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## **BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES: A NEW ERA FOR TWINNING**

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Sustainable communities are a core element of national policies around the world. But when we look at different communities we see many aspects of sustainability missing. Lack of clean water, poor access to healthcare, polluted environment, limited access to affordable education and transportation.

In this lecture I will look at how the emphasis on national governments delivering sustainability has overlooked the vital role that communities can play in building up sustainability. We will look first at the history of twinning moving on to see how these might evolve in today's new setting of open governance. I will explore how local engagement in environmental projects has increased sustainable development in communities. Then I will look at what this means for communities in terms of climate change. Finally, I will explore how a new form of twinning between communities might be considered as an effective way to increase sustainability and prosperity.

### **History of Twinning**

Looking first at the history of twinning, we see that it has been used for many centuries in some cases to promote cultural and commercial ties between towns, cities, counties, oblasts, prefectures, provinces, regions, states, and even countries in geographically and politically distinct areas. The first record was between Paderborn, Germany, and Le Mans, France, in 836. In the UK in 1905, Keighley in West Yorkshire, England, had a twinning arrangement with French communities Suresnes and Puteaux.

The modern concept of town twinning was conceived after the Second World War in 1947, and was intended to foster friendship and understanding among different cultures and between former foes as an act of peace and reconciliation, as well as encouraging trade and tourism. By the 2000s, town twinning became increasingly used to form strategic international business links among member cities.

Within Europe, town twinning has been supported by the European Union through a scheme established in 1989 and there are now more than 7,000 bilateral relationships with 10,000 European Municipalities. The current programme has two main themes of remembrance and democratic engagement and civic participation.

Different words are used to describe this joining of towns – Spain uses the term "ciudades hermanadas", which means "sister cities"; Germany, Poland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic use "Partnerstadt", "miasto partnerskie", "jumelage", "gemellaggio", "partnerstad" or "stedenband" and "partnerské město". In Greece, the word "αδελφοποίηση" (adelfopiisi – fraternisation) has been adopted. In Iceland, the terms "vinabæir" (friend towns) and "vinaborgir" (friend cities) are used. In the former Soviet Bloc, "twin towns" and "twin cities"



are used, along with “города-побратимы” (Ru) (sworn brother cities). In the Americas, South Asia, and Australasia "sister cities" or "twin cities" are used. In China, the term is “友好城市” (yǒuhǎo chéngshì – friendship city) is often a mayor-to-mayor agreement.

With the increasing emphasis worldwide of local city action, city diplomacy is now a formal part of the workings of the United Cities and Local Governments and the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group. And here in the UK, the House of Lords acknowledged the evolution of town twinning into city diplomacy, particularly around trade and tourism, and in culture and post-conflict reconciliation. The importance of cities developing "their own foreign economic policies on trade, foreign investment, tourism and attracting foreign talent" has also been highlighted by the World Economic Forum.

Twinned towns are mostly chosen because of similar demographics and size with socio-economic, industrial and cultural connections – although there have been some that are just wonderful linguistic connections, such as Dull and Boring! There have been endings as well as beginnings as a result of disagreements. In 2013, the Italian cities of Milan, Venice, and Turin, formerly twinned with Saint Petersburg, suspended their links due to Russia's passage of anti-gay legislation. In 2014, Prague terminated its partnership with Saint Petersburg and Moscow because of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine. In 2017, the mayor of Osaka, Hirofumi Yoshimura, ended the city's 60-year relationship with San Francisco due to the erection of a memorial to comfort women in downtown San Francisco.

### **Can Twinning Help to Deliver Sustainable Development and Prosperity?**

The majority of benefits of the twinning programme have revolved around the exchange of citizens and shared trade and industrial development. Friendships have grown, colleges and students have studied in their twinned institutions. In 2013, the BBC interviewed people in the UK and Germany and reported that most people saw benefits in twinning. Is twinning still worthwhile in 2019 and can it be used to support sustainable development and help improve prosperity?

Towns and cities sit within a landscape of multi-layered governance. In the USA responsibilities for sustainable development are divided between the Federal government and the States; similarly in Germany between the Federal system and länder; in Kenya there is a national government working with now more than 40 devolved County Governments to deliver sustainable development; and in the UK there are elements of all. However, there is a growing awareness among citizens that the existing division of responsibilities, which leaves many communities outside any decision-making about sustainable development is not the best way to deliver the transformation that will be needed.

Attitudes towards government are changing; there is a growing mistrust in the ability of administrations to deal with the multiplicity and complexity of issues such as climate change, food security, water contamination and air pollution. This has led to many communities taking steps to tackle the problems locally.

The question is whether the speed and type of transformation required to tackle these challenges and envisioned in the Sustainable Development Goals can be driven and delivered by a local actions, invigorated by a new form of twinning between communities across the world.

### **Prosperity – A Shared Community Agenda**



Ongoing studies in Nairobi Kenya, East London, and Beirut, by the Institute for Global Prosperity have been exploring what is prosperity as a shared and common agenda of sustainable development goals. Through participatory workshops, co-laboratories and surveys, citizens and communities have been invited to participate in developing the measures and indicators which they consider to be essential components for achieving prosperity.

The outcomes have been striking. In East London, we see the many challenges facing local communities and the need to confront questions as to why policies and strategies are no longer delivering improvements in living standards, fairness and inequalities or safeguarding planetary resources. In Kenya, we hear about the need to tackle climate change, provide livelihoods and affordable healthcare and to empower people to have a voice. The common theme in all places is the importance of living in a sustainable, safe, and life giving community.

The foundations of prosperity are no surprise, but they are far from the usual measure of success - Gross Domestic Product. Why is this? One of the main problems with GDP, presented in 1934 to the US Senate by the economist Simon Kuznets in the first set of national economic accounts that added up total economic activity of the country, is that it does not tell us about the health of the economy or about the quality of our lives in terms of the real things that matter to real people. There are now other measures such as the social progress index and gross national happiness but again are used to give an overall, generalised picture.

When people articulate their own expressions of prosperity, we see a far more nuanced description. In both East London and Nairobi, the foundations of prosperity include good quality secure jobs, affordable housing, transport & energy, openness & transparency, inclusion and fairness and local value creation. Other themes in common include, culture and community; health; opportunities and aspirations; and power, voice and influence. In Kenya, the communities added nature and healthy ecosystems. I see this as an expression of the strong links most Kenyans still have with their rural family lives.

When we asked people in Nairobi and from rural areas to work on the priorities food security and clean water, access to healthcare and education were strong elements. But some of the homeless and poorest also said having their voices heard. In East London, it was having a safe place for their children to grow up in, having affordable homes and the end to zero-hour contracts. In rural areas, such as the village close to where I live, it is about affordable energy and transport, and having a vibrant active community.

These many attributes amount to a far richer and deeper set of desires and needs that communities see as vital to sustaining them and helping to be prosperous. So with this in mind, can we design a way in which communities can identify each other through shared needs and ideas and work together to elicit a global transformation. Reflecting on the wave of online courses emerging around the world, but rather than courses I am suggesting that these evolve into MOOCs – Massive Open and Online Communities.

### **Building Massive Open and Online Communities to deliver prosperity**

Building communities that connect both to local issues but understand the global context and connections that can help deliver sustainability, means developing the settings, facilities and skills that will allow people across the world to:



- i. Identify and analyse the conditions and characteristics, drivers and obstacles to transforming their community towards sustainable development and prosperity;
- ii. Discover communities facing similar challenges across the world and build partnerships and networks to enable sharing of knowledge and solutions to flow through conversations, citizen exchanges and open data about activities in the community;
- iii. Facilitate the transformations, based on community based, evidence-informed processes across the different areas of need;
- iv. Develop personal links and learn from each other through visits and exchange of ideas;
- v. Help government and society gain a better understanding of the ecological, social and cultural contextual conditions needed for such a transformation

International mechanisms such as the Open Government Partnership are ideal for establishing the more formal levels of governance to support community assemblies that give a voice to citizens in decision-making, increase access to administrative justice and create open data. However, it is clear that communities need to have connections with other communities, potentially anywhere in the world – to share experiences and solutions.

Community twinning is a potential way to achieve this and, if done well, to bring down inequalities and the unsustainable use of resources and increase prosperity. There are so many examples of communities transforming themselves as part of the process of facing up to the challenges of climate change and energy.

### **Connecting Communities to Deliver Affordable Renewable Energy Transformations**

Vaasa in Finland, Harbury in the UK and Sekenani in Kenya; these communities occupy different places on the economic spectrum and have vastly different natural environments. Sekenani, where I live, is a small trading centre with a human population of 2200, lying at the edge of the world's eighth wonder – the Maasai Mara Game Reserve – and sharing the environment with millions of wildlife – wildebeest, elephants, buffalo, lions, cheetah, leopards, warthogs, giraffes, vultures, hippos, rhinos, and many species of birds. The main issue is a lack of sustainable decent jobs and hence money to install clean water and energy systems and pay for health and education. Harbury, in Warwickshire, is a rural village close to where my family lives, with a population of 2500, has a need to create more local livelihoods but has been able to bring about a renewable energy transition across the community hall and many homes. Vaasa, in Finland, is a Finnish-Swedish bilingual community of 67,000 which has transformed itself into a university town with renewable energy research forming the core around the invention of a new type of battery as a key of its future prosperity. What Vaasa needs are communities to work with to create testing sites for generation and storage of renewable energy under different conditions.

### **Connecting Communities of Farmers Rebuilding Natural Prosperity**

Like many farmers around the world, the rice farmers from Zarraga on Panay Island in the Philippines found themselves trapped in a cycle of using chemical fertilisers to grow their rice crop. What had been sold to them initially as a way to increase yields, very quickly became a trap, leaving them with soils depleted of nutrients and unable to grow anything without more chemical inputs. The cycle left these once self-sufficient farmers dependent on the agri-chemical companies, who sold them their seeds as well. Then they learnt about the System of Rice Intensification, a method of rice production that uses regenerative agricultural techniques and has proven to produce bigger yields in many countries around the world. Now, four years on, 40 farmers on the island are enjoying the same results; harvesting double the amount of rice and no longer suffering from the health effects of using chemicals on a daily basis. Today the farmers, the buffalo, the fish and the soils of Panay Island are thriving.



On the other side of the world, the community of Mazvihwa in south Zimbabwe knows all too well the impact of climate change on their ecosystems. The erratic rainfall has left the farmers struggling to grow crops and pushed the harvest later every year. The crisis has led them to turn their backs on the hybrid maize varieties and chemical fertilizers handed out and return to indigenous seeds that their ancestors grew. They are now reviving traditional crops like rapoko (finger millet), bulrush millet, and sorghum. These were carefully bred and cultivated by their ancestors over time to withstand long periods without water. They are also reviving traditional ways to conserve their water which involves building terraces and utilizing the natural contours of the land to keep water in the fields and nourish the soil. These ‘phiri pits’ collect and store rainwater and some even have ponds where they farm fish, amidst this arid landscape. The changes have produced significant results for the farmers with a great increase in their yields thanks to the regeneration of land and soil.

### **Connecting Traditional Knowledge Amongst Communities**

Every Wednesday morning in Todedji, Benin, members of the women’s co-operative (Houenoussou) gather to eat together before heading off to their two-hectare market garden on the banks of the river Noire. Their work not only provides food for the village, but it ensures that the traditional knowledge and ancestral seed varieties – which are more resilient to climate change – will be preserved and handed down to their daughters. Houenoussou provides a constant source of healthy organic vegetables for the community all year round and their produce is increasingly sought after in the markets of the big cities, where good quality produce seldom exists. In August, the community gather in the sacred forest of Oro, just behind the garden, to sing and dance and pay their respect to the forest divinity, Oro.

Vivero Alamar is one of the biggest organic urban farms in Cuba made up of many smallholdings. It was created in response to an urgent need to feed the city following the collapse of the former Soviet Union when overnight all imports disappeared. Today, almost 90% of Havana, a city of two million people, is fed on organic food produced by 4000 ‘organopónicos’ as these urban farms are called, situated within the city limits.

### **End Thoughts**

Twinning communities through their different capacities and needs can accelerate our transformation to prosperity and help tackle climate change and inequality. We are just at the beginning of this process. Why not try it for yourselves? Start with your own community and then contact us to see where in the world there could be a twin for your community.

### **Ideas for Saturday Community Prosperity Workshops and Hackathons**

The aim of the events is to build up your own prosperity collaboration or ProCol community, and then to widen participation to see how communities with similar problems can work together and benefit from a deep transformation in our lives and development. Here are some topics to address:

- Prosperity and the Deep Transformation of Development
- What does prosperity really look like in your community?
- Data literacy and open government
- Enhancing data literacy and knowledge in the community
- Data and evidence needed to define direction and actions



- Gathering relevant information for decision-making at the community level up to national and international
- Building trust across communities
- Recognising the role of the young and elderly and cultural context in building trust across your community
- Moving from preserving the status quo to a prosperous future
- Designing and agreeing on viable paths to a prosperous future including how to achieve the Sustainable
- Development Goals in terms of a clean environment, affordable energy, livelihoods and universal basic services.

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### **Additional Reading**

1. Clarke, N.(2013) "Town Twinning in Britain since 1945: A Summary of findings" (PDF). School of Geography, University of Southampton.
2. Handley, Susan. Judith Barton (ed.). (2011) Take your partners – The local authority handbook on international partnerships. 2006 (10 ed.). Local Government International Bureau.

