



VVSG FEDERAL PROGRAMME

MID-TERM EVALUATION - FINAL REPORT

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

This report concerns the external supervision of a mid-term evaluation (conducted by peer evaluators and moderated by the external evaluators) of the VVSG's current 'Municipal International Cooperation' multi-annual programme, which started in 2017 and runs until the end of 2021.

This programme is supported by the Belgian federal government through the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD).

The programme aims to contribute to good local governance by strengthening local governance in the South and local policy coherence in Flanders. There are two parts to this objective. On the one hand, the programme wants to increase the strong local governance of local governments and their associations of cities and municipalities in the South through a process of capacity building around specific policy themes. On the other hand, the programme wants to contribute to the realisation of the SDGs in Belgium through a municipal translation of them into a local coherent policy for sustainable development.

1.2. Subject and purpose of the evaluation

The following partnerships are part of the mid-term evaluation¹:

¹ Terms of Reference of this assignment.

Country	Actors involved	Outcome
Benin	Zoersel – Bohican twinning (Benin)	Les capacités municipales sont renforcées pour soutenir l'économie locale axée sur le marché.
Benin	Programme between VVSG and ANCB (Benin)	Renforcement des capacités de l'ANCB pour un meilleur accompagnement des Communes dans la promotion de la bonne gouvernance locale.
Ecuador	Town twinnings between Bierbeek – Oña; Evergem – Guaranda	Los principios de la buena gobernanza local en cuanto a la gestión integral de los recursos hídricos se han puesto en práctica.
Morocco	Town twinnings between Antwerp – Ouled Daoud Zehkanine	L'encouragement et le soutien des activités génératrices de revenus (AGR) dans le secteur de l'économie sociale et solidaire (agriculture, élevage, artisanat et écotourisme) est renforcé par la commune d'Ouled Daoud Zekhanine en collaboration avec les associations de diaspora et en coordination avec les coopératives et la société civile.

The purpose of the mid-term evaluation is to learn (about peer evaluation and techniques of evaluation and about the cases). Through externally supervised peer evaluations, the VVSG and the stakeholders want to gain insight into the first half of the programme period and gather input for the further continuation of the programme. The mid-term evaluation also has the additional purpose of identifying a number of elements from which lessons can be learned for the next multi-annual programme.

1.3. Approach and implementation

The supervision of the peer evaluations was divided into several steps

Step 1: Kick-off meeting:

Step 2: Review of relevant documents related to Benin peer evaluation (in which ACE Europe was not involved as external evaluator)

Step 3: Meeting with peer evaluators who conducted Benin evaluation.

Step 4: Preparation of methodological manual.

Step 5: Training workshop for peer evaluators

Step 6: Support facility during implementation of peer evaluations.

Step 7: Review of peer evaluation reports:

Step 8: Sense-making workshop

Step 9: Co-authoring of the final report in collaboration with the VVSG on the basis of a first draft by the VVSG.

Step 10: Participation in feedback meeting in Brussels.

Step 11: Finalisation of the final report.

During implementation, there were several adjustments to the step-by-step plan described above. The main reasons for the changes were: the COVID-19 pandemic and lack of time on the part of the parties involved. Due to lack of time, steps 3 and 10 were not carried out and there was no training workshop for the peer evaluators. It was also not possible for the VVSG to provide a first draft of the report, and input was limited to providing summaries of the peer evaluation reports. The cross-case analysis is solely the work of ACE Europe. ACE Europe received an additional request to support a process of self-evaluation in all twinning municipalities with advice (on question and approach). The VVSG considered this to be important with a view to formulating the new programme. The results of this survey are the subject of another report, but the feedback was prepared in cooperation with Voices that Count.

Based on the lessons learned from the Benin evaluation, namely that it was difficult for the twinning municipalities to come up with good evaluation questions, the training was reoriented and ACE Europe organised a workshop for all twinning municipalities in Flanders to identify evaluation questions through self-evaluation based on outcome harvesting. Subsequently, in consultation with the twinning partners, the VVSG decided to look into the interpretation of the concept of good local governance (with a view to the new programme): the emphasis in twinning sometimes shifts too easily to operational follow-up and the question is how to keep the broad debate on the contribution of actions to good local governance on the agenda and continue working on it.

The starting point was the definition of strengthening local governance as used by the VVSG (see box below).

Strengthening local governance = a long-term vision/process to increase the capacities of Flemish local governments and their partner municipalities to enable them to work in a more democratic, transparent and participative way.
How? Within a town twinning and through twinning programmes, both partner municipalities work on strengthening local governance by cooperating in a process-oriented and reciprocal way. Both partners share knowledge and practices, experiment and dare to make mistakes in order to learn from them, develop capacities and expertise and monitor and (self-)evaluate together.
Who? Strong local governance is determined by the interaction between the three pillars from the triangle of good local governance, namely the civil servants, politicians and civil society from both partner municipalities. Contributions to strengthening local governance should therefore take this into account. Each actor has a clear role in the process of strengthening local governance and that is incorporated into each town twinning.

Both municipalities pay attention to integrated and cross-policy strengthening. To achieve optimal strengthening of local governance, various actors need to be given a (political) mandate by the town twinning to work on strengthening local governance.

Result? Strengthening local governance will ultimately lead to local development and a better service delivery from government to citizens. This will result in greater recognition of the population for local government.

The following evaluation questions were developed for the peer evaluation in Ecuador

Question	Theme	Evaluation question (EQ)
Main question	Strengthening local governance	What interpretation is given to the concept of 'strengthening local governance', is it shared and how does twinning contribute to strengthening local governance?
Sub-question	Managing town twinning	Does the current management of town twinning help to strengthen local governance?

ACE Europe supported the formulation of the evaluation questions and the approach for data collection and analysis. A manual explained some of the principles of evaluation and gave guidelines for organising an evaluation and data collection.

COVID-19 interfered with the implementation of peer evaluations in Morocco and Ecuador. After consultation between the VVSG and the twinning coordinator it was decided in June 2020 not to carry out the evaluation in Morocco (this will be done in the course of 2021 with a local evaluator). The other evaluations were organised digitally. Initially, the manual was adapted, but in the end the peer evaluation was organised on the basis of a limited number of interviews (see overview in Annex 2).

The evaluation and also the reporting encountered several constraints

- The evolutions outlined above made it difficult to analyse the reports from Benin in the same way as the reports from Ecuador.

- The online interviews did allow for exchange and reflection, but because many respondents could not be questioned (including final beneficiaries) it was not possible to capture the full complexity and diversity of perceptions.
- The approach to the evaluation as set out in the manual and the design of the analysis could only be implemented to a limited extent, due to time constraints on the one hand and the inability of the evaluators to work in situ on the other. The experience with online evaluation was entirely new.

2. SOME FINDINGS OF THE MID-TERM (PEER) EVALUATION

In this section we summarise the findings from the peer evaluations followed by a horizontal analysis based on the available reports.

2.1. Overview of findings of individual peer evaluations

A summary of each evaluation carried out is attached to this report. ACE Europe summarises the conclusions and recommendations of each report below.

town twinning	output	Changes/conclusions	recommendations
VVSG-ANCB	Guide to gender monitoring Installation of 'gender focal points' in 12 pilot municipalities in Benin	12 pilot municipalities Attention to gender in municipal policy planning + implementation of gender-relational activities (leading to more balance of disadvantaged groups in policy participation) ANCB Revitalisation of the RÉFEC network (Réseau des femmes conseillères du Bénin) Functioning of the Commission for Gender, Social Affairs and Civic Participation Focal points: gender expertise (N and S) and better use of peer-to-peer exchange, integration of Gender into ANCB strategy, ownership of the issue by all elected officials in the municipalities, capitalising on and sharing of good practices (by association)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Furthering partnership • Increase impact: establish partnerships with other sister associations, explore possible synergies to allow for larger programme/budget, include focal points
Zoersel-Bohicon	Infrastructure of the local market: hangar, shops, sanitary block	Improvement of hygiene in the market thanks to infrastructure but also the Hygiene Brigade (and their awareness-raising activities) Improvement of the social position of brigade members (image) (slight) increase in the income of the people collecting the financial contributions (collectors) Focal points: operation of the market infrastructure (ensuring equal access, see different rates for the use of toilets for men and women), improving the visibility of the collectors and strengthening their awareness-raising mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop strategy for financial sustainability for paying brigade (to be supported by a plea at national level in collaboration with other municipalities and ANCB and by increasing visibility of the project to attract other partners) • Management: formalise monitoring a little more, have politicians (N-S) communicate more • Increase impact: adjust tariffs for the use of sanitary blocks, reward market women and men for good hygiene (e.g. with stickers that also raise awareness), standardise collectors' salaries and strengthen their awareness-raising role, ensure that staff are properly equipped
Evergem - Guaranda	No specific focus in evaluation: it	Twinning can strengthen political commitment to a sustainable future (in N and S) Strong participation mechanisms in Guaranda (based on language, culture and identity), but less present in Guaranda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen partnership/ twinning: choose international philosophies/agenda's for change to guide and support twinning, learn from different approaches in N and S, combine attention to abstract

	was on strengthening local governance	<p>Well-trained technical staff in Guaranda</p> <p>Contribution of town twinning management to strengthening governance: presence of commitment and equality, presence of ownership</p> <p>Focal points: managing political change (maintaining continuity), strengthening empowerment strategy in Guaranda (participation goes beyond numbers involved), bureaucratic procedures in Guaranda, willingness to learn from each other (less present in the N), more difficult communication between politicians and civil servants in Guaranda</p>	<p>issues such as strengthening local governance with themes that are of specific concern to citizens, consider twinning committee in Guaranda with mandate for coordination and communication and set out strategic lines.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen management: project selection procedure, set up an appropriate monitoring system, proactive system for dealing with changes in the administration and addressing the structure of twinning and roles of various actors (civil servants, politicians and civil society), continue work on digitalisation • Increase impact in Guaranda: empowerment strategy, focus on internal processes in Guaranda • Increase impact in Evergem: attention to diversity e.g. through rejuvenation and feminisation of the twinning committee, working on openness to learning.
Oña - Bierbeek	No specific focus in the evaluation: it was on strengthening local governance	<p>Strong ownership (but fragmented)</p> <p>Strong communication in hands of twinning coordinators</p> <p>Interest of civil society in Oña to be more involved</p> <p>Concern for equality is present in both partners</p> <p>Focal point: ownership at political level, systematisation of communication, financial transfers create dependency in Oña</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen partnership/ twinning: further develop ownership by politicians/elected representatives, work on better understanding role of civil society in twinning, sufficiently develop N-S exchange activities in addition to financial transfers, further clarify the twinning 'triangle' as framework for cooperation

2.2. Cross-case analysis of town twinning by ACE Europe

As an external evaluator, ACE Europe formulated certain findings arising from an analysis of the three reports on town twinning. These findings were tested against the experiences of the Flemish twinning coordinators during an online feedback meeting on 23 February 2021, and comments were taken into account in what follows. In general, the findings were supported by the participants. At the same time, participants noted that much is expected of projects and town twinning and that it is important to be aware of the complexity and many obstacles.

The analysis by ACE Europe starts from the question as to what extent the concept of (support for) strengthening local governance is recognised by the respondents, and to what extent the way of working (through twinning) creates the conditions to work on strengthening local governance. These conditions are related to the following aspects:

- How much room is there for taking ownership?
- How much room is there for promoting equality?
- How does communication work between the partners and the various actors in the two partner municipalities (North and South)?
- To what extent is the underlying model of the triangle helpful? see diagram below

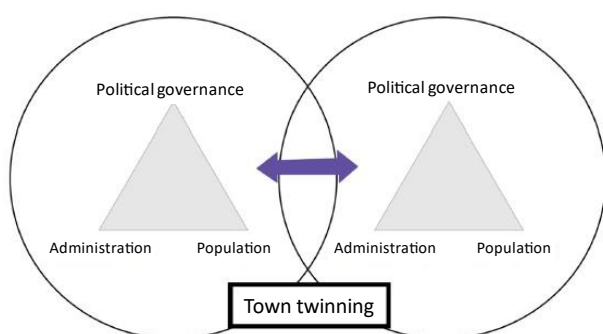


Fig. 1: key actors for local global policies

The concept of strengthening local governance - These are the elements in the definition of the concept, which were shared with the respondents.

- support for strengthening local governance = embedded in a long-term vision, is a process to increase the capacity of municipalities for good local governance. Good local governance = functioning of government in a more democratic, transparent and participatory way
- Central elements are: political commitment, involvement/participation, quality of service, transparency of decision-making and implementation and continuity of policies

The **concept of strengthening local governance is recognised** by the respondents, and the various components in the definition that was proposed are also recognisable. Although all respondents indicate that they would like to commit themselves to this, it is difficult for them to cite practical examples that make the concept tangible. The concept is an ambition, a standard on which everyone seems to agree. It is also noteworthy that respondents **do not distinguish between strengthening local governance as an endogenous process initiated and carried by the municipalities and the support that this process receives through the projects/town twinning**. That distinction, however, is important for ownership of the ambition of strengthening local governance, for precisely determining who gives or can give what support, and for being able to situate individual projects against the backdrop of a more complex process of change. Peer evaluations show a **strong project-driven approach with less focus on the whole**. A more holistic view is especially noticeable among project coordinators, and less so among local governments or the various civil society groups involved.

The discussion during the peer evaluation in Guaranda did lead to a **new definition that calls for more attention to the development of political policies based on a sustainable future**, but where at the same time the commitment of the Northern municipality for the same, falls away. The definition is as follows: 'Strengthening good local governance enhances the competencies of local governments to continuously provide high-quality services in a participatory, transparent and efficient manner. Good local governance requires short- and long-term political policies for a sustainable future.'

Support for strengthening local governance through town twinning has added value, according to respondents. To this end, they point to several features of twinning (which usually occur in combination). At the same time, the reports provide **critical comments** on some of these aspects:

- Within the twinning approach, much attention is paid to the process of cooperation (jointly determining themes and manner of implementation, attention to relationships). However, attention is not always paid to the internal processes/back office in the municipality where the projects are implemented.

Everyone is aware of these internal processes and the influence they exert, but it is not very explicit in the cooperation; this was felt to be an obstacle in Guaranda-Evergem, for example.

- Twinning broadens the horizons of all those involved (literally and figuratively) and stimulates reflection on the task of local government. At the same time, this reflection is not always systematic or strategic and is therefore less of a catalyst for more profound changes.
- The focus on cooperation between colleagues/peers and networking with other actors (as in the Zoersel-Bohicon example) is unique compared with other externally funded collaborations. This different perspective is essential in order to focus on the specific nature of support for strengthening local governance and to maintain a focus on the role of local government as a development actor (among other actors).
- By working within the framework of a twinning arrangement in which (friendly, non-technical) exchanges between associations and colleagues also take place, the focus is not only on financial transfers. At the same time, respondents indicate that those financial resources continue to be essential and that awareness-raising and communication about the added value of twinning remain necessary.
- Twinning, with its focus on civil society, provides small success stories in specific service delivery projects that can strengthen grass-roots democracy and test management models (e.g. water management in Guaranda). However, the twinning model does not appear to be sufficiently strong to ensure that those experiences of success are transferred to other departments/wider governance to influence the way of working (beyond standalone projects).

The reports recognise that working on strengthening local governance (via the town-twinning model and the projects) has its **limits**:

- Relations between civil servants and politicians in the South (with civil servants often having limited decision-making powers) appear to be a factor over which little influence can be exerted.
- The degree of stability/capacity in the municipalities in the South does not always allow for governments and civil society organisations to take on their role in project formulation, implementation and ensuring sustainability. This is a feature of the context that must be taken into account. Even so, expectations of governments and civil society are often unrealistic.
- Town twinning works through specific projects and may have more difficulty in touching upon the underlying mechanisms that help determine the quality of local governance. This choice is partly inspired by the expectation of the population (in the South, but especially in the North): there is little support for a programme that works around an abstract concept of strengthening local governance or internal processes, water, health, etc. are much more tangible.

- There is significantly less openness to learning in the North. Respondents (from the North) wonder where the policy for a sustainable future or the experimentation with alternative models of participation stand, and are rather pessimistic about the commitment to work on strengthening local governance in their own municipality. However, as the report on Guaranda firmly states, the situation in the partner municipality holds up a mirror to the administration and points to the urgency of a different policy. It is also sometimes assumed that little can be learned from a system that is not based on efficiency (e.g. a one-stop-shop in Evergem to answer citizens' questions and more loose, individualised interaction between citizens and politicians in Guaranda).
- The added value of the twinning model is not apparent to everyone. One of the peer evaluations clearly points out the ambiguity and lack of unanimity about the exact role and added value of different actors in the triangle with regard to strengthening local governance. This lack of clarity can cause friction, e.g. in the case of changes of administration and financial support for civil-society projects (Oña – Bierbeek)

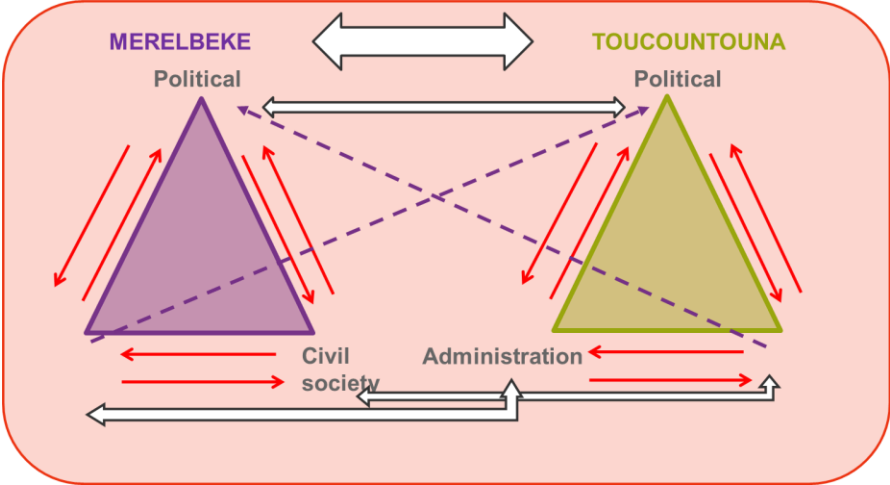
Conditions for working on strengthening local governance – The reports show that there is **strong ownership at project level** in the South and of specific components within the projects. So there is ownership (especially in the South and among twinning coordinators), but it is fairly fragmented. The reports indicate that few respondents see the broader picture or the connection between different projects and interventions in the municipality (often from different external funding programmes as in Bohicon). There are two factors that contribute to this ownership: the fact that projects respond to a real need and the attention to transparency in the implementation of projects (e.g. the consultation in Guaranda with the indigenous communities, even if the selection procedure is less clear). Twinning coordinators find it important that every project always responds to and takes into account the expectations and needs of the population and politicians in North and South as much as possible; this is not easy in practice, and it often takes a lot of time and effort to get everyone on the same page in the start-up phase.

Equality in the partner relationship is an important feature for the respondents, and they also indicated in the reports that they experienced this equality in the encounter (however, no concrete examples could be found in the reports). According to the respondents, equality is promoted by investing in consultation (this is a constant focal point for twinning coordinators) and by creating space for exchange, in addition to financial transfers. The Oña-Bierbeek report underlines that identifying the potential of the different parties involved as a basis for developing projects helps to strengthen equality.

The twinning coordinators play a crucial role in ensuring good **communication**. The Oña-Bierbeek report points out the difference between ad hoc communication (which is more operational) and an approach focused on

'relationship building', which is certainly what the coordinators do. In addition, the reports underline the fact that there is usually good communication and interaction between civil servants (North and South) involved in projects, but less so between politicians. Organising effective communication in a complex environment is always a challenge: it is not always clear who should discuss or know what at what time. In general, the current COVID-19 pandemic is weighing heavily on such communication: physical and formal/informal personal contacts are very important for the quality of communication.

The triangle model as the basis for the twinning approach is not questioned by the evaluations/reports. The schematic representation of the model (see below) provides a basis for discussing the strengthening of local governance and for making interactions (between the three pillars and between North and South) explicit and open to discussion. The Bohicon-Zoersel report makes it clear that it can be useful to open up and strengthen the model by introducing a fourth pillar, that of networking with other local authorities and development actors in the municipality. For Bohicon, this is especially useful with a view to attracting external funding: networking strengthens the project application because various donors consider it important. ACE Europe concludes from the reports that the strong emphasis on civil society as an actor (an emphasis that is especially important in the North) can sometimes cause tensions, but this requires further investigation.



Recommendations from the parties involved - The recommendations of the twinning partners that are relevant to the question of cross-case analysis (based on the reports and comments during the feedback) are listed below:

- The twinning model should not be limited to organising support for strengthening local governance. Within twinning, special attention must continue to be paid to supporting civil society as a specific

stakeholder in policy-making and implementation + as a value in itself. It is precisely the degree of complexity and levels within twinning that leads to accumulated capital. It is important to communicate well on this because it is not always clear to everyone. It is clear that a twinning committee (with representation from the three pillars) must remain the hub of the collaboration.

- It is important to clarify the roles and tasks of the different pillars in the triangle model again and again, in the relationship, the collaboration and the individual projects. This is linked to the attention that should be given to the management of twinning and the support that should be given to the actors to better play their role in this management (efficiency of implementation).
- It is important to show and visualise the coherence between actors and projects that support processes of strengthening local governance, especially to the population that currently does not see this coherence. Seeing more coherence can help people see the bigger picture.
- The influence of **internal processes of decision-making** in the municipality and (lack of) authority of officials in the South should be more explicitly included in the development of cooperation and projects.
- It is important that twinning coordinators **develop a strategy that takes into account instability and elections** and subsequent changes in government and civil service (especially in the municipality in the South). This includes more proactive communication/management for elections.
- There are questions about how the objectives related to strengthening local governance can be given a place in the municipalities in the North: how can support for cooperation and mutual learning and working together on the global challenges (SDGs), innovative models of citizen participation, etc. be put more explicitly on the **administrative agenda of the partner municipality in the North**? There are as yet no clear answers.
- In view of a **new DGD programme**, it is essential that twinning **partners can determine the themes among themselves** (with the municipality in the South taking the lead) and that expectations about what projects can change are **more realistic** (supported by a ToC that indicates what the limits are). There is a demand to work more with pilot projects that can then be scaled up (including through associations of cities and municipalities in the partner countries). **Civil society** must regain its central role, although this is not always evident in practice. There is a need **to better define** the function of civil society (e.g. as a bridge between government and citizens, as a source of inspiration for new forms of participation) and to consider when civil society should be involved (is it about co-creation of policy, or a role in implementation, or as a watchdog regarding implementation and results of policy?). There are some voices that do not only want to work on strengthening local governance through the town-twinning model and the triangle. This also includes, for example, investigating more **attention to networking** as a function of strengthening local governance. The new programme should also focus more on **supporting sustainability**, which is a major challenge, especially for twinning partnerships

that are just starting out (what strategy, how to tackle it from the start?). Finally, specific attention is demanded for the workload for the municipalities.

3. EXPERIENCE WITH PEER EVALUATION

Design of peer evaluations - What has been done to support and carry out peer evaluations:

- Peer evaluation organisations in Benin (unsupported) autumn 2019;
- Exchange of experiences with consultant with a view to adjusting the process. This showed that it was difficult to determine focus and evaluation questions;
- February 2020 training for formulating good reference terms for twinning coordinators in the North: emphasis on how to determine focus and ask good questions, with the help of outcome mapping and outcome harvesting approach;
- March 2020: manual for the peer evaluators: structured according to product/report, process/relationships and attitude and procedure/methods and techniques), translated into Spanish. This manual gave a step-by-step presentation of all the necessary actions with focal points and tips. Updated in June 2020 due to COVID and organisation of digital assessment;
- May 2020: VVSG planning for the organisation of peer evaluation in Ecuador and in Morocco;
- June 2020: decision after consultation between VVSG and twinning coordinator not to carry out the evaluation in Morocco (will be carried out in the course of 2021 with a local evaluator);
- June 2020: feedback from ACE Europe on final formulation of evaluation questions by peer evaluators and advice on reference frameworks to support questioning and analysis.

Supporting material (manual, reference terms, etc.) is available from the VVSG on request;

Rating by the peer evaluators – The peer evaluators rated their experience of the evaluation on paper. ACE Europe subsequently asked additional questions about the experience with the manual and formats for reporting. There was little response (1 response from peer evaluator from VVSG). The manual proved helpful in preparing for the evaluation, in organising communication and in preparing for interviews.

It is clear that the peer evaluation was a major investment both because of the peer evaluators (who are not professional evaluators but have some experience in project management and evaluation) and because of the VVSG, which initiated, supported and moderated the process. Finding people who have the time and inclination to take on the challenge, have experience with local government and speak the language of the partner

municipalities, proved to be the first hurdle. COVID-19 required a change in approach that increased the workload, which was generally underestimated.

The peer evaluators indicated that overall it was a learning (first) experience with peer evaluation. As part of a team, they were able to get acquainted with various perceptions of international cooperation and were involved in relevant reflections on strategic issues (including broadening support). It was also interesting to get acquainted with the (different ways of) questioning among the peers. The experience provided inspiration that they can take back to their own practice (but the reports do not give explicit examples of inspiration).

The peer evaluators faced very real challenges, of which the following were the most common:

- Team management: the evaluations were carried out with a minimum of 3 evaluators, and in Benin there was even a team of 6 evaluators. This required a lot of attention for making agreements about expectations and did not make preparing together easy (who leads, who delivers what and when?). It also led to fragmented data collection. The teams also showed that evaluators had different attitudes towards respondents (giving very specific advice versus limiting themselves to asking questions);
- Expectations management of respondents: several respondents were asking for specific recommendations, but the focus of the evaluation (especially in Ecuador) was fairly strategic.
- Getting information in time (so that the mission and programme can be prepared properly)
- Specific technical competencies of the evaluator: e.g. mastering interviewing techniques, adapting questions to different types of respondents, positioning as a peer (in the context of evaluation aimed at accountability: how independent should you be, how to deal with sensitive issues?), moving from interviews and desk research to reporting (how to approach and deliver a good report in a limited time frame?).
- COVID-19 was a challenge in itself: the table below illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of digital online evaluation with a physical evaluation on the ground.

	Digital evaluation	Evaluation on the ground
+	Less stress in terms of planning No travel Planning easier to organise alongside other work	Space for exchange between colleagues Experience of reality (non-verbal communication, observation)

-	<p>More limited win for peer evaluators (less exchange, reflection on own practice)</p> <p>Longer lead time</p> <p>Non-attendance of respondents</p> <p>Quality of connection</p> <p>Fewer opportunities for interim assessments</p> <p>No surveying of final beneficiaries</p>	<p>Managing different attitudes between evaluators</p> <p>Doing a lot in little time</p> <p>Little time for reflection and preparation of conclusions and recommendations</p>
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The peer evaluators made the following recommendations:

- they are not in favour of new online assessments in the future
- It is important to pay attention to clear agreements: discuss expectations properly with regard to preparation, division of tasks between evaluators, processing of interviews and reporting
- Make realistic time estimates for peers, the efforts were heavily underestimated.
- A manual could also give time indications and draw up a more detailed plan of the process, and also help with time estimations.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening local governance is at the heart of the federal programme and is an important objective of twinning. The evaluation reports make it clear that the respondents recognise this but find it difficult to make it tangible. The project-driven manner of cooperation does not make it easy to focus on processes of strengthening local governance. The (understandable) desire to gain broad support among citizens, both in the North and in the South, places the emphasis on themes that are more attractive and tangible. Nevertheless, it appears important to put the strengthening of local governance more explicitly on the agenda: it is clear that small successes alone do not change the way a municipality works and that more is needed. It is not self-evident to use twinning (or a bilateral relationship between municipalities) to touch upon underlying mechanisms and dynamics (between officials, politicians and civil society) that help determine the quality of service delivery in a municipality. Although there are important limits, the conditions for working on strengthening local governance within a twinning arrangement seem to be more than fulfilled: there is attention and concern for creating ownership, working on equality and a communication that strengthens the relationship. However, it is also important that working on strengthening local governance and the underlying mechanisms and dynamics is an endogenous process, and it is clear that this involves more than smaller pilot projects. The willingness to

learn from each other and to let go of one's own models could be stronger, particularly in the North. Perhaps this is the missing link to turn town twinning into an instrument that can put governance on the agenda in addition to projects, exchanges and financial transfers. ACE Europe supports the idea that integrating town twinning into international frameworks and agendas can contribute to this.

The organisation and implementation of peer evaluations proved to be a tough process, partly due to COVID and the underestimation of the workload. The peer evaluators remain very fond of the concept and it is clear that there is much to be learned about peer evaluation in the future.

This report formulates recommendations with regard to the final evaluation, the parties involved and peer evaluations.

With regard to the final evaluation - These recommendations are mainly based on the discussion at the feedback meeting. The twinning coordinators want the final evaluation to address the following questions:

- Effectiveness: what has changed/improved in terms of strong local governance (and what has trickled down from projects to the organisation of local governance) and what are the effects on the different actors/target groups?
- What has been the influence of the federal programme on the content and functioning of twinning?
- What has been the role of local government associations in the different countries (in management and support of town twinning and in capitalising and duplicating good practices)?
- What can be noticed in terms of reciprocity and what are the opportunities to strengthen this reciprocity: e.g. what can the North learn from other forms of participation, approach of the SDGs, setting up a food strategy, etc.?

With regard to stakeholders

1. ACE Europe believes it would be useful to review the existing literature and manuals on multi-stakeholder partnerships.² The reports contain many findings, conclusions and recommendations that touch on the management of relationships in a complex environment. A multi-stakeholder approach can help to look at the management of twinning in a different light and explore how the management of twinning can be supported/strengthened.

² A very good and easily accessible guide is the MSP guide from the University of Wageningen, available at: mspguide.org.

2. The citizens' institution model for supporting strengthening local governance³ seems to be more appropriate than the triangle model for working on strengthening local governance, for several reasons:
 - a. the town twinning model with the three pillars is actually a plan of action, a strategy rather than a model that indicates how processes of strong local governance proceed (theory of action versus theory of change);
 - b. the model does not refer to the citizen but only to civil society, whereas the idea of good service to the citizen is central (and the citizen has a direct and real interest in it);
- civil society (its added value and its position in policy development and implementation) is insufficiently defined in the three-pillar model. It might help to make a distinction between 'civil society' on the one hand and 'social movement' on the other. Civil society is then an analytical concept that makes it clear that there is no void between the citizen and the state/local government and that there is a space where relationships between people are not based on laws of the market (private sector) or legal norms of the government, but where people can freely associate and where these associations can play a role in co-determining and implementing policy. Social movements are aimed at changing society, they have a project for change. 'Civil society' in itself is not a social movement with a project for change, and social movement and civil society do not cover the same ground, although there is a connection: a flourishing civil society can be a breeding ground for social movements.⁴ The question is: when twinning coordinators/actors in the North/South talk about civil society, to what extent does the concept of social movements (and the associations that go with it) play a role? If this is the case, it must be made explicit in the partner relationship. Especially in twinning arrangements that consider working with a committee (or want to set up a committee), this is an important point of discussion. It is therefore important that partners (municipalities in the North) clarify what civil society means for them. This is to avoid supporting organisations that have an agenda for change and are therefore not necessarily part of civil society. This can create tensions or lack of ownership among politicians in the South. It is important to clarify this, including in relation to setting up a twinning committee: who should be on it and why?

With regard to peer evaluations - ACE Europe would make the following recommendations from its supporting role:

- keep the team of evaluators small (maximum 2 people, always with a 'local evaluator');

³ Otto, J.M. (1999) *Lokaal bestuur in ontwikkelingslanden. Een leidraad voor lagere overheden in de ontwikkelingssamenwerking.*

⁴ Barrez, D. (2001) *De antwoorden van het antiglobalisme. Van Seattle to Porto Alegre, 195-197.*

- clearly define what a peer is: a peer evaluator is not and does not need to be an evaluator. Classic evaluation practices should not be copied (e.g. use of peer pressure as in the OECD peer evaluations) and 'doing things differently' is allowed. The aim is to make a combination: on the one hand draw up a set of questions and an approach that makes systematic data collection possible, and on the other hand bring in the experience of the peer evaluator so that together we can learn how to improve what is already happening and how to adjust the way of working so that the effects become stronger. This helps to manage the power relationship so that trust can develop and commitment to the process of learning together (around global challenges) can emerge from different stakeholders.
- focus the evaluation on understanding and analysing specific projects (with attention to results and quality of implementation), rather than strategic questions (because they are often more 'political'). Strategic issues can be addressed in a feedback moment, through joint analysis of and reflection on the conclusions of the evaluation. Such a feedback moment requires extra preparation and time (a meeting of 2 hours in which only conclusions are shared is too limited for this).
- Further strengthen the learning aspect: the peer evaluation can be built up in combination with a self-evaluation in the presence of and with the peer, in which the peer asks questions from his/her own experience and practice in order to sharpen the focus and also brings in 'tacit knowledge'. The idea is that the evaluator can also take away insights that can be applied in his/her own practice (and is invited and encouraged to express and use these insights explicitly).
- For the future: (i) invite peers from the South to analyse projects in the North, (ii) continue to invest in peer evaluation and learning, but do not insist on peer evaluations as a function of accountability, (iii) provide a budget for twinning partners who wish to engage in peer evaluation.