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The international partnerships of British local authorities

Introduction

International action is important for local authorities. It enables political experimentation – something demanded by new and complex problems such as climate change (John 2001). It also enables comparative urbanism of the kind advocated by Robinson (2002): comparison between different cities that exposes local authorities to diverse forms of city life and expands imaginations of urban development among politicians and civil servants. Studying the international action of local authorities is important, therefore, for these reasons and others. Such action has been on the rise in recent years. If we take the example of international partnerships involving British local authorities, they emerged as a phenomenon after the Second World War and each decade since then, according to data from the Local Government Association or LGA (see Clarke 2009), more and more new partnerships have been formed, including 24 in the 1950s, 184 in the 1970s, and 598 in the 1990s (after which, the LGA stopped collecting data in quite the same way). In addition, this international action is not only an effect of globalisation. It also helps to produce and shape globalisation, if globalisation is understood as the progressive extension of multiple kinds of network (Saunier 1999). Finally, the international action of local authorities constitutes one field through which public policy in general and urban policy in particular gets formed and circulated (Saunier 2001; see also McCann 2010, McCann and Ward 2011, and Peck and Theodore 2010 on ‘urban policy mobilities’).

My own research on this field has taken a historical perspective because, as with many phenomena, the international action of local authorities is somewhat path dependent (Ewen and Hebbert 2007). Contemporary programmes often work through long-standing networks and partnerships. A historical perspective helps to explain how the current geography of such action emerged – and how it might be changed. Let me just provide a few examples of such path dependence. The ‘Urban International’ (Saunier 2001) arose from the Socialist International, the co-operative movement, and international congresses like the International Housing Congress, before becoming institutionalised through organisations like the International Union of Local Authorities, the International Federation of Housing and

Town Planning, and, eventually, the United Nations. Focusing on the United Kingdom (UK), the UK Government's Know How Fund for Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, established in 1989 to influence transition in post-socialist Europe and Asia, operated in part through a Local Authority Technical Links Scheme based on existing town twinning and other interurban partnerships such as that between Bristol and Tbilisi (Georgia). Similarly, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum's Good Practice Scheme, established in 1998 to circulate good practice in public policy among local authorities in Commonwealth countries, operates most often through long-standing interurban partnerships such as that between Warwick and Bo (Sierra Leone).

In the rest of this paper, I consider the origins and development of international partnerships involving British local authorities. The research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and completed between 2007 and 2009. It involved analysis of LGA data, material in the National Archives at Kew, London, material from numerous local record offices, and transcripts of interviews with representatives of various local, national, and international organisations, including the International Union of Local Authorities, the United Nations Development Programme, Towns and Development, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, the British Council, the LGA, the United Kingdom One World Linking Association, and Oxfam. The research focused on international interurban partnerships: the construction and practice of relatively formal relationships between two settlements located in different nation-states. Such partnerships involve and can be defined by repertoires of agreements, exchanges, and joint projects – deployed as modular devices by numerous agents, including local authorities, with numerous ends in mind (of which more below; also see Clarke 2011). By this definition, over 2,500 partnerships currently exist involving British localities. At the other end of these partnerships are found localities in Western Europe (especially France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium), the world's larger economies (especially the United States of America and China), the countries of post-socialist Europe and Asia (especially Poland, Russia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary), and members of the Commonwealth (especially Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand). Reasons for this spatial patterning should become clear as we consider the origins and development of these partnerships.

Origins and development

In the UK, the international partnerships of local authorities have been shaped by continuities of desire and interest at the local scale – desires for peace, understanding, knowledge, and

welfare in particular – and discontinuities of opportunity at the national and international scales (Clarke 2010). During the 1950s and 60s, the future was relatively open for local authorities interested in founding international partnerships. A range of partnership models were available to them. One was the ‘bonding model’ of the Council of European Municipalities (CEM), established in 1951 by campaigners previously associated with La Federation, the Vatican, and various large corporations, and interested in European exchanges, projects, and institutions that might bond a Christian Europe together in the face of a perceived threat from Communism (Vion 2002). Another was the ‘bridging model’ of the United Towns Organisation (UTO), established in 1951 by campaigners associated with Le Monde Bilingue and interested in global understanding, world peace, and preservation of the French language through French-English bilingualism and town twinning between towns and cities throughout the world – especially those found on either side of the emerging Cold-War divide of East and West, and the emerging development divide of North and South.

During the 1970s, the UK Government promoted the CEM’s bonding model over the UTO’s bridging model and the international partnerships of British local authorities became oriented towards civic and school exchanges, primarily, with localities in France and Germany. Documents in the National Archives at Kew, London help to explain why this happened (also see Clarke 2010). In 1961, the President of the British Section of the CEM wrote a letter to the Secretary of the (British) Association of Municipal Corporations (AMC) describing the UTO as “the subject of much political controversy” and requesting a partnership with the AMC to promote town twinning in Britain. This resulted in the Joint Twinning Committee, the primary clearing house for town twinning in Britain between 1962 and 1989. Also in 1961, an intelligence report shows how the Foreign Office suspected the UTO of “communist exploitation”: “Town-linking associations are always potential targets for exploitation by the communists; and we believe that to some extent the UTO is already the victim of such exploitation”.

Then, in 1965, Jean-Marie Bressand, a founder of the UTO, wrote to Douglas Smith of the UK Executive Committee for International Cooperation Year 1965. His letter, promoting the UTO over the CEM, was discussed by the committee and J P Gaukroger, another committee member, wrote of his views on the UTO to H Nield at the Ministry of Overseas Development: “There are aspects of the organisation that repel many of us, not least the fact that it seems to be dominated by one or two people with a polemical attitude to others and a persecution mania that have put up the backs of many perfectly reasonable and enlightened individuals”. In that same year, ECOSOC Resolution 1028 (Town Twinning:

Means of International Co-operation) went to the United Nations General Assembly, having been proposed by France and some French speaking countries in Africa, and promoting the UTO as the primary international clearing house for town twinning. The UK voted against the resolution, alongside the United States of America, Canada, and New Zealand. A briefing paper from the Cultural Exchange Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office explains why:

We consider: a) it is undesirable for political reasons that this organisation [the UTO] should obtain any greater degree of authority; b) that co-operation of the kind envisaged by the UTO is more effective when left in the hands of the civic authorities concerned; c) that any attempt by the UTO to gain further recognition and control of funds should be resisted.

Around 1970, British concerns about the UTO reached a peak. In 1968, C C B Stewart of the Foreign Office, in a letter to J C Swaffield of the AMC, wrote:

One of the forms which it is suggested celebration of United Towns Day might take is an item in the programme recommending participants to demand that “bombings in Vietnam cease immediately, that the destruction of towns and villages be stopped, that the Vietnamese people be given the right to govern themselves”.

Then, in 1972, a briefing paper from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated:

The degree of communist manipulation and infiltration has increased substantially. The UTO has set up a centre in Sofia and, despite its claims to be non-political, a number of its pronouncements are indistinguishable from current communist propaganda. For example, the most active member of the organisation, M Bressand, has described the main task of the organisation as “the fight against all forms of fascism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism”. It has in the past adopted political programmes expressing the familiar clichés of international revolution and class struggle.

That very same year, the UK Government launched its first and only programme of funding and support for the international partnerships of local authorities. The Rippon Programme

aimed to improve cultural relations between the UK and existing members of the European Economic Community, in preparation for the UK's entry in 1973. According to LGA data, new partnerships involving British settlements doubled in this period (from 184 during the 1960s to 365 during the 1970s), while the number of overseas countries represented fell (from 26 during the 1960s to 19 during the 1970s).

Since the 1980s, as contexts have changed, the range of partnership-forms has broadened once more to include a multiplicity of partnership-forms, variously known as town twinning partnerships, local economic development partnerships, North-South links, community development partnerships, international municipal exchange partnerships, technical assistance partnerships, decentralised co-operation partnerships, city-to-city co-operation partnerships, and good practice partnerships.

One new context has been the so-called democratic deficit of the European Union (EU) – an apparent effect of the Europeanisation of institutions without the Europeanisation of citizenship. Responses to this context have included Community Aid for Twinning (est. 1989) and Citizens for Europe (est. 2007) – both of which funded a bonding form of town twinning not dissimilar to that promoted after the Second World War by the CEM and during the 1970s by the UK Government's Rippon Programme. A Second new context has been economic globalisation and its implications for what is often called the Global North: recessions, public spending cuts, devolution of welfare responsibilities to regions and localities, and competition for mobile investment capital. Responses this time have included local economic development partnerships of the kind studied by Cremer et al (2001) and Ramasamy and Cremer (1998). Thirdly, the end of the Cold War brought attempts by western countries to influence transition in the East, requests for assistance from newly formed local authorities in the East, the re-orientation of EU Structural Fund money towards Central and Eastern Europe, and new funds for western organisations acting as experts in capacity-building programmes targeting the former East. This context provoked a number of responses including the UK Government's Know How Fund for Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, established in 1989 and incorporating the Local Authorities Technical Links Scheme; and the European Commission's Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), established in 1991 and incorporating the City Twinning Programme.

A final context has been the coming together of long-standing concerns about global poverty with new concerns about the effectiveness and paternalism of large-scale development programmes (associated with national governments and international donor

agencies e.g. the World Bank), and also the narrow expertise of non-governmental organisations – confined as it has been primarily to emergency relief. Add to this urbanisation and democratisation in the so-called Global South. What is left is the promise of legitimate local authorities through which development might be pursued by way of capacity-building activity. Responses to this last context have included the North-South links of the United Kingdom One World Linking Association (est. 1984), which are similar to the community development partnerships written about by Shuman (1994) and the international municipal exchange partnerships written about by Hewitt (1996). Responses have also included: the ‘decentralised co-operation’ agenda of the European Commission, born out of the fourth revision of the Lomé Convention in 1989 and pursued through Europe Aid programmes like Urb AI and Asia Urbs; the ‘city-to-city cooperation’ agenda of the UN (see Bontenbal and van Lindert 2009); and the ‘good practice’ agenda of the Commonwealth, pursued especially through the Commonwealth Local Government Forum’s Good Practice Scheme (est. 1998).

Conclusion

In the 1950s, at least two models of international partnership were made available to British local authorities: the CEM bonding model; and the UTO bridging model. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the UK Government promoted the CEM model over the UTO model – not least via the Rippon Programme – for two main reasons: the Foreign Office associated the UTO with communist infiltration, manipulation, and exploitation; and the UK civil service objected to the “polemical attitude” of J-M Bressand. As a result, the international partnerships of British local authorities came to be dominated by partnerships with French and German localities, primarily involving civic and school exchanges. From the late 1970s, however, the range of partnerships began to broaden once again as a result of a number of new contexts including Europeanisation, globalisation, the end of the Cold War, and urbanisation and democratisation in the Global South.

I want to finish by raising two concerns about these newer partnerships that have arisen from these more recent contexts. Firstly, local economic development partnerships, technical assistance partnerships, decentralised co-operation partnerships and so on tend to be relatively informal, short-term, and tightly focused (compared to post-war town-twinning partnerships). There are good justifications for this. Local authorities increasingly use management systems designed to make government accountable and involving short-term aims, objectives, milestones, outputs, and so forth. Nevertheless, it raises the question of

whether opportunities for understanding and learning across local borders are being lost (Clarke 2012a) – especially opportunities for understanding and learning across divides such as that between North and South where dialogue and translation are important if crude ‘imitative urbanism’ is to be avoided (Robinson 2006). In short, such partnership characteristics may compromise political experimentation and comparison between different cities (of the kind advocated in the introduction to this paper).

Secondly, urban policy mobility through the international action of local authorities can reduce urban policy to the technical and managerial (as opposed to the political) – to that which travels beyond local contexts and on which multiple parties can agree – thus sidelining processes of local, democratic policy-making (Clarke 2012b; see also Payre and Saunier 2008, Saunier 2002). In other words, the more urban policy gets formed and circulated by the international action of local authorities, the less it may get formed in the field of local democracy.

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