules, regulations, manuals and codes of practice, as well as in professional training. However codified professional knowledge and practice are located in social, historical and physical contexts that affect how they are created and used. Thus consciously analysing and reflecting on the relationship between tacit and codified knowledge

practice and the differences in context, perspectives and experience is a key dimension of the practitioner-practitioner methodology.

The two partnerships in this study were promoted by individual champions in each council who met, sometimes several times, with their counterparts in Uganda before making the case for making an institutional link. The partnerships focused on a range of concerns. Our study concentrated on environmental (or public) health in Uganda, which were key components to both partnerships. The partnerships were between (i) Kampala City Council (KCC) (Uganda) and Kirklees Metropolitan Council (KMC) (based in the large town of Huddersfield, UK), and (ii) Iganga Town Council (ITC) (Eastern Uganda) and Daventry District Council (DDC) (Northamptonshire, UK). Thus, one of the partnerships was between a city and a town-based metropolitan council; the other was between two small towns (of 20,000 people in Daventry and 40,000 [daytime population] in Iganga). 'City' is thus a metaphor for urban centres for the purposes of this article.

The partnerships lasted several years. The Kampala-Kirklees partnership was mainly funded by the World Bank, which covered time spent by Kirklees officers on the projects. The small grants funding of the Iganga-Daventry partnership did not permit this possibility. The Kampala-Kirklees partnership was also based on contracts and more tightly interpreted by the two Councils than that between Daventry and Iganga. In the latter, the Memorandum of Understanding for the partnership included building community links, which served to cement the partnership in the longer term.

The municipal dimensions of the partnerships have now ended. DDC stopped for financial reasons in 2000, however engaged officers, politicians and other members of the community set up an NGO, Daventry Friends of Iganga, and the officers, current and retired, continue to work on Iganga projects in their own time. DDC also still hosts Ugandan environmental health officers from different local authorities, who come for 3-month study periods as Commonwealth Professional Scholars. The

Kampala-Kirklees partnership stopped in 2002: the formal contract had ended and it was difficult for Kirklees to make inputs without further resources. It was also becoming increasingly difficult to sustain the relationship on a collegial basis as there were pressures from the World Bank to move to competitive tendering. In addition, the lack of feedback from Kampala to Kirklees left officers feeling that they were no longer able to learn or gain something from the relationship once the contract had ended.

The focus of this article is on the learning by northern 'cities' from these links: amongst their officers, their organisation, and beyond the officers into the wider constituencies. The data was gathered in interviews carried out amongst existing and past officers and politicians in all the councils in 2003. Interviews were mainly with individuals although some were carried out in pairs or groups, and, in some instances, we interviewed members of community organisations and schools. Overall 44 interviews were carried out (Daventry: 11; Kirklees: 8; Iganga: 14; Kampala: 11). For the most part, we used a structured interview schedule as we wish to cover the same ground with each informant to be able to identify common and different narratives on the same subject and also enabled us to triangulate accounts as well as gather different interpretations of events and processes. The structured nature of the interview did not, however, inhibit us from delving into new themes or interesting accounts. In addition, having two people involved in the interview meant that one could listen and record, and come back later with additional questions.

The main, baseline, themes were:

1. The history of how the partnership was formed

2. How it was maintained over time, and the key factors in maintaining the partnership

3. The situation before the partnership (problems faced, who was affected)

4. The aims of the projects, their conceptualisation and achievements

5. Who learned what from the partnership

6. Evaluating mechanisms for 'technology transfer' and learning

7. Institutionalisation of learning

8. Governance issues

9. Anything else that informants wished to tell us.

Points 5 and 6 were explored in some depth with multiple questions to enable us to elicit indirectly informants' perceptions of learning (as well as their perceptions of a lack of learning). Here we also explored accounts of processes and events (including different accounts of the same event or process).

In what follows, we first conceptualise the nature and mechanisms of practitioner to practitioner learning and some of its challenges. We suggest that the concept of 'action learning spaces' can capture the dynamics as well as temporary and transitional nature of learning 'moments'. We then examine the learning amongst officers in Kirklees and Daventry and the extent to which the learning became institutionalised in the councils. In Section 4, we look briefly beyond the boundaries of the municipality to how city-city partnerships can (and need to) engage with other constituencies, particularly given the limited time frame of most municipal partnerships. Other reasons for extending the boundaries lie in the realm of public engagement. In this context, though, where the relationship is no longer based on practitioner to practitioner, there is a challenge for community learning in the North. We draw some conclusions in Section 5.

2   **The nature and mechanisms of practitioner to practitioner learning**

We have argued previously (Johnson and Wilson, 2006) that the municipal partnerships we investigated, at their espoused level, fall within what Fowler (1998) has called 'authentic partnership': '*mutually enabling, inter-dependent interaction with shared intentions*' (ibid, p.144; emphasis in original). We noted that, in spite of inequalities in terms of material, financial and human resources, partners claimed that different knowledges, experiences, practices and contexts were respected and formed the basis of dialogue. Officers used phrases such as: 'we spoke the same language'; 'treated the problems at the same level'; 'you are peers on the same side'; 'you can share ideas'; 'you have people who share common problems'; 'each party comes with some knowledge'. Partner officers were operating from a similar foundation of theoretical knowledge in civil engineering or environmental health. Officers also shared a broad knowledge and discourse of problem definition and problem solving. There was thus a kind of 'characteristic-based trust' between the officers (Zucker, 1986)[1], although it also had to be actively promoted. We suggested that the combination of characteristic-based trust and active promotion of trust over time enabled a 'cyclical trust-building loop' (Vangen and Huxham, 2003). In addition, for the UK officers, the 'professional challenge' of working in resource-poor environments was a strong motivator for their learning - something we return to below.

However we also noted that, in practice, there were different values placed on different knowledges. For example, the northern partners' knowledge of professional practice was more highly valued than the southern partners' knowledge of context. On the other hand, southern partners' knowledge of context (and how it might affect coded practice as well as challenge the tacit knowledge of northern officers) was

---

[1] Zucker (1986) distinguishes between trust that is based on shared characteristics, such as kinship, ethnicity, religion, profession, etc., and forms of trust that are developed over time.

essential to for carrying out joint projects in Uganda. There were thus issues for how mutuality operated in practice.

We have addressed these issues in greater depth elsewhere (Johnson and Wilson, 2006; Wilson and Johnson, 2007). Important to mention here is the constructivist and experiential perspective on learning which underpins our analysis. Such a perspective involves the interaction between understanding and experience, old and new knowledge (Atkins et al., 2002), or, in Kolbean terms, experiential learning involves a virtuous circle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation (Kolb, 1984, p.42). However, as we have noted previously, there are many learning practices.

A fundamental element of learning is the existence of difference: 'bumping up against difference … can stimulate our curiosity, our drive to learn, and our ability to actively try to enter each other's experiences and perspectives' (Wyss-Flamm, 2002, p.150). Wyss-Flamm and others focus on the role of conversation in learning from difference (Baker et al, 2002, p.1). 'Conversational learning' is based on experiential learning and is 'a process whereby learners construct meaning and transform experiences into knowledge through conversations' (Kolb et al, 2002, p. 51). Particularly appropriate to the kind of cross-cultural contexts that are being examined here, it is also suggested that 'conversation is a meaning-making process whereby understanding is achieved through interplay of opposites and contradictions' (ibid, p.53). 'Conversational learning spaces' are seen as defined by rules and norms which create boundaries and hence safe spaces in which difference can be explored (ibid, p.65). In the case of our own study, it could be said that the 'characteristic-based trust' between northern and southern officers created such a space and enabled them to be challenged with respect to their professional knowledge and their understandings of social, cultural and organisational contexts.

However learning from difference is not necessarily a comfortable process, even within a conversational learning space. While the practitioner to practitioner partnerships are based on an espoused value of mutuality, we have suggested that there can be a 'mutuality gap' (Johnson and Wilson, 2006). Differences from which partners can potentially learn may be hidden by differences of status and influence in the partnership, and such inequalities have the potential to undermine the incentive for engagement. Indeed, other writers have suggested that relations of power mean that mutuality in North-South partnerships can be hard to achieve (Fowler, 2000; Harriss, 2000).

The spaces in which actors in practitioner to practitioner partnerships have the potential to learn from each other are therefore critical to their success and it is important to understand them and their contradictions. We suggest that the concept of 'action learning space' can help identify those moments or dynamics through which learning has the potential to occur. Action learning derives from the Kolbean view of experiential learning outlined above, while 'space' is that moment of social interaction which triggers new knowledge, understanding and insights as well as new practices, tools, techniques and skills. Such interaction may be framed by a joint project or problem that needs solving. Equally it may simply be shared engagement in some aspect of social life. The boundaries of an action learning space in terms of actors and activities might, therefore, be fluid; the processes involved may be highly structured (for example, as in a course) or through a more spontaneous and unstructured but conscious and reflective form of engagement (such as a conversation or debate). The idea of action learning space allows for the multiple cross-cutting interactions, events, histories and experiences that influence learning and knowledge production. Overall, however, action learning spaces are about building shared understanding through shared experience, which in turn leads to the potential for new knowledge and practice.

Action learning spaces are not necessarily safe – the rules and norms that might define social interaction may create the possibility of new knowledge, however new knowledge can challenge the safeness of the relationship and even the rules and norms in which is it based. Understanding the nature of these spaces and their social relations thus helps to make visible the fluid, and sometimes uncomfortable, processes that are involved.

A further challenge to learning in practitioner to practitioner partnerships concerns the potential to go beyond the individual to institutionalise experience within the organisation (in this case, councils). Such learning can take place through the mechanisms identified by analysts such as Argyris and Schön (1996): the mismatches between 'expected and actual results of action' (ibid, p.16). The feedback from such mismatches can lead to organisational change as well as to individual learning. The learning in practitioner to practitioner partnerships is potentially a rich source of 'mismatch' that challenges existing knowledge and practices. However, individual experience may not be carried through into the organisation, and as we have noted elsewhere, individual learning and learning in organisations does not necessarily take place at the same pace and in the same direction (Johnson and Thomas, 2006).

We now examine some of these issues in the light of our two case studies in the following sections.

3   Two cases of 'city-city' learning: the spaces for action learning

Our investigation into the partnerships between Kampala-Kirklees and Iganga-Daventry took place in 2004, when we interviewed officers, politicians, community and school leaders and observed some of the projects on which they had collaborated. Two interviews with partnership champions in Daventry were also

carried out in 2008. We present some first-hand accounts of the UK officers which we distinguish by their reflections on personal and professional learning, and whether their experience was institutionalised in the councils. It will be seen that there are relatively equal and unequal, and relatively safe and unsafe terrains in which northern officers engaged with the challenges they faced in different action learning spaces.

Personal learning

For most of the officers, these partnerships were the first experience of serious engagement with the challenges of a developing country. Awareness was raised at multiple levels, and was an important part of building the values of partnership and mutuality as well as providing an incentive to participate and the basis for an action learning space. One DDC environmental health officer (EHO) contrasted the professional relationship with his personal observation:

> I was well-received as public health officials get on well with each other wherever… I couldn't quite grasp that the Iganga EHO was well qualified yet the town was as bad as it was.

This contradiction was the EHO's first learning experience about poverty and development, and the need to understand history and social context. The same EHO also commented:

> I had never been to Africa before. It changed me towards more positive opinions… I learned…to appreciate the problems they have.

Such growth in individual awareness was confirmed by his boss:

> When people come back and explain things to people here, there is a ripple effect. Others become more aware that their preconceptions might not be right.

And by a DDC politician who visited Iganga:

12

> Me personally, I have also been very humbled. I tell my grandchildren who whinge when their computer breaks down that in Iganga the children don't whinge like that.

Thus the initial awareness was based on the substantial inequality in the conditions of life and work which the officers saw as a positive learning experience. The difference helped to form the basis for professional collaboration. It also came to be mediated by personal attachments to colleagues and their families, which in turn fed back into the professional dimension. A DDC engineer noted:

> Once you have started something you want to see it through. It comes down to friendship. We have developed an empathy.

His EHO colleague also observed:

> Friendships were established and there were spin-offs from that. It wasn't just professionals working together.

This aspect was echoed in Kirklees (KMC) by one of the original champions:

> Our officers were keen on the spirit of it. A number of KMC officers became familiar with Kampala. Family friendships formed.

However this bond was not always a comfortable one. One of the KMC traffic engineers observed that 'it was a difficult partnership but the most important factor was personal commitment.' He added that he felt a moral responsibility to 'put something back' after the colonial history. Personal - or personalised - commitment can of course have ambiguous dimensions: putting something back can be based on engagement (which is how this officer aimed to operate in practice) or it can tend towards 'giving' in the sense of charity. We argue in Section 4 that this tension can become a function of a relatively unequal but a relatively safe dimension for northern partners.

Professional learning

Although both DDC and KMC saw the partnerships as opportunities for staff development, officers did not initially characterise their learning as new professional knowledge - i.e. knowledge about the scientific and practical bases of engineering or environmental health. On the other hand, in working in the Uganda context, they had to 'go back to basics' and 'throw away the book'. They thus became more aware of the importance of context in using and adapting professional knowledge. In some instances, professional knowledge became to be seen as a process of interaction between the technical and the social – a dimension that was learnt through officers' attempts to demonstrate and implement 'best professional practice' in the Ugandan context. In addition, officers learnt other important skills that they might not directly attribute to a more narrowly-defined characterisation of their professions.

With respect to the narrower conception of professional knowledge, one DDC engineer, who had a short engagement with the project, thought he had not learnt any professional skills. However he was aware that he had been taken back to the public health roots of engineering in the work. While another engineer colleague agreed that new but not professional skills had been learnt, he nonetheless added:

> The link has given me a tremendous sense of perspective. We're much better off in the UK. Other engineers have said it's like going back to basics, when everything here is mountains of paperwork. You go to Uganda and say build a channel and they go off and build a channel.

This back to basics and direct problem-solving provided an incentive for northern officers, illustrated by a comment from one of the original KMC champions:

> Professional skills were reinforced. Things are done in the UK to a set of formulae especially in Highways. Having to go with a blank sheet is very challenging and exciting. I think it was the highlight of their careers.

In addition, a waste management engineer in KMC learnt some new science-based skills in leachate treatment for landfill sites, which had previously been on the borderline of what he did.

However the main learning was in the relationship between engineering and social processes – working with others in a different social context and learning about the demands of the context itself. In this sense, the officers became much more aware of the relationship between the social and the technical, and were challenged to unpick many of the standard assumptions they made about engineering or environmental health. Thus the waste management engineer, mentioned above, observed:

> When we started on the extension [of the landfill site], we asked for a survey. It took them six months and vital things (e.g. the location of streams) were missing because their surveyors had no conception of what we wanted to know. Their survey showed ant hills everywhere.

In this instance, the challenge to the engineer was to unpick the idea that there was a universal conceptualisation of a landfill survey and to understand the key areas of significance and meaning in the Ugandan context. Two other examples demonstrate this growing realisation of the link between the social and the technical. The first is how the officers agreed how to start working on traffic management in Kampala. A senior member of the Highways and Transportation department in KMC related:

> We got them to tell us what the issues were…We had an officers' meeting – including central government and the police – we had a 3-hour knockabout sessions. We needed a feel of where they wanted to get to… We then had meetings with the community. Sixty people turned up and it was very constructive…

These meetings were later followed by workshops with the Kampala officers to agree a demonstration project they would carry out.

The second example took place in Iganga and focused on the need to develop clean water supplies and improved hygiene practices. While some of the standard techniques familiar to the DDC officers were used (for example, adapting a survey to find out about local conditions), the next step was quite new to both sets of officers and took the form of community participation in designing the technicalities of the project:

> The village chairman organised a village meeting…We mentioned each item in the survey results and asked questions. E.g. 'Why are there only 5 toilets, why haven't you got them?' People came up with various answers, such as lack of money or skills to build them…

> We also asked why the children were not being inoculated. They said that the clinic was too far and when you got there it did not always have the drugs. The remedy was to bring the clinic to them.

> At the end we said we would provide water protection and immunisation if they improved their houses.

Officers thus became aware of the social dimensions of technological change and design and of working with colleagues in a different context to solve problems. There were several elements to this process. The first was the need to build the safe spaces for conversation. Although not using this language, one DDC EHO noted:

> ...working together you set up a rapport. Initially I felt I was interfering when I met them. You need to sit down and relax with them to convince them I'm not the white man's arrival with knowledge to tell them what to do.

Officers thus realised that building trust was an important dimension to the practitioner to practitioner methodology. Workshops with the traffic engineers in Kampala were also part of this trust-building. However these processes were not always comfortable ones. The waste engineer from KMC commented:

> We are from different backgrounds so it takes a while to get on to each
> others' wavelengths.

While characteristic-based and personal trust formed a relatively safe space for action learning, different kinds of action learning moments challenged the officers. One DDC EHO noted some of the less easy but instructive conversations:

> We bounced ideas off each other. On the water supply we said we can do it
> this way; they said no we must do it that way… In the compost areas, we said
> you turn it, fine; they saw a problem with that because animals will eat the
> compost.

These uncomfortable moments can drive learning. The workshops with traffic engineers in Kampala arose because the conversations had reached an impasse. A senior KMC engineer noted:

> We all made assumptions that weren't right. But we had made those
> assumptions as the [KMC-KCC] team. We overlaid some European
> assumptions, some were challenged by our counterparts, some were not.
> Some worked, some did not.

Other assumptions and misjudgements were made: for example assuming that police would know how to direct traffic at junctions; understanding the nature of waste in the Ugandan context; underestimating the role of politics in decisions about resources and sustaining projects that had been started; underestimating the role of a third party in a working relationship (for example, when the World Bank wanted the contract between KMC and Kampala to move to tendering); and how contractual relationships can result in a shift from practitioner to practitioner to something akin to a consultancy relationship. As the senior engineers in KMC noted:

> In consultant mode there is no feedback loop… We were being treated as
> consultants towards the end but we didn't set out to do that. We saw our task
> to be a critical friend.

> Critical friend means being straight and honest… A consultant will tell you
> what you want to hear.

There were however some observations from interviewees who were not directly involved in the partnership or its practitioner to practitioner side. These observations reflect the relatively unequal-relatively unsafe dimension. For example, an administrator in KMC noted that 'critical friend has slight colonial overtones of superiority. But people pretend that relationships are equal'. A community development worker, who had visited Uganda with the KMC team with the hope that partnerships outside local government could be created, thought that 'not enough attention was paid to culture because it's invisible'. His view was that KMC was the dominant partner, and in particular that:

> …there was a communication breakdown because not enough work was
> done on…: styles of work, listening, work ethics, delivery
> deadlines…expectations of the partnership. These were things that were
> needed but should have been worked out before they started.

From the above, and also from the previous sub-section on personal learning, a key benefit for the UK officers in both Councils was to learn about an unfamiliar context. In the previous sub-section on personal learning, such learning was viewed as an end in itself, although one might argue that it was also a means towards the officers becoming 'good, global citizens' (see also Section 4 below). This sub-section on professional learning has focused more on the importance of learning about context and social processes and their relationship to the technical content of the officers' work.

Institutionalising individual learning

To the extent that mutuality involves incentives for shared learning, and potentially other benefits for northern 'cities', how far have such incentives and their outcomes had wider influence and impact within northern councils? The two councils in question had different approaches to international partnerships, partly determined by their size and budget. While KMC has an international office and has had relations and agreements with many other councils, the link with Iganga was DDC's first (and possibly only) experience of international work aside from the twinning of Daventry with a European town. Yet in both instances there were positive comments from senior staff about the professional and personal learning of the officers involved in the Uganda partnerships, and an expressed enthusiasm for such learning to take place. The staff development orientation does not in itself suggest that each council had a policy and mechanisms for institutionalising learning. An administrator in KMC exclaimed:

> Staff development? Yes but you can't justify on the basis of staff development for a few individuals, when we can't get on to powerpoint presentation courses.

She did however note that:

> There was some percolation… there was more awareness in the development education sense…There has been stuff in workplace newsletters…

Thus there was only limited nodding towards institutional embedding of individuals' experience. The administrator continues:

> Critical reflection here has been confined to individuals. It has put people's problems here in perspective.

A senior manager at DDC also noted that there was individual learning that went beyond the narrower professional dimensions, mainly in the aspect of developing leadership and management skills, which were valuable for the council in negotiating partnerships in the UK. Officers themselves spoke of having to 'stand up and talk on the hoof' and to make speeches on special occasions. The senior manager observed that:

> It's difficult to know whether they might have learnt these skills here…at the time, they would have been less comfortable having to do these things.

The purpose, main function and financing of local government means that giving high profile to international work is potentially undermining of their credibility with local constituents, when their core business is financed by taxation and is to supply local services. Action learning spaces within the councils were thus constrained but not totally invisible. Some examples were given by KMC engineers, such as using the workshop techniques that they had employed in Kampala with colleagues in KMC, and developing a pedestrianization project through consultation in much the same way that they had done with traffic management in Kampala. The senior engineers provided the strongest statement of organisational learning:

> We have re-thought our public engagement. No longer is it, here is an engineering problem and a solution and this is how we're going to do it. We had had some experiences here ourselves, but having to go through that process of getting people on board has made you realise how important it is here. You can either force something through or use what I call guerrilla tactics. E.g. We wanted to put a bus lane on one of our roads. We were able to beat the car lobby by getting local people to support us – the community, the disabled on board. This is a better way and it questions the whole foundations on which you stand.

One or two KMC interviewees also mentioned that colleagues had used the Uganda model for political representation on councils to reflect on how they could include people with disabilities, or how they could enable people to bridge the divides between North and South Kirklees.

There is also a mixed story in Daventry. While one engineer commented that there had been few changes in DDC as a result of the partnership, noting that:

> Everything I do here is governed by standards from morn to night. Everything – roads, curbs, buildings, street light bulbs, pipes – has a standard. There is not much opportunity here for things to change in terms of work practice,

an EHO told a different story:

> There have been changes in the organization of Environmental Health in DDC arising from the cuts[2]. This has resulted in a professional split [between EHO specialisms]… However they have insisted in staying in the same room. Iganga [i.e. the partnership experience] has kept them together socially and professionally. They have also got to know the engineers. It has helped to break down barriers and they can get working together very quickly.

The senior manager mentioned above was also aware of the difference that the learning experience has made to the group that was directly involved. In particular, she noted that it had enriched their working lives and kept them in DDC when they might have moved to other jobs.

These guarded statements are supported by the UK Local Government Alliance for International Development in a commissioned consultancy report on 'Why should my local authority be involved in an overseas project?' (Green et al, 2005). While mutuality and capacity-building of officers were emphasized, the benefits for the local authority were noted to be 'modest'. It was noted that the interactive encounters

---

[2] I.e. the financial cuts in the year 2000 mentioned in the introduction to this article.

between officers were often followed by gaps and it was difficult to sustain the trust and mutual respect for longer term learning. The report also noted the potential conflicts of these exchanges with domestic agendas and the resources needed for them (ibid, pp.19-20).

There is however an important counter-argument which reflects deeper conceptual issues in relation to institutional learning. They are illustrated by the quotation above from the Kirklees senior engineer about public engagement. This quotation is revealing if we consider the engineering profession in Europe as an institution with stable, shared and commonly understood patterns of behaviour (Brett, 2000, p.18). As a pattern of behaviour, engineering involves, firstly, defining a problem using scientific laws and scientific techniques for finding out and then, secondly, designing and implementing a solution by applying those same laws. However, publics do not share these patterns of behaviour. In practice, an engineer has to confront these unshared patterns of behaviours habitually, even though engaging with other stakeholders remains submerged in the realm of tacit knowledge. However, through their Kampala experience, the Kirklees engineers were not only drawing on this tacit domain, but also having to articulate it, which itself formed a further learning experience. Returning to the quotation above, the engineers had 'had some experience' in the UK of stakeholder engagement, 'but having to go through that process [in Kampala] made you realise how important it is'.[3] To adapt phraseology of

---

[3] Of course, a small group of engineers in a single UK local authority coming to this realisation does not mean institutional learning and change for the entire engineering profession. To discuss such change is beyond the scope of this article, although Wilson (2007) has suggested such broader changes are occurring. It is possibly an area for future research.

Lave and Wenger (1991), what was peripheral knowledge became legitimate codified knowledge.

To conclude this sub-section, it is difficult to identify sustained institutionalisation of individual learning from these partnerships, whether in terms of professional practice in the UK or in more diffuse domains such as enriching working lives. These partnerships *could*, however, be conceived as a source of learning, in terms of the deeper processes of critical reflection on practice. This is something UK central government has been encouraging local government to do since the late 1990s as part of its 'Best Value Regime', where 'challenge' and 'comparison' are two of its four pillars (consult and competition being the others). The power of difference to drive learning should not be underestimated therefore, however great the difference might be. A question for the future is thus to what extent local government can become an international and learning local government that revises its public brief and demands new kinds of public engagement from its officers and members (and support from their wider constituencies)?

4 Beyond local government: new action learning spaces in 'city-city' cooperation and beyond

A further question raised by these experiences is to what extent city-city cooperation needs to go beyond local government to wider public engagement - and what sort of public engagement is required? Such 'institutional spreading' has the potential to link practitioner to practitioner partnerships to other networks and promote other types of northern learning. For example, one community leader in Kirklees thought that the partnership with Kampala should have involved a range of community as well as local government links, building on other areas of expertise such as understandings of poverty and race relations.

Although not focused on poverty and race relations, Daventry Friends of Iganga was made possible not simply because of the committed champions amongst a number of the officers and members of DDC, but because the MOU between Iganga and Daventry aimed to build other types of link, for example with business and education. Hence many schools in Iganga and Daventry were linked to each other and schools in Daventry were already developing web-sites and curriculum around the geography and social life of Iganga, and leading to proposals for school visits. From this initial and very local institutional spreading, Friends of Iganga involved professional associations as well as other NGOs (Water for Kids, Tools for Self-Reliance, Riders for Health) in either direct or indirect links with the partnership. The Daventry EHOs successfully engaged the East Midlands Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, which has supported the visits of Commonwealth sponsored Ugandan public health officers on professional development visits to the UK, and has included discussions about environmental health in Uganda at its conferences. In addition, this alliance has been the basis for team visits of UK EHOs, nurses and teachers to Iganga to help continue with some of the projects that were started under the practitioner to practitioner partnership.

This 'institutional spreading' is associated with the promotion of global citizenship, which has also been used as a justification of UK local government partnerships with the South in terms of core business. For example, Leeds City Council has a corporate international relations strategy which includes promoting, through an extensive network of partner cities, global citizenship across the city, particularly in schools. There are however some complex dimensions to how global citizenship is constructed beyond local government practitioner to practitioner links in the community, with NGOs and professional associations. The construction of global citizenship (including within councils) involves a tension between 'aid' and 'engagement'. Community organisations (and schools) in particular tend to want to

raise funds and donate goods. This is a different process and type of public engagement from the learning and knowledge sharing which underlies the ideal of mutuality in practitioner to practitioner partnerships (however imperfect that is). The nature of this new kind of engagement and its potential for joint action learning thus needs much further investigation.

5   Conclusions

From this study it is clear that the possibility of mutuality is an incentive for co-operation between urban local authorities of North and South. Espousal of the value of a rough parity and equality between local government officers who participate in co-operation clearly also oils the wheels of their engagements.

There has, however, to be some qualification:

Firstly, the espoused value is qualified in practice. In the case of practitioner-to-practitioner cooperation the northern officers' knowledge of 'best practice' can be valued more highly than the southern officers' knowledge of local context. This and other inequalities affect in turn the incentives for participation. Overcoming, or at least learning to manage, such inequalities can be achieved by repeated engagement and going beyond tight definitions of contract, but this is neither time- nor money-free. There have to be proper understanding and realistic expectations of the additional demands on people's time that such partnerships involve.

Secondly, there can nevertheless be high levels of both personal and professional learning among northern local government officers, especially in terms of learning about the importance of social context in their core work. Practitioner to practitioner partnerships create action learning spaces for individuals and professional teams. This does not, however, necessarily mean that councils also learn. Here a conceptual shift is needed on the part of councils, away from thinking that these

partnerships are primarily development assistance (or development co-operation, where the emphasis is still on development for the South) towards their explicit espousal as learning opportunities. We have elaborated on this elsewhere (Johnson and Wilson, 2006) in terms of 'closing the mutuality gap' in these partnerships.

Another driver for the partnerships among northern officers was articulated by one as giving something back after colonialism. In this sense we can speak of a moral case for partnership, which is also a key feature of the institutional spreading that we report in the case of Daventry-Iganga. There are many positive things to be said about people wanting to give, and also nothing intrinsically wrong as a result with their personal gaining of a general 'feel-good' factor or perhaps even a mitigation of felt personal guilt (for example, over colonialism). There are again, however, two qualifiers. Firstly, acts of charity are seen deontologically as good and right things to, but we need to be careful of their consequences where, on occasion, they might end up doing more harm than good. Secondly, there is the challenge to ensure that aspects of dominance or inequality are not being perpetuated, but are rather being replaced by new relationships and forms of engagement. .

These considerations bring us back to the importance of mutuality being enshrined in city-to-city co-operation, where all parties, including people and organisations in the North, gain and can be seen to gain. Wider processes of what we have termed 'institutional spreading' also need, however, to be linked to northern, as well as southern, benefits. Contributing to global citizenship is clearly one articulated benefit, as seen in Leeds City Council. This process is part of promoting an active citizenry with the right and responsibility to help 'make and shape' our lives from local through to global scales, rather than the right only to 'use and choose' local services (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000).

References

C. Argyris, D.A. Schön, *Organisational Learning II. Theory, Method and Practice* 1996, Addison-Wesley, Mass., USA, 1996.

P. Atkins, C. Baker, N. Tomlinson, S. Cole, J. George, M. Haywood, M. Thorpe, N. Tomlinson, S. Whitaker, *Supporting Open Learners Reader*, The Open University, Milton Keynes, 2002.

A.C. Baker, P.J. Jensen, D.A. Kolb, *Conversational learning. An experiential approach to knowledge creation*, Quorum Books, Westport Connecticut, London, 2002.

A.C. Baker, P.J. Jensen, D.A. Kolb, Learning and Conversation, in A.C. Baker et al., *Conversational learning. An experiential approach to knowledge creation*, Quorum Books, Westport Connecticut, London, 2002, 1-14.

E.A. Brett, Understanding organisations and institutions, in D. Robinson. T. Hewitt, J. Harriss (Eds.), *Managing Development. Understanding Inter-Organisational Relationships*, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2000, 17-48.

A. Cornwall, J. Gaventa, From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers: Repositioning Participation in Social Policy *IDS Bulletin* 31(4) (2000) 50–62.

A. Fowler, Authentic NGDO Partnerships in the New Policy Agenda for International Aid: Dead End of Light Ahead? *Development and Change* 28(1) (1998) 137-159.

L. Green, C. Game, S. Delay, *Why Should My Local Authority Be Involved In An Overseas Project? Understanding the domestic impacts of local government involvement in international development,* UK Local Government Alliance for International Development and Birmingham University, School of Public Policy, 2005.

J. Harriss, Working together: the principles and practice of co-operation and partnership, in D. Robinson, T. Hewitt, J. Harriss (Eds.), *Managing Development.*

Understanding Inter-Organisational Relationships, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2000, 225-242.

H. Johnson, A. Thomas, Individual learning and building organisational capacity for development, *Public Administration for Development* 27(1) (2006) 39-48.

H. Johnson, G. Wilson, North-South/South-North partnerships: closing the 'mutuality gap', *Public Administration and Development* 26(1) (2006) 71-80.

D.A. Kolb, *Experiential learning*, Prentice Hall, London, 1984.

D.A. Kolb, A.C. Baker, P.A. Jensen, Conversation as Experiential Learning, in A.C. Baker et al., *Conversational learning. An experiential approach to knowledge creation,* Quorum Books, Westport Connecticut, London, 2002, 51-66.

J. Lave, E. Wenger, *Situated learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

D. Pasteur, An Evaluation of the Uganda Decentralised Development Co-operation Project, Mimeo, May 1998.

J. Rossiter, Global Links for Local Democracy, Report for One World Action, Mimeo, 2000.

S. Vangen, C. Huxham, Nurturing Collaborative Relations. Building Trust in Interorganisational Collaboration, *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 39(1) (2003) 3-31.

G. Wilson, H. Johnson, Knowledge, learning and practice in North-South municipal partnerships *Local Government Studies* 33(2) (2007) 253-269.

G. Wilson, Our knowledge ourselves: engineers (re)thinking technology in development, *Journal of International Development*, 2008 (forthcoming).

E.D. Wyss-Flamm, Conversational Learning in Multicultural Teams, in A.C. Baker et al., *Conversational learning. An experiential approach to knowledge creation,* Quorum Books, Westport Connecticut, London, 2002, 139-164.

L. Zucker, Production of trust: institutional sources of economic structure, 1840-1920, *Research in Organisational Behaviour* 8 (1986) 53-111.