Conclusions and recommendations – evaluation of the GIS-MIC programme 2008-2012 implemented by the VVSG.

Evaluation report by ACE Europe

[1] GIS-MIC is a strong programme with a relatively high level of effectiveness and a more than appropriate degree of sustainability (compared to other development programmes), however fragile some of the launched processes may be. The various city-to-city cooperation programmes help achieve the federal GIS-MIC programme's general objective by strengthening the institutional capacities of local authorities in the South. In 11 of 15 city-to-city cooperation projects this assistance is highly visible[1]. The GIS-MIC programme has helped improve public services, has strengthened local authorities' role as a 'director' as part of its ongoing decentralisation processes allowing them to manage local development in a better, more effective way and has spread principles of transparency, effective population participation and accountability. This boosted local authorities' credibility and enabled local authorities to gain more recognition in their role as the driving force behind local development. The impact of this on the fight against poverty and sustainable human development must be seen in the longer term.

[2] How a city-to-city cooperation programme contributes to good local governance in the South should obviously be put in the right perspective. Regardless of the programmes' quality, there are structural limitations that are mainly caused by the local reality. On the one hand, supra-local actors must provide the necessary institutional reform processes and policy frameworks to shape the decentralisation processes and support local authorities. These are contextual factors that very much determine the local area of operation and are hardly affected by local authorities in Flanders. On the other hand, local authorities in Flanders cannot be expected to have a decisive influence on local political processes and corresponding power structures and behavioural patterns.

[3] These programmes offer an opportunity to invest in the administration and the relationship between citizens and the local authority and this adds considerable value to the support of local development processes. They tend to be initial processes that can be successfully supported in pilot projects. The processes are still fragile and can only lead to sustainable changes in the medium term. This long-term perspective is a major characteristic of the GIS-MIC programme's objectives. In order to consolidate the launched processes, a new GIS-MIC programme is required that takes into account as much as possible the challenges that came to light in this assessment. The following paragraphs describe some important conclusions and recommendations resulting from this assessment[2].

1.1   FROM PILOT PROJECT TO EFFECTIVE POLICY (EFFECTIVENESS AND SUSTAINABILITY)

[4] All city-to-city cooperation programmes include concrete (pilot) projects introducing new concepts and approaches to solve certain problems, such as environmental issues, economic development, town and country planning, strategic planning, relevant youth services, a safety and public order approach. Local authorities are facing a number of challenges: (1) the pilot projects are usually limited to a few

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[1] Two city-to-city cooperation programmes are currently being launched (Bornem-Nquthu and Mechelen-Nador). The city-to-city cooperation between Maasmechelen and Tshwane was stopped and administrative power strengthening is unclear for 1 city-to-city cooperation programme (Hasselt-Missour and Outat).
[2] These conclusions and recommendations are obviously generalisations and therefore do not necessarily apply to each specific city-to-city cooperation.

neighbourhoods. All local authorities find it a challenge to learn from and studying practices and the pilot project (scale deepening), to systemise the approach and extend good practices to other neighbourhoods (scale broadening) and to strengthen the cooperation with other actors and administration levels (scale deepening). (2) Developing and/or adjusting local policy based on lessons learned from pilot projects (broadening) is often difficult. The development and application of policy tools and plans provided in most GIS-MIC interventions have had limited success so far. Scaling up (the oil spot principle) should be seen mainly as scale deepening and broadening. Most city-to-city cooperation programmes lack strategies for scale broadening, scale deepening and policy development.

5   To develop an effective policy based on launched (pilot) projects, we need the necessary support from politicians, officials and the population. This city-to-city cooperation programme draws a lot of attention to the involvement of these different actors in local policy and therefore involves more than just technical knowledge transfer. Such a multi-stakeholders approach must be maintained according to effectiveness and sustainability.

6   The GIS-MIC programme rightly states that its main objective is the strengthening of local government. Good governance is the basic condition of effective local development and services. However, strengthening local government is not limited to technical interventions such as capacity building and organisation development, which most city-to-city cooperation programmes focus on. Good governance also has a very strong political dimension that is reflected in the applicable political culture, the formal and informal rules of power, the existing mechanisms of transparency and accountability, etc. Structural problems often occur in partner countries in this respect (both at central and local governments). We cannot expect relatively limited tools such as city-to-city cooperation to successfully tackle such a hard political core and possible sources of 'bad government' directly and head on. However, for future reference it does seem useful to focus more on how city-to-city cooperation programmes – particularly the successful ones – can contribute to those political dimensions that are so crucial to sustainable local development. City-to-city cooperation practice currently shies away from this political arena. In certain contexts opportunities are missed to use city-to-city cooperation programmes in a strategic sense as a 'springboard' or 'lever' in order to bring the political dimensions of good governance more to the surface. This can be done in all sorts of creative ways, such as the creation of positive dynamics based on concrete projects for improved services, making citizens and the administration think about and act on these political dimensions, the promotion of a dialogue between local actors, the joint identification of priority reforms in local administrative culture, the encouragement of political exchanges about the principles of good governance, etc.

7   *Recommendation 1* – Most ongoing city-to-city cooperation programmes with good results should pay more attention to broaden and deepen the scale of the (pilot) projects in a subsequent stage. An adjusted strategy must be developed per partnership in this respect and the GIS-MIC programme should provide the necessary means to provide financial and technical support in this stage of deepening and broadening.

8   *Recommendation 2* – 'Upscaling' good practices at an inter-municipal, departmental and/or national level cannot be presented as an objective, as there are insufficient means and capacity at VVSG and the towns involved (resources for advocacy and lobbying, resources for good guidance). VVSG and the towns involved must be well aware of this fact. VVSG and the towns can keep an eye on which existing programmes in a certain country could support such upscaling (for example by analysing other donors and the capacity/interest of local national town associations). When the opportunity to upscale arises, they should respond. Although it is difficult to plan in advance, a GIS-MIC programme should be flexible enough to release resources for this purpose (through internal budget reallocation, for example).

⁹ *Recommendation 3* – The intervention strategy can be developed in a better, more customised way. The development of the cases should pay more attention to appropriate analysis of the local policy context (transcending general context information) and the risks and opportunities that can promote or hinder the deepening and broadening of pilot projects.

¹⁰ *Recommendation 4* – More attention could be paid to the development of change paths to strengthen local administrative power and to sufficiently explore good solutions to the analysed problems. In order to prevent that existing policy solutions are simply 'copied', it is important to model the collected ideas according to one's own practice and to establish whether this is the best solution to a certain problem. Organising the appropriate dialogue in this respect is not easy. A good GIS-MIC programme should provide time and resources for this type of 'exploration'. This means that the rhythm and 'peak' of the programme's term are difficult to predict. More attention could also be paid to the political dimension of good local government and the challenge of setting up a good dialogue in this respect. This requires an investment in the development of long-term and trusting partner relationships.

1.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING ONGOING PROCESSES (RELEVANCE, EFFECTIVENESS AND SUSTAINABILITY)

¹¹ All city-to-city cooperation programmes are relevant and tie into policy themes for which the local authorities in the South are authorised. The most successful programmes are those aiming to meet a need that is perceived to be a priority and/or that are in line with processes that have been launched/supported at a higher administrative level. The effectiveness of the programmes is determined by the present local capacity and commitment, the relevance and priority of the chosen policy theme, the present local dynamics, the depth of the national decentralisation policy and the quality of (external) support in the implementation of projects and is highly dependent of the persons involved. It is therefore important to seize the opportunities that arise.

¹² *Recommendation 5* – In GIS-MIC programmes, VVSG, the local councils and DG-D should be more explicit in their choice to support local dynamics of administrative power development and strengthening, whilst recognising that these are long-term processes of a political nature (and therefore depend on the redistribution of power and resources). By definition, these local dynamics or paths all differ hugely and evolve with time. Successful processes can also lead to new local priorities, to which city-to-city cooperation can ideally respond to in a more flexible way to 'organically' strengthen local administration and policy further. From this point of view, it makes little sense to strive towards concentration (of themes) from the outside and impose an agenda in the name of greater efficiency and better management of the programme.

¹³ *Recommendation 6* - The city-to-city cooperation programmes each follow their own path and rhythm. The programme could be set up in a more performance-based way, making it easier to move resources between the several city-to-city cooperation programmes to ensure that certain processes are not hindered by lack of resources (particularly if additional resources are available for other programmes). The relevant procedure must be arranged in advance to guarantee decision making transparency.

¹⁴ We want to draw attention to the fact that GIS-MIC programmes can easily be suspended for 1.5 years. It is therefore possible that little progress is made over a 3-year period. We must bear in mind a 6-year time perspective.

1.3 EFFICIENT USE OF TOOLS

[15] A wide range of tools is used in support of local processes: a colleague-to-colleague approach, working visits, South-South exchanges and networking. These tools are currently not used to their full potential. (1) The colleague-to-colleague approach is limited by certain boundaries (availability of officials and effectiveness of the efforts). Many local councils do not have the conditions in place to involve colleagues in the town twinning. (2) The focus is mainly on the transfer of technical expertise from North to South. Less effort is spent on proactively looking for good practices and knowledge in one's own country or region. (3) Exchanges between towns (through working visits and/or participation in conferences) provide many good ideas. It seems extremely difficult to put experiences and ideas into practice locally.

[16] Networking between participating towns seems to be positive and in several cases led to the exchange of ideas and the launch of joint initiatives. The most important results of the exchanges (as part of regional and international conferences) are the shared conceptual framework for municipal international cooperation, access to the rules for good city-to-city cooperation programmes (e.g. communication, good governance, the involvement of politics, officials and civil society), networking and increased visibility and legitimacy of municipal international cooperation.

[17] *Recommendation 7* – The colleague-to-colleague approach must be developed more clearly in the GIS-MIC programme. The assessment shows that colleague officials (town twin coordinator and/or theme official) mainly play the role of 'coach'. Colleague officials contribute, act as a sounding board, facilitate networking, present contacts and information, give feedback to change processes and offer peer reviews. The transfer of technical expertise is only a part of the change paths. This implies that the cost of the city-to-city cooperation coordinator (and possibly the theme official) is largely more of an operational cost rather than a management cost. We could consider entering some of the expense of the officials in the North as operational costs. We also need to focus a lot more on attracting local expertise: the exploration of good practices in one's own country, the organisation of specific dialogues on this issue between local actors, the commitment of local consultants and/or NGOs that can offer guidance. There should therefore be sufficient funds available to encourage South-South exchanges and attract local expertise.

[18] *Recommendation 8* – The organisation of regional and/or international conferences continues to be valuable and should be continued. It is very inspiring to all participants and increases the visibility and importance of municipal international cooperation. In case of a match, it also facilitates contact between persons and leads to the exchange of concrete practices and experiences. However, we do not feel this is a justified reason to promote regional concentration, as the city-to-city cooperation programmes of Flemish towns all originated in their own way (and therefore are at risk of being excluded from an interesting programme). When choosing new city-to-city cooperation programmes, VVSG can point out to Flemish towns that working in the same region has its advantages and towns can use this as an extra selection criterion.

1.4 MORE EFFICIENT MANAGEMENT MODELS

[19] City-to-city cooperation coordinators indicate that the imposed management tools resulted in quite a planning burden (particularly at the start of the programme) and a lot of administration, which should be reduced. The city-to-city cooperation coordinators (in the North and South) have indicated that the tools contributed to a more plan-based approach to the cooperation and better monitoring of the programmes. An

additional effect is the experience the partners gain with such management and planning tools, which enables them to attract and manage projects from other donors. However, the management tools were not used to their full potential.

20 Ambiguity about the finality and implementation terms of the programme when it was created (2007) at DG-D, the changing guidelines and the programme's late approval caused a lot of confusion and frustration in the local councils involved, which put the partner relationship under pressure. Most local councils also delayed implementation until the programme's approval was certain. This caused substantial delays right from the start of the programme.

21 The quality of the municipal records is more than adequate, which is largely due to VVSG. VVSG is very accessible to the local councils and helped them draft their documentation and guided them during implementation by capably offering joint consultations, training and tailor-made advice. The VVSG training range can be more in-depth in the next programme.

22 *Recommendation 9* – If we continue to work with logical frameworks, we can increase their quality for the next programme by (1) recording fewer results and activities[3]; (2) introducing better indicators and (3) adding an appropriate risk and opportunities analysis (as a basis for devising hypotheses).

23 *Recommendation 10* – If possible, there should be room for policy tools other than the Logical Framework. Local councils can be given a choice to continue working with LFA or to use their own existing management and planning tools.

24 *Recommendation 11* – VVSG was able to bear a major part of the management burden, but should avoid working with a single central logical framework for the entire GIS-MIC programme. This programme can be based on a single central strategic framework under which separate programmes are developed for each city-to-city cooperation. We urge the DG-D section responsible for the management of this programme do some internal lobbying to ensure that politically bureaucratic factors in donor countries do not get in the way of the integration of the central lessons drawn from countless evaluations including this one.

25 *Recommendation 12* – It seems appropriate that in addition to a number of traditional training courses, VVSG launches learning paths with more room for 'action learning' also involving the partners in the South. For example, a number of themes can be determined to be developed further based on concrete cases that local authorities can subscribe to.

26 The following table is a concise summary of the recommendations per stakeholder. The relevant recommendation as described above is mentioned between brackets.

VVSG	Local councils	DG-D (Donor)
Attention to the strategy of scale broadening and scale deepening in the programme's strategic framework (A1)	Development of a strategy for scale broadening and deepening for ongoing projects (A1) and a strategy for policy transfer processes (A4)	

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[3] The current logical frameworks have overlapping activities, tools and cost types. Activities should be linked to a cost type, as these generally coincide in these programmes. Only activities linked to financing should be included. Activities for which no financing is requested, such as meetings of a certain commission, are sometimes better used as indicators (e.g. meeting frequency as an indicator of a commission's operations).

No concentration of themes (A5)		No concentration of themes (A5)
Development of procedures for flexible financial performance-based management (A6)		GIS-MIC programme with the necessary flexibility: (i) flexible transfer of resources between programme sections (A2); (ii) emphasis on processes/paths and process indicators and less so on concrete project achievements (A2); (iii) time to explore (A4); (iv) performance based management (A6)
Support for risk and opportunities analyses (A3)	Good analysis of the policy context, policy room for change and the risks and opportunities (A3)	
	A more specific role for the city-to-city cooperation coordinator as a coach (A7) + increased use of local expertise (A7)	Some efforts by city-to-city cooperation coordinators and theme officials can be considered an operational costs rather than just a management cost (A7).
Continuation of the organisation of regional and international conferences (A8)		
One central strategic framework including separate individual town twinning programmes (so not one LFA for the entire programme) (A11)	Improvement of logical frameworks with special attention for the establishment of indicators and adequate analysis of risks and opportunities (A9)	Permitted use of other management models in the towns (A10)
Expansion of training and support with action learning paths and more attention to policy transfer processes in city-to-city cooperation programmes (A12)		

Table 8
Overview of recommendations according to stakeholder.