

- › Local government international partnerships – involving **colleague-to-colleague learning and coaching** – strengthen local government capacity and performance effectively. They are most successful when linked into a partnership programme.
- › To **maximise impact**, partnership programmes should be based on country or area plans with common agreed themes, clear contracts and learning-focused monitoring. They should be co-ordinated with the national government's decentralisation policies.
- › Programmes such as LOGO South offer a record of **successful experience and a proven methodology** for shaping and managing the programme. They also provide a set of learning tools to benefit both participants and the wider local government sector.

VNG International Policy Brief #3 ²⁰¹⁰

* Local government international partnerships

> A structured approach to maximise impact

Local government international partnerships have for many years delivered positive results in improving local capacity, services and development. This policy brief describes the context of these partnerships, how partnership programmes work, and how they can achieve a wider impact. For example, the LOGO South programme, managed by VNG International, has been described as 'relevant, efficient and effective', in a recent external audit report.¹

What are local government international partnerships?

In essence, they are relationships – usually long-term – for exchange and support, between local governments. They involve colleague-to-colleague exchanges, through professional dialogue, on-the-job training and coaching etc. While the partnership focuses mainly on the local governments as such, a broader twinning relationship often includes the wider local community.

Promoting decentralisation

Many governments have introduced decentralisation policies over the last 30 years, with powers, resources and responsibilities progressively transferred

to local governments. But to succeed, decentralisation must overcome potential obstacles, including lack of political will, poor legal frameworks, funding problems, or lack of capacity.

International donors – who often support national governments – can play a key role by also funding local government partnership programmes. Through these programmes, the overall capacity of local government to take on its new roles can be greatly strengthened. A recent official report to the Netherlands' government points out:

'It is also possible to focus primarily on other authorities that are willing and able to deal with aid adequately... Such a step also links well with the growing need to invest in the development of quality of regional and local authorities, which are becoming increasingly important tiers of government with the strong increase in urbanization'.²

Linking national and local levels

Support for local government through partnership programmes should not be planned in isolation, but co-ordinated with national government policies, and

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1 Baud I.S.A. et al. (2010), *'Towards improved local governance through strengthened local government'*, University of Utrecht, University of Amsterdam.

2 Lieshout P. van (2010), *'Less pretension, more ambition, development policy in times of globalization'*, Amsterdam University Press.

between the local governments involved. VNG International uses two main ways to achieve this.

The country or area plan This plan sets the framework for all partnership grants and activities, taking account of national and donor policies. It analyses the actors, relevant policies, and 'windows of opportunity'; from these, the priority common themes are identified. Grant applications are then tied into the plan.

Local government associations (LGAs)

LGAs should be involved from the outset. They help link the programme to the national context, and show their members that it benefits the whole municipal sector, not just individual partners. LGAs can play a key role in defining country plans, and in helping assess grant applications.

Designing the partnership programme

While programmes differ in scale and content, some key building blocks are always needed. For example, under the LOGO South programme, the following essential elements are included:

- **Selection and baseline assessment:** The aim is to ensure that partners selected meet the programme's eligibility criteria, and have the capacity to deliver. VNG International carries out a baseline assessment, including the authority's political commitment, dedicated staff resources, and current organisational performance.
- **Contracts for partnership projects:** A contract is always required – usually, between the partner municipality and VNG International. A short memorandum suffices for simple exchanges of expertise. A fuller contract is required where the partner receives grants for investment.
- **Joint planning:** VNG International and the local government partners commit to the country plan, to achieve broader shared objectives, reduce the amount of individual planning, and enable different



types of authority to take part.

- **Administration and accounting:** VNG International offers practical systems, with funding manuals, information, training, internet forums etc. Most audits are relatively simple; more detailed rules apply if the partnership grant includes funding for investments.
- **Monitoring:** VNG International uses monitoring not just as a system of control (which donors require) but also for learning and sharing. Whilst some controls, including assessment of quantitative results, are necessary, outcomes and quality may be best assessed in more interactive ways.

Managing risks

Partnership programmes always incur risks, which must be carefully managed. These include delays, lack of commitment, loss of political support following election changes, staff turnover, or problems of corruption or personal security.

VNG International factors these risks into the programmes' design. For example, to counter the risk of local 'brain drain', all staff who benefit from training must also be involved in activities which help others to learn.

Achieving a wider impact

Partnership programmes should always try to generate improvements for the whole local government sector. The LGA often plays an important role in this.

Through tools such as websites, manuals and articles in journals, learning is spread beyond the immediate partners. However, VNG International also favours more interactive learning e.g.:

- **municipal benchmarking:** jointly designed by the partners, but open to other local governments, in which outcomes and performance against benchmarks are discussed
- **coaching-mentoring:** providing one-to-one advice and exchange, at all levels
- **internships** in other local governments or associations,
- **training of trainers:** to enable trained staff to disseminate lessons to other municipalities.