

Flemish Association for Cities and Municipalities
(VVSG)

**Report
Support for SDG Partnerships (2024-2025)**

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context and objectives of the assignment

Fewer and fewer new Flemish municipalities are committing to town twinning, which is seen as administratively and financially burdensome and based on a traditional North-South relationship. The VVSG therefore decided to experiment with an alternative formula for international municipal cooperation, based on mutual knowledge sharing.

The formula also had to promote internationalisation, be accessible and involve low administrative and financial costs. The experiment was intended to generate recommendations for possible future continuation.

The pilot project ran from January 2024 to December 2025. It started with four Flanders-Rwanda and three Flanders-Benin partnerships around learning themes:

- Flemish-Rwandan partnerships: citizen participation
- Flemish-Benin partnerships: local economy with a special focus on citizen participation

Due to circumstances, the Flemish-Rwandan partnerships and one Flemish-Beninese partnership were already terminated in the first semester, and the pilot project was fully implemented with two Flanders-Benin partnerships: Laarne – Ouinhi and Sint-Truiden – Covè.

Methodology

The pilot project was structured around the following **learning cycle** within each municipality:

- Each municipality identifies local challenges and formulates learning questions around them
- Partner municipalities exchange ideas on these learning questions, with one municipality requesting expertise and the other offering expertise in turn
- Each municipality experiments in the field with what it learns from the partner municipality
- This deepens learning questions or gives rise to new ones, continuing the cycle

Two key learning strategies:

- Digital exchanges between partner municipalities
- Field visits by each municipality to its partner municipality

The vast majority of exchanges were digital. This was particularly difficult in the beginning, partly due to technical issues and language proficiency. There was a field visit by Beninese municipalities to their Flemish partners and a field visit by Flemish municipalities to their Beninese partners: these were crucial moments in the learning processes.

The exchanges were supervised by an external consultant and the VVSG representative.

Ten tools were developed for the reciprocal learning processes. The focus was on systematising learning processes: formulating detailed learning questions, following up on what had been learned and its application in the field.

Results

Positive results:

- The experiment was a success: the four municipalities learned from each other and put this into practice (Sint-Truiden was a specific case).
- The learning questions developed were qualitative and relevant (linked to local needs).
- The field visits clearly responded to the learning questions.
- The digital approach was sometimes difficult but ultimately worked.
- Internationalisation: there was involvement from services, administration, politics and councils. The municipalities communicated externally about the SDG Partnerships.
- The SDG Partnerships had a limited administrative burden and financial cost.
- The experiment was intense at times, but still accessible to the municipalities.

Challenges:

- Technological problems hampered digital exchanges.
- Digital meetings were sometimes difficult due to ambitious agendas.
- Direct exchanges between municipalities did not happen immediately.
- The local political context sometimes had a negative impact on the pilot project.
- Municipalities and umbrella organisations did not always/immediately understand the essence of the SDG partnership approach and how it differs from traditional town twinning.
- Language problems (French, English) were sometimes a hindering factor.

Lessons learned

Methodology

- Learning processes are difficult to predict accurately and are partly beyond our control.
- Learning processes are of better quality when they are linked to concrete applications.
- Good preparation of municipalities (knowledge of context, etc.) in SDG Partnerships is an important factor for accessible and smooth learning processes.

Actors and governance

- A good understanding of the essence of SDG Partnerships among umbrella organisations and municipalities is crucial for strong municipal engagement in the partnerships.
- Strong involvement of umbrella organisations in SDG Partnerships is important.
- The right balance between political and technical participants is important for the learning processes.

Future SDG Partnerships will improve if the methodology takes these lessons into account.

Recommendations

Key point: the methodology used in the pilot project has worked and should form the basis for a possible repeat, with a number of points for attention.

Methodology

- Budgets must be confirmed as early as possible and paid in a single instalment so that municipalities have sufficient time to use them.

- Good internet connection and equipment must be guaranteed for digital exchanges.
- The site visit must be thoroughly prepared and linked to the learning questions.
- Individual coaching must be given sufficient weight to lighten the digital group sessions.
- The umbrella organisations must train the municipalities in preparation for the partnerships (knowledge of partner countries, etc.).
- The methodology must be continuously monitored and adjusted if necessary (flexibility).
- Political contexts must be anticipated as much as possible.

Actors and governance

- Ensure that municipalities and umbrella organisations fully understand and support the principle of SDG partnerships by involving the necessary services and articulating this internally.
- Focal points and other persons in the municipality must be given a mandate for high-quality participation.
- The right balance must be found between the participation of technical and political profiles, adequate knowledge, etc.
- Sufficient language skills must be guaranteed.
- Southern umbrella organisations must be involved in all phases of the process and there must be ongoing dialogue between all umbrella organisations involved.
- Multiplier effect: the participating municipality can work on problems and learning questions from several municipalities together and feed back the lessons learned and inspiration gained to that group of municipalities, which then each try to apply the lessons and inspiration and feed back as a group to the participating municipality. The participating municipality would thus become a kind of knowledge hub.

2 INTRODUCTION

Between January 2024 and December 2025, the VVSG launched an experiment between Flemish and African municipalities called SDG partnerships, with the aim of establishing, testing and refining an alternative methodology for international municipal partnerships based on mutual knowledge creation and exchange. The aim of this experiment was therefore to learn from each other and to apply what had been learned in practice, integrating it into policy or other initiatives. Other objectives included the internationalisation of Flemish administrations and accessibility (limited use of personnel and administrative burdens).

The report is structured as follows.

In the second chapter, we describe the context in which the project takes place.

We then describe the methodology developed during the pilot project and the tools used to make the learning process work.

In Chapter 4, we explain how the implementation went, what worked and what did not.

In Chapter 5, we explain how the learning processes developed in concrete terms in each municipality during the process, what influence the partner municipalities had, and how the application took place in the field. This complements the previous chapters, which were more theoretical.

We conclude with conclusions, lessons learned and recommendations.

The appendix contains all the tools we used in the process and a table showing the development of the learning cycles of the municipalities.

3 CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES OF THE ASSIGNMENT

3.1 Context of the assignment

3.1.1 The GLoBe programme

The VVSG (Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities) is a recognised institutional actor within the Belgian development cooperation sector. For many years, the VVSG has been working to promote good local governance with subsidies from the DGD, the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation. The current VVSG programme GLoBe (Good Local Governance), funded by the DGD, runs from 2022 to 2026. GLoBe strengthens local governance through three tracks:

- Capacity building for local politicians and civil servants
- Supporting participation so that residents can actively contribute to policy
- Strengthening umbrella organisations of local governments

This is achieved through long-term partnerships, town twinning and the exchange of good practices between partners. The VVSG works in seven countries within this programme (Belgium, Benin, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Rwanda, Senegal and South Africa).

The specific objective in Belgium consists of five separate results. The fourth result concerns the search for new forms of international cooperation, where we see a clear link with the SDG partnerships.

3.1.2 The SDG Partnerships

Over the last few years, the VVSG has identified a number of trends with regard to traditional town twinning between Flanders and the Global South. Firstly, fewer and fewer Flemish local authorities are committing to traditional town twinning with municipalities in the Global South, as town twinning is perceived as administratively burdensome and financially costly. Secondly, most town twinning arrangements are based on support for the municipality in the Global South by the Flemish municipality through donations and knowledge exchange, which maintains a vertical relationship between Flanders and the partner countries. This vertical relationship is increasingly being questioned by global solidarity organisations, but also by the DGD. Flemish authorities are also increasingly looking for international cooperation from which they themselves can benefit, e.g. by gaining knowledge on topics that are important to them, by building networks, etc. A number of new town twinning arrangements have already been launched based on this principle, such as Bruges, Kortrijk and Oostkamp.

This situation has prompted the VVSG to look for innovative – but also accessible – forms of cooperation between municipalities in Flanders and the Global South that 1) should be lighter in terms of investment (time, administrative burdens, etc.) and 2) pursue a horizontal relationship between North and South, based on mutual reinforcement around knowledge. These forms of global cooperation would also be in line with the current decolonisation processes that are becoming increasingly strong in various organisations and areas.

The VVSG decided to experiment with this by working on global partnerships that would aim at mutual knowledge creation and sharing around specific SDGs. These partnerships were named SDG partnerships. This pilot project is the first experiment in this regard.

3.2 Objectives of the SDG Partnerships pilot project

The immediate objective of this assignment was to use a pilot project to experiment with alternative forms of international municipal cooperation based on knowledge creation and sharing between Flanders and the partner countries, but which were also accessible and involved low administrative costs.

Further main objectives were:

- Learning lessons from the experiment
- Internationalisation of Flemish municipalities
- Strengthening municipal administrations

In terms of objectives, there were therefore two distinct levels:

- The experiment itself as a methodology and learning from it
- The concrete impact on municipalities (knowledge and its concrete application, internationalisation)

The specific nature of the SDG partnerships cannot be overemphasised; a switch from traditional North-South support via relatively small projects to joint knowledge creation and sharing between North and South is an impactful change of principles for both North and South.

3.3 Participating municipalities and learning themes

The SDG Partnerships were launched between Flanders and two African countries: Rwanda and Benin. Eight partnerships were planned before the start of the pilot project (four Flanders-Rwanda, four Flanders-Benin), but the project ultimately started with seven partnerships:

- 4 Flemish-Rwandan partnerships (each partnership with 1 Rwandan and 1 Flemish municipality)
- 3 Flemish-Beninese partnerships (each partnership with 1 Beninese and 1 Flemish municipality)

Incidentally, in the case of Rwanda, it was not municipalities but districts, a higher administrative level, that were involved.

The central learning themes were:

- Flemish-Rwandan partnerships: citizen participation.
- Flemish-Beninese partnerships: local economy, with a special focus on citizen participation.

Both learning themes were also the focus of the collaborations in the ongoing DGD programme GLoBe.

Citizen participation was a common learning theme between the Flemish-Rwandan and Flemish-Beninese partnerships, which meant that these blocks also had to be able to learn from each other.

Due to circumstances (explained in the report), the Flemish-Rwandan partnerships were interrupted at the end of the first semester of 2024 and one Flemish municipality withdrew from the partnership with Benin. Ultimately, two SDG partnerships remained (with Benin), namely Laarne – Ouinhi and Sint-Truiden – Covè.

4 DESCRIPTION OF METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND TOOLS

In this chapter, we describe the methodological approach and principles used, as well as the tools employed. We describe their concrete application, what worked and what did not, in the following chapter.

4.1 Experimentation and flexible methodologies

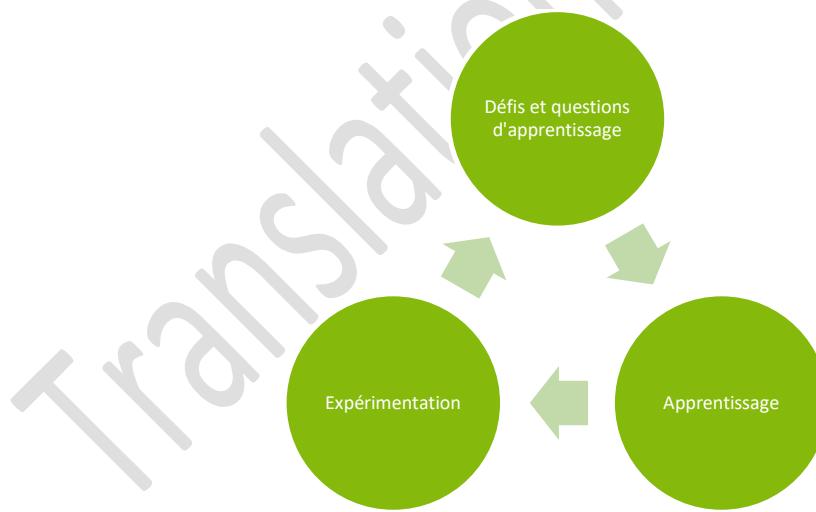
Since the SDG Partnerships, based on mutual knowledge enhancement, were an experiment, there was no clearly defined methodology for them yet; the aim of the project was precisely to search for a functioning methodology and to learn lessons from it. Of course, an approach was developed as a starting point, but this was deliberately flexible, especially in the beginning, and was continuously monitored and adjusted as the experiment progressed (learning while doing, trial and error). Between February and the end of September 2024 in particular, the methodology was fine-tuned several times to achieve the right balance.

The experiment also included a project dimension: the municipalities were given funds to experiment with what they had learned and with the inspiration they had gained, in order to support the learning process. However, the projects were not allowed to become the goal of the experiment. This sometimes created tension between experimenting with reciprocal North-South learning dynamics on the one hand and project implementation on the other.

4.2 The learning cycle

The experiment was based on the idea of a learning cycle:

Figure 1 – Schematic representation of the learning cycle



The following concrete **steps** were planned for the participating municipalities:

- The municipalities get to know each other.
- Each municipality identifies local problems/challenges related to the learning themes (see 2.3) and **formulates learning questions** to address these problems/challenges. This takes place in a digital dialogue with the SDG partner municipality as a sounding board. Naturally, learning questions are sought for which the SDG partner has expertise, otherwise no learning process can be started.
- **Learning processes among the SDP partner municipalities**, which learn from each other through digital exchange. This dialogue can also lead to reformulations of the learning questions.

- **Site visits** by each municipality to its partner municipality to learn about the learning questions: this is a crucial step in the learning cycle, as the partners (finally) meet each other in person (social aspect) and the municipalities can see in concrete terms what has been exchanged digitally. Initiatives, actors, municipal services, projects, etc. are visited on site.
- **Application** by each municipality of what has been learned or the inspiration gained by setting up often experimental initiatives in their own area, with the aim of tackling local problems/challenges.
- Learning from this experimentation, identifying obstacles, **further deepening** and adapting the **learning questions**, possibly formulating new questions, so that the learning cycle continues and becomes dynamic.

In the learning processes within the SDG Partnerships, both municipalities request expertise from the partner municipality (through their learning questions) and offer expertise to the partner municipality by answering its learning questions. Each municipality is therefore both a seeker and a provider of expertise. This is the **reciprocal nature** of the SDG Partnerships.

The above steps were supervised from start to finish by an external consultant, in collaboration with the VVSG representative(s).

4.3 Digital exchanges

It was clear from the outset that the vast majority of learning between the SDG partner municipalities would take place digitally:

- The first six months (February 2024-September 2024) were entirely digital.
- At the end of September 2024, the first field visit took place, from the Beninese municipalities to the Flemish municipalities. This field visit lasted five days.
- This was followed by another six months of digital exchanges.
- In March 2025, the next field visit took place, this time from the Flemish to the Beninese municipalities (5 days).
- After that, all exchanges between partner municipalities were digital until the end of 2025.

The field visits naturally played a crucial role in the learning processes (strong input of information in the field, direct contacts with the SDG partner municipality and other actors, many impressions), but in terms of time, the field visits carried much less weight than the digital exchanges. The digital aspect was a major challenge because:

- The municipalities did not know each other and their realities were very different (some municipalities were not familiar with the partner country).
- Not all Flemish and Rwandan municipalities were fluent in French and English.
- The internet connection in Benin and Rwanda was often unstable.
- There were differences between the partner municipalities in terms of digital communication culture (screen on or off during digital exchanges, on computer or phone, in the office or not, with or without surrounding noise, etc.).
- The approach of the exchanges, i.e. learning from each other, was new, abstract and ambitious for the municipalities.

Digital communication was not an easy option in those circumstances.

4.4 Tools used in the SDG Partnerships

In the steps of the learning cycle described above, tools were used, some of which had been developed in advance and others during the pilot project. All the tools used can be found in the appendix to this report.

Below is a detailed overview of the tools used for the various steps of the learning cycle (the formats of the tools are included in the appendices).

Figure 2 – Overview of steps in the learning cycle and tools used

Steps in the learning cycle	Tools
Presentation and getting to know each other among municipalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation sheet: description of municipality and country (geographical, socio-economic, political, structure of the municipality, etc.), with illustrations • Activity profile: for three existing projects/initiatives, the municipalities identify and evaluate the strategies used for the participation of local actors (what worked, what did not work?) • Factor analysis: the municipalities analyse and prioritise factors that have had 1) a positive impact and 2) a negative impact on the above initiatives. • The municipalities conduct a SWOT analysis for at least 1 of the 3 initiatives/projects
Develop learning questions for each partner municipality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning question table: each municipality develops two learning questions in a table, with for each learning question 1) concrete problems/obstacles that should be solved by the learning question and 2) sub-questions, i.e. a breakdown of the learning questions into more concrete parts that make the learning question manageable.
Learning processes and the contributions of the partner municipalities to these	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learning question table, as a basis for exchanges. • Short audiovisual clips
Site visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning question table cross-referenced with priorities and activities • Reference terms for site visits • Action plan for the coming months as a result of the site visit
Applying what has been learned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action plan as a basis

A digital platform was also developed to centralise information (reports, learning tables, etc.). However, this tool was not widely used by participants and was eventually abandoned.

The tools often took the form of tasks that the municipalities had to carry out, with support from the external consultant through individual coaching, and then present in digital meetings.

A lot of attention was paid to digital exchanges, for which **three forms** were used:

- **Individual coaching**, in which the consultant explained the pilot project to the individual municipalities in one-to-one sessions, provided support for the tasks, discussed and refined the learning question tables together with the consultant and the municipality, reviewed the site visits, etc.
- **Bilateral meetings** with the participation of only the two municipalities per SDG Partnership, facilitated by the external consultant. This is where the dialogue between the municipalities in the partnerships took place: they discussed their respective learning questions, shared their expertise on the learning questions of the requesting municipality, discussed programmes for site visits, etc.
- **Knowledge network meetings (or group meetings)**, with the participation of all municipalities together, to seek cross-fertilisation, learning between all participating municipalities, learning from each other's learning questions. External specialists also attended these meetings to discuss topics related to the learning questions.

The bilateral meeting normally always preceded the knowledge network meetings. At the beginning of the process, the bilateral meeting provided specific input for the knowledge network meetings, but later this mechanism was toned down.

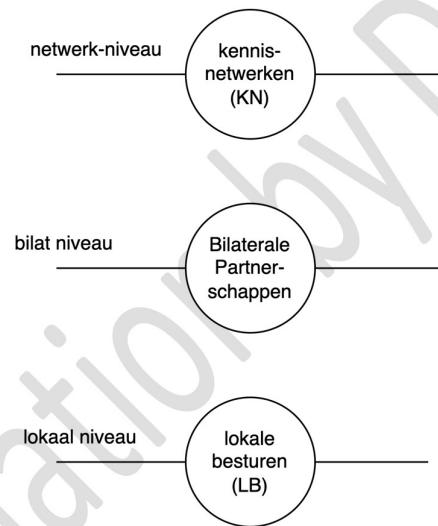
The logic between individual coaching, bilateral meetings and the knowledge network sessions was as follows: start developing learning questions for each municipality on an individual basis (with individual coaching), refine these questions with the SDG partner during the bilateral sessions and initiate a learning dialogue around them (gaining expertise) with the SDG partner, then open everything up to the knowledge network level (the large group) to get everyone's input on all learning questions, involve external speakers and cause as much cross-pollination as possible, and reformulate learning questions if necessary. Then, we went back to the individual level for the next tasks and/or thoughts about the learning questions.

The aim of the knowledge network sessions was not only to address individual learning questions, but also to offer a number of common learning questions and knowledge activities related to them.

Consideration was given to also creating knowledge networks per region (North and South) in order to develop North and South learning processes, but this idea was ultimately not implemented due to lack of time; it would probably have conflicted with the objective of accessibility.

In summary, these were the levels at which the municipal authorities came together:

Figure 3 – Levels at which municipalities found themselves



5 IMPLEMENTATION METHODOLOGY AND LEARNING CYCLE

In this chapter, we describe how the experiment actually unfolded, how the learning cycles developed and how the methodologies and tools contributed to this.

5.1 Country participation and participant profiles

A number of external factors hampered the initial phase of the pilot project.

The call for SDG Partnerships was made one year before the local elections in Flanders. Given the duration of the pilot project (two years), it was difficult for the Flemish municipal authorities to decide to participate, as it would extend beyond the current legislative term. This weakened the potential participation of Flemish municipalities in the project.

Participation by the four Rwandan districts was difficult from the outset. They seemed to be looking for traditional technical support for technical projects, while the Flemish municipalities were looking for reciprocal learning processes. This gap led to Rwandan learning questions that were outside the scope, difficult exchanges and dwindling motivation. Moreover, the Rwandan districts said they could not contribute any knowledge to the Flemish municipalities. The fact that the Rwandan participants were districts rather than municipalities played a role, as districts are at a higher administrative level than municipalities, which meant that learning and experimentation in the field could not take place in the same way as in the Flemish and Beninese municipalities. There were still hopeful exchanges between the VVSG, RALGA and a number of Rwandan districts, but the diplomatic break between Rwanda and Belgium in 2025 ended the cooperation definitively.

The municipality of Schoten decided fairly quickly to withdraw from the cooperation with its SDG partner Lalo; after the departure of the accompanying civil servant, Schoten was unable to continue the project. For a number of months, attempts were made to keep Lalo involved in the project in an alternative way, but this could not be sustained, which meant that the municipality of Lalo also dropped out of the process.

In the end, only two Flemish-Beninese partnerships remained, namely Sint-Truiden – Covè and Laarne-Ouinihi.

Profiles of the participants

The participants from the municipalities, in the digital exchanges and the field visit, did not all have the same profile. The Beninese municipalities were always represented by the Secrétaire Exécutif (SE, comparable to the Flemish General Director), the person responsible for international cooperation and a number of technical/administrative functions. Initially, the mayor of one Beninese municipality took part in the digital sessions; he also participated in the field visit from Benin to Flanders.

Although the participation of the Beninese mayor played a useful political role (strengthening political support), it also became clear that the technical issues and the slower pace of the technical work (e.g. developing and debating learning questions) were not the optimal platform for the mayor. Participation at the highest political level could also influence the extent to which technical profiles did or did not express themselves in working meetings. This is an important lesson in terms of the composition of the groups.

For Benin's Flemish partners, either the Director-General of the local administration (Laarne) or the Local Global Policy Expert was the focal point. It was important, both for internal support and for optimal expertise, that the necessary relevant services were involved. In the case of Sint-Truiden, the Tourism Department was involved in the process in order to mobilise the necessary expertise for the learning questions of Covè. Due to circumstances, this department was not represented during the field visit to Benin

but was replaced by the Shop & the City agency, which has strong links to the tourism department. However, the tourism department remained closely involved in the exchanges with Covè. This participation had a clear added value for the relationship and learning between Covè and Sint-Truiden.

There was fairly strong political participation in the field visits from Laarne and Sint-Truiden (two aldermen from Laarne, one from Sint-Truiden), which went well. However, no mayor participated, which is a significant difference from the Beninese municipality.

As far as Flanders-Rwanda is concerned, the teams from the Flemish municipalities usually consisted of participation officials, communication officers and sometimes the person responsible for an existing town twinning, always with an alderman in the background. The Rwandan focal points acted, among other things, as intermediaries to convey learning questions from technical staff to the Flemish partner municipalities. There was no participation from political figures.

5.2 Learning cycle and application of the tools

5.2.1 Introduction between municipalities

As mentioned above, the municipalities had not yet met in person at the start of the pilot project. In some cases, they were not familiar with each other's countries. The first step was for the municipalities to get to know each other through digital exchanges. The following tools were used for this purpose:

- Presentation sheets in which the municipalities presented themselves:
 - People involved in the SDG partnership experiment (internal and external)
 - Political and administrative structure of the country and local government
 - Brief description of the municipality: map, images, information about population, geography, economy, tourism, famous people, etc.
 - Reasons why the municipality participated in this experiment
- Activity profiles: identifying and evaluating strategies for the participation of local actors in three existing municipal projects/initiatives (what worked, what did not work?)
- Factor analysis: analysing and prioritising factors that had a positive and negative impact on the above initiatives.
- SWOT analysis for at least one of the three initiatives/projects

The presentation period between the municipalities and the tasks to be prepared took a lot of time and energy, which was perceived as burdensome by the municipalities. It became clear that the municipalities could have been better informed in advance about the political/administrative/social/economic structures of the country and the partner municipality, e.g. through the umbrella organisations.

The three projects/initiatives identified and used in the exercises were not relevant to the further process, but served to make the reflection on strategies, factors, strengths and weaknesses as concrete as possible in order to identify local challenges and needs for reinforcement (demand for expertise) in the municipalities, as well as the existence of expertise for this in the SDG partner municipality (supply of expertise). The supply and demand of expertise per partnership were set out in a table in order to identify similarities and complementarities between partnerships and to facilitate prioritisation.

The municipalities were asked to carry out part of these tasks as 'homework' and then present them to each other in bilateral meetings, guided by the consultant. This led to enriching moments of mutual exchange, the beginning of a mutual exploration process.

A number of **obstacles** in the process came to light for the first time:

- The difficulty for some municipalities to carry out tasks autonomously in the context of this experiment. Reasons cited for this included lack of time, as not all participants in the municipality

were given extra time for this and other priorities often took precedence. Individual coaching with the consultant therefore became important for the tasks.

- The difficulty for municipalities in sometimes recognising which information was relevant to the partner municipality in the exploratory process.
- Language: all communication was in French (Benin) and English (Rwanda). For a number of Flemish municipalities, it was not easy to understand the French and English of their African partners and to express themselves clearly. This improved as the project progressed. The Rwandan participants did not always have a good command of English.
- Technology: digital communication was often a problem in Rwanda and Benin (poor internet and Wi-Fi quality), which seriously hampered communication during meetings. Seeing the faces of the partner communities on the screens was important (some participants turned off their cameras). Also, especially in the beginning, some participants joined meetings by telephone, which made it difficult to share documents.
 - These problems were improved through financial support from the project, which was used to improve internet connections.
 - Ultimately, despite the problems, digital communication between Flanders and Benin did work for quality exchanges.

For all these reasons, contact between municipalities in the bilateral meetings was often not very smooth, especially in the early stages, and the information shared was not always relevant. The consultant's supporting role remained important for the tasks of translating or paraphrasing, through individual coaching and in the sessions. Nevertheless, despite the obstacles, it is clear that this phase was crucial for building mutual trust and getting to know each other. An initial dialogue was started and a first step was taken towards identifying common factors and challenges, which was further developed in the next phase of the cycle.

Initially, it was suggested that it would have been better to start with a site visit, as direct contact would have facilitated exchanges. However, it was decided to plan the visit for a later date and to prepare for it through numerous tasks and digital exchanges, in order to give the visit more impact in the search for specific inspiration and solutions. We believe that the pilot project has succeeded in this intention.

Incidentally, from this phase onwards, the consultant already emphasised the importance of direct exchanges between the partner municipalities without his intervention. However, this happened little in the early stages. After the field visits, this happened more often, especially when there were concrete reasons for doing so (such as the awareness in Covè of the importance of involving local actors in a dialogue on tourism or developing a local 'DNA' to better promote tourism).

5.2.2 Developing learning questions for each partner municipality

In this phase, each individual municipality, both in Flanders and in Rwanda and Benin, formulated and elaborated learning questions that would form the basis for the rest of the process (except for Rwanda). Systematising these questions in a table made it easier to match demand for expertise with the supply of expertise in each SDG Partnership and to identify possible common themes for the knowledge networks. In a partnership, municipalities were therefore both demanders and suppliers of expertise.

The learning questions developed in the Flanders-Benin partnerships were broad at the outset but became increasingly focused; the guided digital exchanges were therefore effective in this regard. Between Flanders and Rwanda, the development of the learning questions was difficult, as explained above. To avoid the learning questions remaining too abstract, it was decided to elaborate each learning question into 1) concrete problems that the learning question had to try to solve and 2) sub-questions, a detailing of the learning question to make it manageable, to be able to answer it concretely and to be able to apply it more concretely in the field. To this end, the municipalities used the tool known as the [learning question table](#) (learning questions + underlying problems + sub-questions).

It is important to note that this was **an iterative process** between global learning questions, underlying problems and sub-questions: the sharper the underlying problems, the sharper the sub-questions, the sharper the global learning questions, etc. Individual coaching was crucial in this regard, but so were the exchanges with the partner municipality via the bilateral sessions.

Laarne and Sint-Truiden increasingly moved in the same direction when working on their learning questions, which ultimately led to the decision to draw up a joint learning question table.

Working on the learning questions in bilateral and group meetings led to rather long and difficult meetings, in challenging circumstances (language, technological problems). It was therefore decided to do more and more work through individual coaching sessions, which thus became more important. This lightened the bilateral and group meetings, allowing more time for external speakers to come, for example.

Finding the right balance between the three forms of digital exchange took time. The external consultants played a central role in the three forms of digital exchange (preparation, coordination, facilitation of exchanges). The VVSG programme manager also played a central role in the group meetings.

5.2.3 Digital contributions by municipalities to the learning process and preparation for site visits

Once the learning questions had been finalised, the municipalities began to use their expertise to answer the learning questions of their partner municipality. This was done through digital exchanges, using the learning table as a tool. The municipality requesting expertise reviewed its learning questions, including sub-questions and underlying problems, and the municipality providing expertise responded accordingly. The consultant coordinated these exchanges.

Solving the learning questions and the problems to be solved one-on-one was difficult, as the problems to be solved were too complex for this. When it concerned more concrete sub-questions and problems to be solved, e.g. launching a website in Benin or strengthening a Facebook page for local tourism, in theory some of what had been learned could be applied immediately, but even in these cases, this was not always realistic, as internal steps were first needed in the Beninese municipalities, such as attracting a community manager or mapping out tourist assets. So even for the more concrete (sub)learning questions, what was learned usually led mainly to inspiration and avenues for thought, but not necessarily to immediate solutions. In more complex cases, such as strengthening the tourism sector in a Beninese municipality, the path to direct concrete changes was even more complex.

Providing expertise on the learning questions also led to an ever-better understanding of the learning questions, sometimes reformulating and refining them. This was still necessary at that point, also in view of the upcoming site visit, in order to enable the host municipality (the expertise municipality) to put together the most relevant package of activities possible.

In order to prepare for the site visit, a tool was used in this phase to link the proposed activities of the site visit to the learning questions, namely the [activity-learning question table](#). This tool was used to 1) prioritise sub-questions, 2) verify in black and white which sub-questions the activities would answer and how, and 3) immediately highlight any gaps in the site visit programme that would prevent all (sub)learning questions from being successfully addressed. This table was discussed by the municipalities in their digital meetings and amended where necessary.

Finally, the agreements in the activity learning question table were formalised by incorporating them into [Reference Terms](#), which were validated by the visiting municipality and signed by the host municipality.

All of this contributed to ensuring that the site visits would meet the needs of the learning processes.

5.2.4 Site visits

In September 2024, the first field visit was organised, from the Beninese to the Flemish municipalities, and in March 2025, the field visit from the Flemish to the Beninese municipalities took place. The field visits lasted five days, the first of which was preparatory and the last of which was conclusive, with a focus on consolidating what had been learned and planning how to apply it over the following months.

The field visits were crucial moments in the learning processes, as the municipalities would meet each other in person for the first time, which should give a strong boost to human contact but also to the learning process by experiencing the reality directly in the field.

The field visits were successful. A great deal of information was shared and experiences gained through meetings with various actors and visits to local realities such as markets, producers, networks, citizens' councils, etc. Crucially, the activities largely responded to the learning questions and sub-questions formulated in advance.

First day: introduction

The first day of the site visit (Monday) was always joint, with all four municipalities together, with presentations of the site visit programme, exchanges on the municipalities' expectations, the methodology for the learning processes and the tools used, external speakers on SDGs, administrative contexts of local authorities and similar themes. The participating municipalities found this first day useful, both in terms of gaining a clear overview of the programme and for capacity building. It was also an opportunity for the four participating municipalities to get together and strengthen their mutual contacts, as well as their contacts with the VVSG and ANCB.

Days 2, 3 and 4: the field visit

Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday were used for the actual field visit of each individual visiting municipality to its partner municipality. A tool was developed for the visiting municipality to learn from ([Learning Journal, site visit version September 2024](#) and [site visit version March 2025](#)) to keep track of learning, evaluate the relevance of the activities, identify missing information and develop ways to apply what had been learned in practice upon return. In the morning, the municipalities were expected to review the Learning Journal for the day in preparation, if possible with the host municipality. At the end of the day, the visiting municipalities filled in their Learning Journal together with the consultant or the VVSG representative, either on site or via WhatsApp. Elements emerged that could be shared with the accompanying municipality the following day, allowing any necessary adjustments to be made to the agenda.

Observations from the site visits:

- The activities were closely linked to the objectives/learning questions. This was very important for the learning process and was decisive for the success of the site visits.
- The social contacts on site and experiencing the local contexts were important for the continuation of the partnerships (mutual understanding, better knowledge of the context in which the other municipality operated).
- The participants were visibly motivated to learn.
- The mayor's participation had the advantage of creating a strong political component, and thus political will and ties in both municipalities, but his presence in technical meetings was not ideal, also given the hierarchical differences.

Findings on methodologies and tools used during site visits:

- The systematisation of the lessons learned at the end of the day, digitally or physically, with the guidance of the consultant or the VVSG representative, using the Learning Journal, proved very useful for systematising the observations, reflecting on their applicability and identifying missing information. It was sometimes difficult to do this after a long day, and in a number of cases it was impossible to carry out, but overall it was done in a group setting and proved to be a good decision.

- The participation of the consultant or the VVSG manager as a guide for the delegation was important in order to provide context for each activity and, if necessary, additional explanations and, at times, translation.

Day 5: consolidation and action plan

The last day was devoted to consolidation and planning. The delegation reviewed the week and shared observations and conclusions about the site visit.

A very important activity on the last day was the drafting of the [Action Plan](#) by the visiting municipalities for the coming months, i.e. for the concrete application of what had been learned in concrete activities, projects and initiatives. This included: objectives, activities to achieve the objectives, persons involved from the requesting municipality, support from the expertise municipality, necessary resources. Sometimes it was a challenge to be specific in all aspects, but overall the Action Plans were useful tools.

Above all, it was interesting to see how what had been observed in the field served as inspiration and, in some cases, could be applied in concrete terms, although of course not usually on a one-to-one basis.

5.3 Interim evaluations

Regular evaluations were conducted to follow up on what the participants thought worked, what did not, and how things could be improved. An interim evaluation took place in April-May 2024, in December 2024 and in September-November 2025. These moments contributed to adjusting the methodology where necessary and keeping abreast of the participants' analyses.

5.4 Role of umbrella organisations

The VVSG, RALGA and ANCB all played important roles in the pilot project. There was continuous consultation between the three umbrella organisations, both for fine-tuning the initial proposal and selecting the municipalities, and for consulting with the consultants on several occasions during the processes. Where necessary, the umbrella organisations contacted the municipalities directly to discuss any potential problems. The consultant Benin had regular exchanges with the ANCB and the VVSG to monitor the processes and dynamics together.

6 EVOLUTION OF THE FOUR LEARNING CYCLES

In this chapter, we review the learning cycles of the four municipalities in detail, giving the reader a concrete impression of how the learning processes developed. At the end of this chapter, there is a table summarising the learning processes. The appendix contains a [table with a detailed schematic representation of these learning processes](#).

6.1 Ouinhi

Initially, Ouinhi wanted to focus specifically on the lack of tax revenue at the local level. The learning question was therefore how tax revenue could be increased. Discussions about the learning question and work on the learning question table took the question to another level, namely how local economic actors could contribute more to local taxes. This was followed by an awareness of 1) the importance of local actors feeling sufficiently supported by the municipality to see the importance of tax contributions and 2) an understanding of the fact that local economic growth was a prerequisite for higher tax contributions from economic actors.

During the field visit to Laarne, the market was visited. Here, it became clear to Ouinhi, among other things, that the municipality supported the local economic actors present at the market in various ways, by getting to know their needs and wishes through regular consultation and by initiating a dialogue with them. This had created a constructive relationship between the municipality and local economic actors.

This observation was an *eye-opener* for Ouinhi. Since then, Ouinhi's learning question has further transformed into how it could develop a constructive dialogue with local economic actors in order to better meet their needs, thereby promoting trust and local economic growth, which should ultimately contribute to higher tax contributions. An interesting transformation of the learning question.

This was put into practice by setting up an advisory council (*conseil consultatif*) with local economic actors, something that the Ouinhi delegation had visited during their working visit to Laarne. Ouinhi has now identified the economic actors, established contacts and set up the advisory council, which is operational with quarterly meetings. A number of initiatives have already been launched to meet the needs of the actors, including the construction of a hangar for storing products for the market and maintenance of certain roads, as well as the production of promotional videos for female producers, which will be shown on the Ouinhi website (see below). Ouinhi is now communicating with Laarne without the intervention of the consultant.

A second learning question concerned digital communication, in particular the launch of a website¹. This proved to be too ambitious, so – as a result of the learning process with Laarne – a smaller website was chosen, specifically tailored to the needs of local economic actors. Transparent information about municipal council decisions has become part of this website. Ouinhi is now in autonomous contact with Laarne about the further development of the content and design of the website. As a result of all this, Ouinhi has now become a *hub* for the 13 other municipalities in the PCIC programme (Programme de Coopération International Communal, the programme of the UVCW, the Walloon association of cities and municipalities) with regard to the development and maintenance of websites.

Overall, we can conclude that the learning objectives have been achieved, that they have been applied in the work of the municipality, and that this application has had a clear impact on the municipality of Ouinhi.

Internationalisation of Ouinhi

¹ <https://ouinhi.mairie.bj/>

Furthermore, several departments and other actors have been involved in the SDG Partnership, such as the Local Development and Planning Department, the Administrative and Financial Affairs Department, the Information Systems Department, the Secrétariat Exécutif, aldermen (second deputy mayor), chair of the Economic and Financial Affairs Committee, the head of the municipal ADTA unit (Agence de Développement Territorial Agricole), and members of the advisory council of economic operators (chairs of agricultural chains, processors of agricultural products, artisans, etc.). The municipality has also communicated openly about the cooperation with Laarne, including the two site visits (to Laarne and from Laarne to Ouinhi). The municipality of Ouinhi held a dialogue with its citizens following its visit to Laarne. The partnership has therefore undoubtedly contributed to the internationalisation of the municipality. The project has been so convincing for both Ouinhi and Laarne that both municipalities have decided to enter into a town twinning agreement.

6.2 Covè

Initially, Covè had focused on agriculture, nature and tourism, which was a rather broad starting position. Through dialogue with Sint-Truiden, this was quickly narrowed down to tourism as a specific learning theme, as Covè wanted to launch tourism in its territory (which was practically non-existent at the time) and Sint-Truiden had a great deal of experience in this area (particularly tourism linked to fruit growing). Incidentally, tourism was also one of the spearheads of the Beninese national government's policy, which gave this learning theme of this SDG Partnership an interesting political coherence (this initiative by Covè was therefore part of a broader political vision and priority).

The second learning question was similar to that of Ouinhi, namely setting up a website.

As far as tourism was concerned, the initial approach was relatively narrow, namely building and organising a tourism office, for which Covè wanted to use Sint-Truiden's expertise. During the digital exchanges around the learning question table, Sint-Truiden explained its vision on tourism, emphasising the importance of the role of local actors as drivers of tourism, the supporting role of the municipality, and the importance of first developing a vision on tourism, including a participatory formulation of the local 'ADN'. This vision influenced the development of Covè's learning question, but the construction of the tourist office remained central in those first months of the learning process.

During Covè's field visit to Sint-Truiden in September 2025, a lot of attention was paid to the way tourism was organised in Sint-Truiden, the importance of a vision, the formulation of the city's 'ADN', the mapping of tourist assets and actors, the dynamic role of local actors, and the role of the municipality in providing support and coordination. Through Covè's Learning Journal and exchanges on the last day of the visit, it became clear that Covè was beginning to realise that a tourist office alone was not enough to launch tourism in a sustainable way. Nevertheless, the focus remained on the tourist office, whose grand opening was now planned for January 2025. The rest – vision, local actors, ADN, etc. – did not seem to be taking shape.

During Sint-Truiden's visit to Covè, discussions were held about tourism, and this led to a shift in Covè's vision of tourism. The numerous exchanges with the representative of Shop & the City, who was part of the delegation, were undoubtedly decisive in this regard. After that visit, direct email exchanges began between Covè and Sint-Truiden's tourism manager about vision, actors and ADN. Covè mapped out its tourist assets with the involvement of local stakeholders and distributed this mapping of tourist assets among various organisations and institutions (local hospitality industry, institutions at departmental level, etc.). Covè also contacted local stakeholders (hospitality industry, but also agricultural stakeholders, for the link between tourism and local agricultural products, theatre groups, etc.) with a view to setting up a consultation structure around tourism. Sint-Truiden's idea of identifying and promoting a local 'DNA' for tourism was adopted: Covè published a brochure entitled 'Covè en 10 regards' (Covè and 10 perspectives), which presents 10 elements of its identity based on the idea of local 'DNA'. It can therefore be said that Covè has ultimately begun to incorporate Sint-Truiden's experience and vision of tourism into its own tourism activities, in its own way and at its own pace, and that there has been a real transfer of knowledge. Contacts between Covè and Sint-Truiden continue to this day, without the intervention of the consultant.

The digital communication that is to be launched has provisionally taken the form of a Facebook page, set up specifically to support tourism in Covè, which is now operational.²

Internationalisation of Covè

Here too, we can conclude that learning objectives were achieved and that the learning processes, which are still ongoing and are intended to continue after the pilot project has ended, are having a concrete impact on municipal operations. Services directly involved in the pilot project included the Local Development and Planning Service (also responsible for tourism), the financial service and the Secrétaire Exécutif. A great deal of communication took place with the general public about the collaboration in the run-up to the establishment and festive opening of the tourist office, as well as during the two site visits (dialogue with civil society, same mechanisms as in Ouinhi). The delegation from Sint-Truiden had many exchanges with departments and civil society (in particular advisory councils). Covè was already internationalised (partnerships with Tournai), but the pilot project has further strengthened this.

6.3 Laarne

For Laarne, the learning process began with a number of starting points, namely 1) that the various advisory councils in Laarne had lost much of their dynamism, and 2) that Laarne wanted to work on the theme of witchcraft as a starting point for work on the position of women in society. Laarne wanted to collaborate with Ouinhi on both starting points, given that 1) advisory councils in Benin are often dynamic and 2) given the specific position of women in African society (on the one hand, often having less overt power and recognition than men, but on the other hand, often well organised, dynamic, articulate and resilient).

It soon became apparent that working on women's issues through the theme of witchcraft in Benin was a sensitive matter, so it was decided not to work on this learning theme at this time and to focus on advisory councils instead. In the learning question table, the underlying problems for which Laarne was seeking a solution and the sub-questions were quickly formulated with the consultant, discussed with Ouinhi, and further refined.

The following months were devoted to organising Ouinhi's visit to Laarne, but from October 2024 onwards, exchanges resumed on Laarne's learning questions, also in preparation for the upcoming field visit to Ouinhi in March 2025. In the meantime, it became apparent that the learning questions of Laarne and Sint-Truiden were becoming increasingly similar. Ultimately, it was decided to develop a joint learning question table with both municipalities containing two learning questions, namely 1) how to make citizen participation in councils and other structures more dynamic (and what role the municipality should play in this) and 2) how to improve the marketing of local agricultural products (and what role the municipality should play in this). The ^{second}learning question was obviously closely linked to the local economy. For Laarne, however, there was a stronger emphasis on the first learning question than on the second, with an additional focus on participation specifically at the micro level, such as streets, neighbourhoods and districts. Laarne wanted to use the partnership and the site visit primarily to gain inspiration for new ways to make the councils more dynamic and socially diverse, where participants would focus more on common rather than individual goals, leading to higher-quality proposals.

The site visit was an important moment for Laarne, which set foot on the African continent for the first time, in its own words a rich but also confronting experience. As far as the learning questions are concerned, both were dealt with in detail through exchanges with associations, advisory councils, producers and, of course, the municipality of Ouinhi itself. In particular, it was instructive for Laarne to see how local actors participated in the participatory evaluation of project proposals (with scores) together with the

² Agonlin-Covè Tourist Office: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61576678629816>

municipality, for the participatory selection of projects; how Ouinhi introduced SDGs into its daily operations; and how the agricultural and economic councils functioned in practice.

The inspiration gained was applied in concrete terms to advisory councils through, among other things:

- involving more diverse actors and more associations in councils
- getting experts involved
- make advisory councils more representative in order to bring the right people to the table (representatives of specific groups, not chosen at random)
- Set up a village council by drawing lots.

A promotional brochure about local products has also been produced and widely distributed, and the agricultural council has been revitalised, as have the tourism and local economy councils. An educational brochure has been produced about the new multi-year programme, an idea taken directly from Ouinhi.

The learning objectives have therefore been achieved and there is concrete and even innovative application of what has been learned and the inspiration gained, which is of course a very positive impact of the pilot project. The experience was so positive that, as mentioned, the two municipalities have decided to start a town twinning scheme.

Internationalisation of Laarne

Laarne has clearly undergone a process of internationalisation. The director was the linchpin in this process, but other people and almost all departments were involved: Communication, Finance, Leisure, Policy and Organisation, Local Economy, Youth, Social Services. Many individuals and departments were directly involved in Ouinhi's visit to Laarne. Communication took place within the College, with schools, and Laarne's working visit to Ouinhi was featured in Laarne's magazine (*Klaar*). Feedback was also provided to the Global Council and in the VVSG magazine (*Lokaal*).

As a result of the experiment, the municipality became so convinced of the importance of cooperation that it decided to enter into a town twinning agreement with Ouinhi.

6.4 Sint-Truiden

The process in Sint-Truiden has been relatively complex.

At the very beginning, there was uncertainty in Sint-Truiden about the common thread (participation versus local economy). The initial approach for Sint-Truiden, when the general focus of the experiment was mainly on participation, was how to increase citizens' trust in the municipality, in response to a lack of trust in the municipality of Sint-Truiden due to a series of events in the recent past.

Over time, the VVSG decided to shift the overall focus more towards the local economy, after which Sint-Truiden developed its learning question more towards food strategy (linking the local economy and citizen participation), with the aim of strengthening the local sale of local products and citizen participation in the agricultural council, which were two distinct goals of the municipality of Sint-Truiden. As discussed above, these were also learning questions for Laarne, so both municipalities developed these learning questions together, but of course also each with their Beninese partner municipality. The field visit also addressed these questions and was successful. However, while Sint-Truiden initially set to work on applying what it had learned during the field visit, there was a change at the political level. It was decided in Sint-Truiden to sell a number of municipal plots of land to agricultural producers in order to generate municipal income but also to increase local production. As a result, strengthening the agricultural council was no longer a priority, which made it more difficult to apply the learning process with Covè at that time.

If strengthening the food network becomes relevant again at a later date, the learning process with Covè can be used again.

Internationalisation of Sint-Truiden

Sint-Truiden was already a highly internationalised municipality, with an international department and town twinning arrangements, but the work with Covè, the involvement of the tourism department and the provision of information to the council have certainly contributed to a stronger internationalisation of the municipality.

Here is a brief overview of the learning cycles of the four municipalities:

Figure 4 – Brief overview of the development of the learning cycles of the four municipalities

Municipality	Starting point for learning questions	Development of learning questions	Concrete application of what has been learned
Ouินhi	Increase in tax contributions by local economic actors Strengthening women's participation in politics Website development	Support for local economic actors Setting up a website to support local economic actors	Launch of advisory council for local economic actors Structural dialogue between municipality and advisory council Concrete support for local economic actors Small website to strengthen local economic actors
Laarne	Organisation of participatory post-project evaluations Working on women's rights through the theme of 'witches' Revitalising women's associations	Strengthening citizen participation in councils and other structures	Strengthening citizen participation in advisory councils through innovation
Covè	Articulation of agriculture, nature and tourism	Organising local actors around tourism and development Vision on tourism	Setting up a tourism office Strengthening cooperation with local actors around tourism Participatory development of a vision on tourism
Sint-Truiden	Strengthening citizens' trust in the municipality Strengthening citizen involvement (food strategy)	Strengthening local marketing of local products Strengthening citizen participation (agricultural council, food strategy)	Temporarily suspended due to political decisions.

7 CONCLUSIONS, LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 conclusions

It was a major challenge to experiment with a new way of collaborating between municipalities from the North and South with the aim of reciprocal and horizontal knowledge creation and sharing, without a fully established methodology and with very limited resources.

To begin with, not everything worked during the two years of the process. There were obstacles and more difficult phases. Unfortunately, Rwanda withdrew from the process after a few months, which meant that their Flemish partner municipalities also had to stop against their will. For the Rwandan districts, the objective of establishing mutual knowledge networks did not meet their expectations, which turned out to be more based on the model of traditional town twinning, i.e. support from the North for projects in the South. The Rwandan districts also reiterated that they could not contribute to the learning processes of the Flemish municipalities.

One Flemish partner withdrew from the collaboration with its Beninese partner because, on closer inspection, there was not enough internal support and conviction to participate in the experiment. The Beninese partner municipality was therefore forced to withdraw from the experiment. Ultimately, the experiment was reduced to just two Flemish-Beninese SDG partnerships.

Among these municipalities, it sometimes took some time before the essence of the project, namely experimenting with learning processes, was fully understood. This is understandable, as this objective differed greatly from the dominant traditional North-South relations between municipalities, which have had a major influence on the North-South thinking of municipalities.

Overall, however, the experiment proved to be a success. An interesting learning dynamic developed between the four remaining municipalities. The learning questions developed by the municipalities (individually and jointly) became increasingly focused and led to relevant exchanges. Not only did the municipalities learn and gain inspiration in concrete terms, but much of what they learned and the inspiration they gained was applied in various ways – adapted to local realities – and contributed to concrete local change processes. There was reciprocity and horizontality: everyone learned from everyone else, South and North, with each municipality in its own specific context. This broke with the traditional North-South pattern. The municipalities now have direct contact with each other about the learning questions, without the intervention of the consultant.

The **methodologies** used were crucial to the smooth running of the experiment. These were partly planned in advance but were regularly adapted to developments in the process, e.g. when they proved insufficiently effective, in response to obstacles or to reinforce dynamics that were working well. Through continuous monitoring of the dynamics, it was possible to make the right adjustments, e.g. in terms of coordination between bilateral and group meetings or through a stronger focus on individual coaching. For example, the group meetings were sometimes too long and tiring for the participants, especially in the beginning, which reduced their productivity. By giving more weight to individual coaching and monitoring time more closely, the balance was improved.

It is clear that the role of external **guidance** was important during most of the process and that direct exchanges for learning between the partner municipalities, without the guidance of the facilitator, took place relatively infrequently, although this improved significantly over time.

Operational partnerships were thus created around knowledge creation and exchange, in one case leading to plans for the establishment of a town twinning (Laarne and Ouinhi).

The experiment also contributed to the **internationalisation** or deepening of internationalisation of the municipalities (bearing in mind that Sint-Truiden and Ouinhi were already reasonably internationalised). This internationalisation took place by involving services in the process, the political level (mayor, aldermen), discussing the SDG partnerships in the council, informing the public through, for example, publications and meetings with the Beninese and Flemish municipalities during their visit.

Although the process has been intensive at times, the municipalities describe it as an accessible initiative (provided adequate guidance is given). The **administrative burden** (reporting, etc.) was perceived as low. Given the generally favourable to very favourable impact of the pilot project on the municipalities, it can be concluded that the cost-benefit analysis is positive.

7.2 Overall results

Positive results:

- The four municipalities learned from each other and put this into practice (knowing that the case of Sint-Truiden was specific).
- The learning questions were qualitative and relevant (linked to local needs).
- The site visits clearly responded to the learning questions.
- The digital aspect was sometimes difficult but ultimately worked
- Internationalisation: involvement of services, administration and politics, councils. The municipalities communicated externally about the SDG Partnerships.
- The SDG Partnerships had a limited administrative burden and financial cost, certainly in comparison with traditional town twinning schemes.
- The experiment was intense at times, but ultimately, all things considered, it was still accessible to the municipalities.

Challenges:

- The digital meetings were sometimes overloaded and too heavy due to the large amount of work being dealt with.
- Direct exchanges between the partner municipalities without the support of the consultant took a long time to get off the ground.
- Local political contexts sometimes had a negative impact on the pilot project (e.g. upcoming elections in Flanders).
- Understanding the essence of the SDG partnership approach and the difference with traditional town twinning was an obstacle or took some time for staff in some municipalities.
- The Flemish and Rwandan municipalities' command of French and English made communication difficult in some cases.

7.3 Lessons learned

Methodology

- **Concrete learning processes are difficult to predict exactly.**

Learning cycles between municipalities in the North and South are complex, difficult to predict and non-linear. Local factors beyond our control play a role, and certain conditions are necessary (budget adjustments, timing, committed key figures, organised groups, administrative measures, etc.).

Direct exchanges between municipalities are also difficult to predict.

The methodology must take this into account.

- **Learning processes are of better quality when they are linked to concrete applications.**
It became clear that local experimentation with what had been learned and with the inspiration gained gave impetus to the learning cycle, motivated the participants, made it easier to involve other services and actors, and contributed to internationalisation.
- **Direct exchanges between municipalities** also became more dynamic as the application in the field became more concrete.
- **The preparation of municipalities in SDG Partnerships is crucial**
The better prepared the municipalities are (knowledge of the partner municipality, the country, the themes, etc.), the less time needs to be spent on training during the partnerships, and the more time is available for high-quality learning from each other. This lightens the load on the bilateral and joint sessions, which can be important for the motivation of the municipalities. The umbrella organisations have a responsibility for organising this learning.

Actors and governance

- **A good understanding of the essence of the SDG Partnerships among the umbrella organisations and municipalities is crucial for strong commitment from the municipalities to the partnerships.**
When umbrella organisations and municipalities clearly understand the purpose of the partnerships, there can be no misunderstanding (as was the case with Rwanda), services can be involved from the outset, sufficient time can be allocated to the focal point, etc.
- **Strong involvement of umbrella organisations in SDG Partnerships is crucial, as is regular consultation between umbrella organisations.**
The Southern umbrella organisations know the regions and the strengths and weaknesses of the municipalities. They can provide feedback to the municipalities in the event of problems in the process, as well as to the other municipalities, e.g. to inform them about the learning processes and contribute to a multiplier effect of partnerships. Consultation between the facilitator, the VVSG and the umbrella organisations of the partner countries is therefore crucial.
- **The right balance between political and technical participants is important for the learning process.**
It is important that the roles of the political actors and technical actors (administration) are clear from the outset so that the two do not encroach on each other's territory and both are used to their full potential, thereby strengthening the overall process.

7.4 Recommendations

Methodology

Pilot project formula:

- The pilot project formula should form the basis for a repeat, with adjustments (see recommendations below).

Administration:

- Budgets must be confirmed as early as possible so that municipalities have sufficient time to use the budgets.
- The budgets must be paid in a single instalment.

Digital technology:

- A good internet connection and equipment must be guaranteed.

Site visit:

- The site visit must be prepared thoroughly (learning questions, use of expertise, preparation organised by VVSG, local umbrella organisation and external actors). Digital with external guidance is a good formula.
- The external persons/organisations visited must understand how they can contribute to the learning process.

Flexibility in methodology and meetings:

- The coordination between the different types of sessions must be done in accordance with the process. General:
 - Try to limit the duration of meetings to around 1.5 hours.
 - Where possible, work through individual coaching to keep group sessions light.
 - Allow sufficient time between meetings to integrate what has been learned into local processes.
- Continuously monitor the methodology and adjust it if necessary.
- Allow for flexibility in the guidance with regard to the learning rhythms of the municipalities.

Actors and governance

Municipal team:

- Team members must be given the mandate to free up time for participation.
- The municipality must involve the necessary services and articulate this internally.
- The right balance must be found between the participation of technical and political profiles, people with the right knowledge, etc.
- A number of members of the Northern delegation must have experience with Southern operations.
- Sufficient language skills must be guaranteed.

Role of the Southern umbrella organisation:

- It is essential that the Southern Umbrella Organisation is involved in all phases of the process.

Multiplier effect:

- A group of municipalities can jointly identify crucial problems and learning questions that are important for the (micro)region (territorial analysis) in advance. The municipality participating in the SDG Partnership would explore these issues and learning questions in depth within the SDG Partnership. This municipality would then feed back the inspiration and lessons learned to the larger group of municipalities. In this way, the SDG Partnership could have an impact on a much larger territory. Ouinhi already played this role in relation to building the website for other Beninese municipalities.
 - The umbrella organisation could play a coordinating and systematising role in this.
 - The participating municipality would thus become a kind of knowledge hub.

8 APPENDICES

8.1 Tool 1: presentation sheets from the municipalities

Each municipality prepared a PowerPoint presentation introducing itself: residents, organisational structure, priorities and challenges, budgets, etc. This PowerPoint presentation was presented to the SDG partner municipality in digital meetings and sent by email.

ODD Partnership

Tool 1 - Getting to know each other

Introductory remarks:

- Prepare a few slides to introduce yourself, your local authority and your town/municipality.
- Focus mainly on what you think your partner should know about you and your town/neighbourhood in the context of the SDG Partnership.
- Below are a few ideas that may inspire you for your presentation and that of your town/municipality.
- There is no need to write a long, detailed document; just a brief presentation will suffice.

Instructions:

1. People/organisations actively involved in the SDG Partnership:

- Your name, position and years of service in your local authority, etc.
- Other individuals/organisations involved in the SDG Partnership (internal and external)

2. Presentation of the local authority:

- Political/administrative structure at national, regional and local level
- Organisational structure of your local government

3. Presentation of your city/municipality:

- Map - location of the city
- 3 to 5 images to describe your town/district
- Other practical information: population, main economic activities, major events, tourist attractions, famous residents, etc.

4. Your reasons for joining this SDG Partnership:

(based on reciprocity and mutual learning/exchange)

5. Expectations / what do you hope to achieve at the end of this 2-year partnership?

8.2 Tool 2: Activity profile

Objective:

- Draw up a list of 3 projects and evaluate the strategies that your local government has implemented to strengthen (civil) participation in all phases (design, execution, monitoring and evaluation) of the implementation of their local projects.

Comments:

- A project could be: improving municipal mobility, building a hall, contributing to the design of the town hall, the location of a hospital construction, sustainable practices in the maintenance of municipal land, etc.
- In the tool (table) below: first describe the project, then list all the strategies implemented to strengthen (civil) participation during all phases of the project's implementation.
- For each project undertaken, start a new column structure. You can add as many projects as necessary.
- Give a score to all the strategies implemented on two levels:
 - Level of participation (=quantity):
 - 10/10 = very high level of (civil) participation
 - 1/10 = very low level of (civil) participation
 - Added value/impact of participation (civil) (= quality):
 - 10/10 = very high level of added value/impact
 - 1/10 = very low level of added value/impact

Please note:

Only mention strategies that specifically aim to encourage/strengthen stakeholder participation in your community (= main objective of the SDG Partnership).

Project name/description:

	Strategies	Level of participation (quantity) ... / 10	What was the added value (quality)? ... / 10	Comments / areas for improvement / challenges / best practices / positive or negative experiences
1		x/10	x/10	
2		x/10	x/10	
etc		x/10	x/10	

Note: feel free to add lines if necessary

8.3 Tool 3: analysis of positive and negative factors

Objective:

- Identify and prioritise the factors that have had a positive or negative impact on the level/quality of (civil) participation in the implementation of your local authority's projects.

Comments:

- These factors can be found at different levels: political, economic, social, cultural, technological, environmental, legal, etc.
- The factors may be both internal (within your local government organisation) and external (outside your local government).
- Give each factor a score: 10/10 = high impact (positive or negative) 1/10 = very low impact (positive or negative)

Remember:

- Only list factors that have an impact on the level of PARTICIPATION of internal and external stakeholders in the implementation of your local government's various projects (= main objective of the SDG Partnership).

Score .../10	Factors with a positive impact	(Civil) participation in the implementation of your local government's projects	Factors with a negative impact	Score .../10
x/10				x/10
x/10				x/10
x/10				x/10
				/10

8.4 Tool 4: SWOT analysis

The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) or FFOM (Forces, Faiblesses, Opportunités, Menaces) matrix is a practical tool used by many organisations to:

- Conduct self-analysis and self-assessment
- Identify challenges
- Develop strategies to respond to these challenges

SWOT can be applied in different ways, ranging from basic to more complex levels; it is up to us to decide how we use it and what we want to get out of it.

The SWOT matrix has four quadrants:

- Internal:
 - Strengths (within the organisation)
 - Weaknesses (within the organisation)
- External:
 - Opportunities (outside the organisation)
 - Threats (outside the organisation)

You will apply the SWOT exercise to a specific project, initiative, or something concrete that you are working on. In terms of the theme of participation, this could be, for example, a project on women's participation in training courses on sustainable urban food production, children's participation in

awareness-raising activities in schools, etc. We recommend that you apply the SWOT matrix to the project(s)/initiative(s)/strategy(ies) you have decided to focus on as part of the SDG Partnership.

Fill in the four boxes of the matrix in an easily readable manner (e.g. with bullet points). You can enlarge the boxes if you run out of space.

Examples:

- Strengths (internal level) may include elements such as: close ties between municipal employees and local stakeholders, employees' knowledge of participatory methodologies, availability to work on the project, strong motivation among local stakeholders, etc.
- Weaknesses (internal level) may include: employees not investing in relationships with local stakeholders, partners' lack of resources to participate in meetings and workshops, partners' priorities, partners' lack of trust in municipal authorities, etc.
- Opportunities (external level): e.g. calls for proposals, favourable public opinion, elections, etc.
- Threats (external level): e.g. COVID, the economic crisis reducing the willingness to participate in training, reduction in national budgets for projects, etc. elections, etc.

You can identify the challenges yourself intuitively by reading the elements in the boxes. You can also identify strategies intuitively. In any case, the consultants will help you use the SWOT matrix to formulate the challenges and strategies.

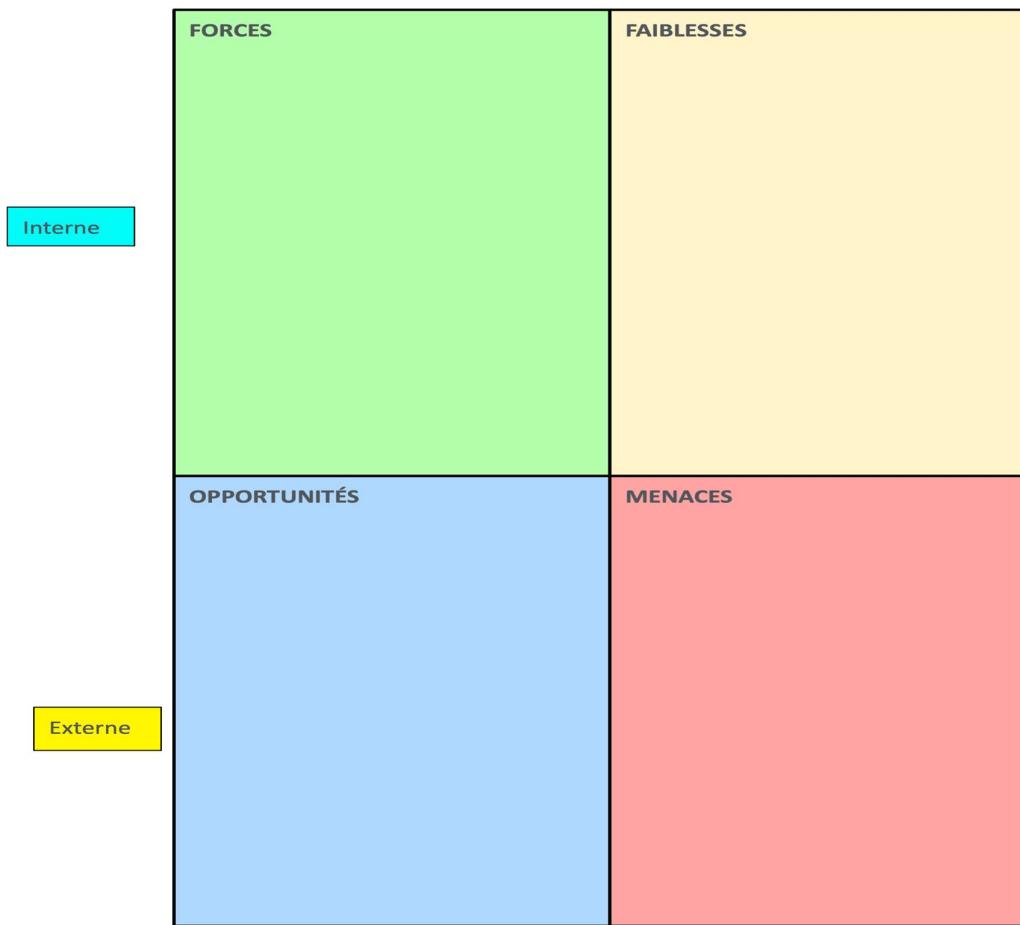
Technical details:

- The font size in the matrix must not exceed size 10, otherwise the boxes will fill up too quickly.
- To write in the squares, you sometimes have to right-click the mouse and then click on "edit text";
- When writing in the squares, avoid long sentences. We recommend using bullet points (and keywords).

SWOT matrix

Name of the project/initiative:

(but remember: we are focusing on the issue of *participation*)



8.5 Tool 5: Learning questions table

Learning questions table

Name of the municipality requesting knowledge: xxx

Learning question 1: ...

Obstacles – problems to be solved:
1.
2.
3.
4.
Etc.
Sub-questions:
1.
2.
3.
4.
Etc.

Learning question 2: ...

Obstacles – problems to be solved:
1.
2.
3.
Etc.
Sub-questions:
1.
2.
3.
Etc.

8.6 Tool 6: Preparation for site visit – activities-learning questions table

This table is a cross-reference between activities and prioritisation

STUDY VISIT FROM MUNICIPALITY ... TO MUNICIPALITY ...

Date: ..

Table: cross-planning with learning questions and priorities

Sub-learning questions:

- *Must have: absolute priority*
- *Nice to have: important learning question but not a top priority at this time*
- *Nice to have: useful learning question but not important at this time*

Schedule	Activity	Learning issue	Accompanying person	Comments
Date				
Time		Xxxxxxx Xxxxxx xxxxxx		
heure		Xxxxxxxxx Xxxxxx xxxxxx		
heure		Xxxxxxxxx Xxxxxx xxxxxx		
heure		Xxxxxxxxx Xxxxxx xxxxxx		
Date		Xxxxxxxxx		
hour				

		Xxxxxx xxxxxx		
time		Xxxxxxx Xxxxxx xxxxxx		
heure		Xxxxxxx Xxxxxx xxxxxx		
Etc.				

8.7 Tool 7: Reference terms for site visits

Study visit to Belgium by three delegations from Benin in the context of SDG partnerships.

... to ... month year

1. Context

2. Objectives of the study visit

Narrative explanation:

Learning question 1: ...

Specific objectives of the learning question:

1. ...
2. ...
3. ...

Sub-questions:

1. ...
2. ...

Learning question 2:

Specific objectives:

1. ...
2. ...

Sub-questions:

1. ...
2. ...

3. Planned activities

Programme

Day 1: date

(Optional: Central learning question of the day)

- Time: activity
- Time: activity
- Time: activity
- Etc.

Day 2: date

(Optional: Central learning question of the day)

- Hour: activity
- Time: activity
- Hour: activity
- Etc.

Day 3: etc.

4. Local context

Local economy, local government, politics, tourism, participation mechanisms, etc.

5. Delegation participants:

Name of visiting municipality: ...
Name, position
Name, position
Etc.

6. General programme

Date	date	date	date	date	date	date
Overall activity	Global activity	Global activity				

Translation by DEEPL

8.8 Tool 8: Learning Journal V1

LEARNING JOURNAL

STUDY VISIT DATE

COMMUNE DE ...

Date	Activity	(Sub)learning questions	Specific learning outcomes	Concretely applicable learning	Missing learning
Date					
Time		XXXX XXXX XXXX			
time		XXXX XXXX XXXX			
heure		XXXX XXXX XXXX			
Date	Activity	(Sub)learning questions	Specific learning outcomes	Concretely applicable learning	Missing learning
Date					
Time		XXXX XXXX XXXX			
time		XXXX XXXX XXXX			
heure		XXXX XXXX XXXX			
Etc.					

Learning sub-questions:

- *Must have: absolute priority*
- *Nice to have: important learning question but not a top priority at the moment*
- *Nice to have: useful learning question but not important at this time*

8.9 Tool 9: Learning Journal V2

Common learning question x:						
Common specific learning objectives x		Daily progress 0 = nothing learned 1 = learned a little 2 = significant progress 3 = revelation!				
Objective 1 – Common priority learning sub-questions x - - ... - ...		Day 1	0	1	2	3
		Day 2	0	1	2	3
		Day 3	0	1	2	3
		Day 4	0	1	2	3
Objective 2 – Common priority learning sub-questions x - - ... - ...		Day 1	0	1	2	3
		Day 2	0	1	2	3
		Day 3	0	1	2	3
		Day 4	0	1	2	3
Goal 3 – Other important learning questions - ... - ... - ...		Day 1	0	1	2	3
		Day 2	0	1	2	3
		Day 3	0	1	2	3
		Day 4	0	1	2	3

Day 1 – date

Objective	Description of learning – what did you learn, what inspired you
1	
2	
3	
Did you learn anything unexpected?	
What contributed most to your learning today?	
What difficulties or challenges did you encounter?	
What did you learn, and what does that mean for you and your community? Is there anything that can be applied?	

Day 2 – date

Objective	Description of learning – what did you learn, what inspired you?
1	
2	
3	
Did you learn anything unexpected?	
What contributed most to your learning today?	
What difficulties or challenges did you encounter?	
What you learned, what does it mean for you and your community? Is there anything applicable?	

Day 3 – date

Objective	Description of the learning process – what did you learn, what inspired you?
1	
2	
3	
Did you learn anything unexpected?	
What contributed most to your learning today?	
What difficulties or challenges did you encounter?	

What you learned, what does it mean for you and your community? Is there anything applicable?

Day 4 – date

Objective	Description of the learning process – what did you learn, what inspired you?
1	
2	
3	
Did you learn anything unexpected?	
What contributed most to your learning today?	
What difficulties or challenges did you encounter?	

What you learned, what does it mean for you and your community? Is there anything that can be applied?

8.10 Tool 10: Action Plan for Local Authorities x

Action plan for SDG partnerships

Objective: By 2030, Municipality xx will be...

Civil servants/politicians involved:

What are these civil servants/politicians doing?
...
...

Other persons/organisations concerned:
...
...

The challenges?

Challenges:
...
...
...

Inspiration, resources:

What are we already doing?

...
...
...

Actions

Actions	Responsible party(ies)	Partner(s)	Contribution from the partner municipality	Period	Budget

Short-term objective:

Medium-term objective:

Long-term objective:

8.11 Overview of the evolution of learning questions and their application per municipality

Municipality	Initial learning questions	Final learning questions	Application of what has been learned
Ouïnhi	<p>How can the municipality ensure that local economic actors pay more tax?</p> <p>How can the municipality strengthen women's participation in politics?</p> <p>How do we develop a website?</p>	<p>How can the municipality best support local economic actors?</p> <p>How can we create a website that supports local economic actors?</p>	<p>Set up an advisory council with local economic actors, establish a structural dialogue with the local council, which will take measures to support local economic actors</p> <p>Setting up a small website with information requested by local economic actors, among others</p>
Laarne	<p>How can the municipality organise participatory post-project evaluations?</p> <p>How can we use witches in Laarne to raise awareness of women's rights?</p> <p>How can we revitalise women's associations?</p>	<p>How can we strengthen, revitalise and make more meaningful citizen participation in councils and other structures?</p> <p>How can we strengthen the local marketing of local products?</p>	<p>A wide range of innovative ways to strengthen citizen participation in local advisory councils, including by focusing more on the micro level, writing to potential participants by name, emphasising associations rather than individuals, etc.</p>
Covè	How can the municipality articulate agriculture, nature and tourism to strengthen the local economy?	How can the municipality strengthen tourism, for example by organising local actors, identifying local ADN, etc.?	Setting up a tourism office, systematising local 'DNA' in a document and distributing it together with local actors, mapping and contacting local actors in relation to tourism, organising these actors into a council, etc.
Sint-Truiden	How can the municipality strengthen citizens' trust in the municipality?	<p>How can we strengthen the local marketing of local products?</p> <p>How can we strengthen, revitalise and make more meaningful citizen participation in councils and other structures? E.g. in an agricultural council for a participatory food strategy?</p>	Interrupted by political decisions. Perhaps in