

SISTER-CITY RELATIONSHIPS AS A FORM OF INTER-ORGANIZA- TIONAL COOPERATION: EXPLORATORY CASE STUDIES IN THE PORTUGUESE CONTEXT*

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify, characterize and understand sister-city relationships in Portuguese municipalities as a particular form of inter-organizational cooperation. There is however a great lack of research on this phenomenon, and a study on this subject was therefore carried out in three cities/municipalities. The instrument for data collection was the semi-structured interview with local authority representatives, and the data processing technique was content analysis. Based on the results obtained in this investigation, we can say that the kind of inter-organizational cooperation most widely used is sister-city relationships. Close relationships, friendship, exchange of experiences, sharing common needs, culture and economic interest are advantages achieved with this type of relationship between cities. The benefits allow better development of the municipalities involved. Some guidelines to be used as a basis for future research are also presented.

Keywords: Inter-organizational cooperation, municipalities, city-to-city networks, sister-city relationships, Portugal.

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1. Introduction

Changes in the global political and economic situations have transformed market arrangements. Competition has become stronger and, allied to technological development, organizations have been required to restructure and adopt new management methods. The intention has been to make organizations more agile, flexible and dynamic to make their operation compatible with international standards of productivity, competitiveness and quality.

In this context, for Cândido and Abreu (2000), adoption of inter-organizational cooperation can be seen as a viable organizational strategy arising from two basic factors: the first, increased competitiveness and increased competition, and the second, the understanding that isolated actions by organizations make survival and development unviable. The use of the principles of this cooperative approach is more and more frequent and leads to the recognition of its importance and the attempt to understand its application in the current organizational panorama (Dyer *et al.*, 2001; Augustine and Cooper, 2009).

The phenomenon of inter-organizational cooperation, which also includes local authorities as organizations/institutions, can be based on friendship, or on cultural, human resource, educational and/or commercial exchanges. Indeed, given the factor of economic globalization, local authorities face increasingly complex situations due to the constant and various social transformations arising from the system's environment (Leroux *et al.*, 2010).

In addition, the revolution of communications, privatizations, decentralization and increased democratization, among other aspects, has led to the formation of relationships at the local level. Decentralizing power to local government requires entrepreneurial efforts to achieve local economic development (Villiers *et al.*, 2007). In this context, Kwon and Feiock (2010) consider that the very organization of local authority administration, through a system of agreements of a local character, promotes a potential endogenous solution to the fragmentation of problems of collective action that towns face in providing public services.

As Warner (2010) states, the twenty-first century must concentrate on rebuilding local government's capacity to finance essential infrastructure, attract and retain a skilled workforce, and involve citizens in the conception of innovative systems to solve common problems in the public domain.

In this context, regional and global sister-city relationships have experienced a recent increase in number and activities. In emerging economies and other countries exhibiting cultural, geographical and economic distances from developed countries (Dai, 2008) such advantages are difficult to establish without good relationships with home governments (Hoskinsson *et al.*, 2000). Nevertheless, more than 70% of the world's cities have been engaged in some form of international cooperation with others, be it a sister-city or friendship city relationship (Tjandradewi and Marcotullio, 2009). Indeed, more than 11,000 pairs of cities in some 159 countries have entered into sister-city relationships (Cremer *et al.*, 2001; Dai, 2008). Thus, sister-cities induce early

relationships with local governments conferring tangible and intangible benefits that establish a positive momentum for inter-organizational cooperation.

In these circumstances, sister-city relationships refer to a long-term partnership between communities in different cities or towns based on mutuality and equity (UNDP, 2000; Ringrose, 2000). According to Villiers (2009), as the intention of most twinning and sister-city relationships is to work together in the long term for mutual benefit, this signifies a partnership between the two (or more) cities involved. As Keiner and Kim (2007, p. 1371) state, 'networking between cities is generally seen as the most effective way to strengthen cities' capacity to solve major environmental and social problems, deliver urban services to their residents and develop effective urban governance and management structures'.

The underlying theme of the reduced institutional distance inherent in sister-city relationships explains some of the prevalent problems for municipalities that seek inter-organizational cooperation without some form of auxiliary support (Dai, 2008). Research concerning the role of sister cities in economies is not new, although the potential significance for international strategic management has not been explored (Dai, 2008; Villiers, 2009). Linderst (2009) argues also that sister-city relationships are a channel of inter-organizational cooperation, but this has remained rather underexposed in academic literature.

Exploitation of these sister-city relationships adds to the international inter-organizational literature. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the theoretical and practical advancement of inter-municipal cooperation, more precisely, with the main objective of identifying, characterizing and understanding sister-city relationships adopted by Portuguese local authorities as a form of inter-organizational cooperation. Consequently, the unit of analysis of this investigation is the local authority and its actors. Thus, this study introduces national and international sister-city relationships as a form of inter-organizational cooperation through which institutional/municipal distance can be reduced. As such, it is a first attempt to describe the dynamics of sister-city relationships in the Portuguese context.

2. Inter-municipality cooperation

2.1. Background

Cooperation between local authorities, as a phenomenon which was previously developed and became known in Europe, eventually spread throughout the world, being considered as an important and essential means for relationships, cooperation and collaboration between diverse communities, whatever their race, religion and/or culture (Afonso, 1998; Cremer *et al.*, 2001).

It was after the Second World War that international cooperation took on a central role for European countries that were seriously weakened in terms of their political and socio-economic structures (Tjandradewi and Marcotullio, 2009; Ewijk and Baud, 2009). Instability and the difficulties European countries faced in their daily lives led them to gradually realize that the approximation of all peoples would be the solution

in rebuilding Europe. Both the creation of a new world order and reconciliation between the states most affected by the Second World War also led to the emergence of an extremely important cooperation typology – inter-municipal cooperation (Ribeiro and Faria, 2009).

In Portugal, cooperation came to incorporate European Union guidelines, but for Proença (2009), political definitions in European and national terms pointed towards a specific type of cooperation for development, centered on actors and based on the principle of their initiative, aiming to mobilize populations, bearing in mind their needs and priorities, strengthen citizenship, its civic organizations, and favor local, lasting and equitable development based on participation.

Therefore, various types of cooperation have been identified by different investigators. Specifically, Villiers *et al.* (2007) explore this phenomenon at the international, national and local level. These authors also analyse this phenomenon in terms of its content, context and structure, i.e., characterizing three types of relationships, namely: (1) municipal, national or international cooperation, designated as inter-municipal cooperation, formed by linking local authorities; (2) sister-cities or town twinning aiming to link towns, forming relationships between communities; and (3) decentralized cooperation, which uses the local authority or community with the purpose of developing a channel of consolidated cooperation. Here, only sister-city relationships will be studied.

2.2. *Sister-city relationships*

With the idea of promoting peace, international understanding, friendship and reconciliation between peoples weakened in the post-war period, the twinning of towns in Western Europe was undertaken (Zelinsky, 1991; Ghemawat, 2001; Dai, 2008; Ribeiro and Faria, 2009).

Sister-cities or town twinning or even linked cities refer not only to local government but also include the general and business communities, and the education sector (Tjandradewi and Marcotullio, 2009; Ewijk and Baud, 2009). The primary link is created between communities and not only by local government, these being seen as the organizers and facilitators of diplomacy between populations.

Sister city relationships have evolved from their beginnings as a facilitating instrument of international friendship and cultural exchange at the local level, to a powerful tool for capacity building, learning, and economic and social development in developing countries (Villiers, 2009).

According to Jacques Santer, President of the European Commission in 1997, the town-twinning movement arose from the will of men and women, determined to act at the local level to remove the existing barriers between different countries. While not the only means of exchange and cooperation, it nevertheless presents the advantage of combining links of friendship with the most varied categories of exchange (Ramassamy and Cremer, 1998). Twinning provides an important framework for maintaining relationships with one or several towns in different countries.

According to Afonso (1998), and Ribeiro and Faria (2009), twinning is understood as a permanent partnership, formalized through agreements between parties, officially recognized between two (bilateral) or more (multilateral) local authorities that promote the exchange of knowledge and experiences, with the possibility of involving different sectors of society.

However, the differentiating character they may take on (political, economic, technical, humanitarian, demographic, geographical situation, linguistic affinity, historical or cultural) led to the encouragement and formation of relationships between nations not only within Europe but also with other countries such as the United States of America, Canada and others (Ribeiro and Faria, 2009).

Indeed, cooperation between towns moved from simple twinning to complex relationship networks (Villiers *et al.*, 2007; Villiers, 2009). The main objective of twinning is to work together in the long term for mutual benefit, i.e., a partnership with common aims is developed between two or more towns.

Neves (2004) reinforces the idea that through participation in transnational networks (twinning), regions have the possibility of operating as a relational interface between networks and drawing benefits from this, such as the ability to integrate technologies from other regions or from firms in other regions; develop the role of liaison between local networks involving different economic agents and organizations and local institutions, and be a point of connection between community, international, trans-regional and local levels.

For Villiers (2005), twinning is stimulated by the force of globalization and decentralization, and aims to increase learning, competitiveness, sharing of objectives and activating partners to fulfill a long-term strategic goal. These sister-city relationships imply a commitment of resources and joint decision-making, aim to create advantages for the parties involved, and can connect more than two partners, leading to the formation of network organizations.

To summarize, many similarities can be observed between inter-organizational cooperation and sister-city relationships (Villiers, 2005, 2009). Both are, for instance, driven by the same forces of globalization and decentralization; both have similar aims such as learning and increasing competitiveness; both are characterized by shared objectives and moving partners towards the attainment of a long-term strategic goal; both entail a commitment of resources and joint decision-making; both are aimed at creating advantage for the parties involved; and both can connect more than two partners, leading to the formation of network organizations (Villiers, 2009).

3. Methodology

3.1. Type of study

In order to attain the objective defined in this study, an investigation of a qualitative nature was adopted. Gil (1999) and Yin (2002) claim this should be understood as a formal and systematic process with the fundamental goal of discovering answers to problems, through the use of scientific procedures, which allow acquisition of new

knowledge. For Merriam (1988) and Massukado (2008), in qualitative methodologies, those involved in the investigation are not reduced to isolated variables but are seen as a whole in their natural context.

In this setting of a qualitative investigation, the case study method of investigation was chosen. The most suitable number of cases recommended is to select as many as necessary to find out what needs to be known (Kvale, 1996). In this method, the concern is not with generalization. What characterizes this type of method is the study in depth, seeking a valid explanation for the case studied. However, Gil (1999), Patton (1990) and Yin (2002) also mention that case studies are a knowledge base, giving direction to future research, an interactive and flexible project taking a holistic approach to study real life events and using multiple sources and data collection techniques.

3.2. Case selection

Case selection is determined according to the needs of the study. According to Patton (1990), the criteria for case selection can be considered intentionally and for the convenience of the investigation. Therefore, for this study, three local authorities in the central region of Portugal were selected, one in the district of Castelo Branco (Covilhã) – Case 1, one in the district of Coimbra (Mira) – Case 2, and another in the district of Aveiro (Ílhavo) – Case 3.

The choice of these three local authorities was due to the following criteria: (1) geographical area: three different districts, bearing in mind the researchers' place of residence; (2) they are part of sister-city relationships; and (3) some diversity of inter-municipal cooperation.

3.3. Instruments of data collection and analysis

For data collection in this study, besides documentary analysis (for example, the selected local authorities' websites), semi-structured interviews were used. As Bogdan and Biklen (1994) state, interviews vary according to the degree of structure, from structured interviews to unstructured ones. However, these authors also mention that semi-structured interviews have the advantage of ensuring the acquisition of data which can be compared among the various subjects.

The interviews were held with two councilors in the respective local authorities (Cases 1 and 2), in charge of cooperation and development, and a deputy mayor (Case 3), between May and August 2011, and lasting approximately sixty minutes.

For treatment of the information gathered, mainly content analysis was used. For Quivy and Campenhoudt (1992), this analysis deals with various types of interview messages or reports. According to Bardin (2004), content analysis is a technique for qualitative data treatment which varies between objectivity and subjectivity and is applied to extremely diversified discourses. It consists of three different stages: (1) description (summarized enumeration after treatment of the text characteristics); (2) inference that allows explicit and controlled passage from the first to the last stage; and (3) interpretation (the meaning attributed to those same characteristics).

4. Results of the cases studied

4.1. Characterization of the local authorities and interviewees

To fulfil the objectives of this study, three case studies were carried out. This type of qualitative investigation aimed to identify, characterize and understand the sister-city relationships of the three local authorities selected.

Table 1 presents and briefly characterizes the local authorities studied, as well as their key informants.

Table 1: Characterization of cases and interviewees

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3
District	Castelo Branco	Coimbra	Aveiro
Local Authority	Covilhã	Mira	Ílhavo
Interviewee / Post held	Councillor	Councillor	Deputy Mayor

4.2. Case 1 – Covilhã local authority

In recent years, the local authority of Covilhã (Case 1) has given priority to sister-city relationships. This form of cooperation refers not only to local government or administration, but also includes the general and business communities and the education sector.

The local authority of Covilhã, according to the councillor, *'has carried out twinning arrangements nationally and internationally. In Portugal, the town was twinned with Oeiras, Santarém and Madalena (Azores), and internationally with Roubaix, in France, Laleia, in East Timor, Trelew in Argentina and most recently with Cidade da Praia in Cape Verde'*.

The councillor considers that *'twinning between towns aims to find points in common between local authorities or the coming together of political decision-makers'*. In addition, it aims to stimulate mutual cooperation between the different towns in economic, social and educational matters.

Roubaix is the second most important city in the North of France with 96,000 inhabitants. This city was the European center of the textile sector, and at present, due to the crisis in this sector, has become the European capital of mail order sales. It is also a major university city. Covilhã and Roubaix are closely linked through the integration of emigrants from Covilhã who contributed to the economy and associations of Roubaix.

'Considering the welcome our emigrants received from the French community and considering the two towns also have a common past connected to the woolen industry, economic and cultural relationships were promoted associating the strengths of the two communities' (Councillor, Case 1).

Focusing this analysis on Roubaix, the councillor stated that, *'what stimulated this twinning was, as already mentioned, the high number of people from Covilhã who emigrated in the past to that city. This cooperation intends to integrate substantially the general community, so as not to lose the existing link and promote the preservation of bonds between second and third generations'*.

Besides, with this type of cooperation, the aim is to activate and transmit cultural heritage, promote sporting events and youth exchanges, directly motivating the community to participate in these links, strengthening and preserving a culture which is partly common to both parties.

In Portugal, with the city of Oeiras, historically the two places are closely linked to the notable figure of Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo who, through creating the Royal Textile Factory on 26 June 1764, marked the future for the woolen industry in Covilhã and Oeiras with action in the fields of town-planning, agriculture and industry. So, also in these two local authorities, common initiatives for development have been promoted in the same context of community participation.

From the interview, it was possible to determine that the arrangement with Cidade da Praia concerns the other two aspects of town-twinning, those of the economy and education.

The link with Cidade da Praia emerged at a congress of the National Association of Portuguese Local Authorities (ANMP). At a first stage, the cooperation bonds have been formed in education and include the University of Beira Interior (situated in Covilhã).

The interviewee explained that *'the cooperation established between these two cities allowed special arrangements for students from Cape Verde to be made, which up to the moment of twinning had not existed'*.

Therefore, through this cooperation the local authority of Covilhã ensures partial payment of student accommodation, the University of Beira Interior is responsible for partial payment of tuition fees and the Cidade da Praia local authority for partial payment of travel. The aim is to permit the training of young specialists who will be able to stimulate the growth and development of their country of origin.

In the business sphere, there have been some missions aiming for both Portuguese and Cape Verde firms to get to know the situation in the other country and be able to stimulate expansion of economic activities, either in a network or by taking advantage of the resources inherent to each firm.

As cases of success, the interviewee mentioned that of a firm in Parkurbis (Covilhã Science and Technology Park) that has set up in Cidade da Praia, and also sporadic cooperation with a children's playground firm for Cape Verde. He also stated that a firm of a Brazilian consortium with links to Cidade da Praia has also become established in the same technology park.

Based on this empirical evidence, we can argue the Portuguese local/regional government decision-makers have perceived a set of advantages in sister-city relationships. Regional public administration has seen these types of inter-organizational cooperation as most beneficial in the areas of educational, social and cultural issues.

4.3. Case 2 – Mira local authority

Concerning twinning arrangements, the councilor from Mira (Case 2) mentioned the partnership with the local authority of Lagni-Sur-Marne (near Paris, France), which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2011.

The interviewee said that: *'Lagni has nothing in common with Mira, it has some agriculture, but with vast fields, and a notable past which goes back to the fifteenth century. That city has a river and we have the sea, however there is one very important factor: out of 30% of Portuguese people in the region many are from Mira. It began as a cultural twinning for our promotion and promoting ourselves among our emigrants from the region of Gandra, but also for the whole country, because the region has very significant communities from Gandra, Carapelhos, Calvão, Ponte de Vagos, Poutinha, Cantanhede, Covão do Lobo, Vagos, Febres, Lanhedes, Viana do Castelo, and even from near Viseu, Moimenta da Beira, all these Portuguese towns'*.

The interviewee representing Mira local authority also pointed out that: *'We were interested in these three communities, but also the cultural interest. They have a very strong presence in terms of neo-classical painting and we were interested in promoting what they don't have. With a high disposable income, they could come here, this was our main motivation. We intended to create a tourist and cultural attraction, but how to do that? On many occasions, we have taken our folk traditions, gastronomy, cultural associations, drama groups, folk music groups, football clubs to let them get to know a different place, Mira, and some of them have come here. The same has also happened from here to there. People go to Paris and visit Lagni'*.

Regarding the future of this local authority, the interviewee underlined:

'We now want to go further, without neglecting the tourism and cultural aspect; we want to reach another level, that of industry/business. We want our business-people to get to know the industrial situation of the region, one advantage is that the Mayor is the regional leader, meaning he has easy contact with others. Our market becomes wider, even at an administrative level. Everything is changing and we want to know what we too can learn'.

Also on the expectations for the future regarding sister-city relationships, the councilor from Mira stresses:

'We have had other requests for twinning, but we haven't accepted any so far, because we don't want simply to have an exchange and realize at the end of the year that it wasn't worth it. There has to be a meaning in it! We see no advantage for Mira in Normandy and Brittany, only for them. For cooperation, there must be advantages on both sides. We would like to have one for Mira in Italy. We still haven't managed to arrange that exchange (...)' stated the councilor – Case 2.

As for sister-cities beyond the local authority level, he added that:

'There are also twinning arrangements beyond the municipal level, where the region is twinned with another region. In our region, this is not easy, Coimbra always wants to twin with other university cities, Mealhada with spas, focusing on business partnerships, we don't want to go down that road. We don't want just tourism, and we don't have any almost unique product to state our case. Mealhada has mineral water and the spa, we don't have an anchor product. We have some products such as Mira turnip leaves, Mira mushrooms, Mira mackerel. We don't want to hold a fair, we want to promote products, and for that it could be everything together. It is still necessary to think about the objective of cooperation before going on to think about how to reach that objective. The purpose served today is not the one that will serve in five years' time, because things change. People think that if you cooperate too much, you disappear.

Despite the development, we still have a problem of mentality which will get worse when local authorities are abolished' (Mira local authority councilor, Case 2).

These empirical results are important in several ways. First, local/regional public managers perceive elements of importance in sister-city cooperation to address some areas such as the environment, health and culture. Second, the public administration hopes that these inter-organizational relationships can be a cost-effective mode of development assistance, able to help low-income cities in Portugal face today's challenges.

4.4. Case 3 – Ílhavo local authority

Resulting from historic relationships based on extensive sharing of heritage, culture and identity, and the common wish to preserve and strengthen this union in the future, Ílhavo local authority (Case 3) over the last decade has signed eight Friendship/Twinning Agreements with the local authorities of St. John's (Canada), Newark and New Bedford (USA), Cuxhaven (Germany), Paraty (Brazil), Ihtiman (Bulgaria), Grindavik (Iceland) and Funchal (Portugal). From this initiative, which had the principle aim of strengthening relationships, stimulating the exchange of their inhabitants and also fulfilling and expanding cooperation programs in the areas of education, youth, sport, culture and professional and economic development, these eight local authorities came to be designated as Ílhavo's 'Sister-Cities'. In this type of relationship, there has been very positive friendship over the years, clearly justifying this effort to promote the town abroad.

In Case 3, the local authorities of Ílhavo and New Bedford signed a Friendship Agreement, as proof of the close relationship between their inhabitants, who since the nineteenth century, have shared an identifying maritime past with its historical, natural and cultural values.

With the German city of Cuxhaven, Ílhavo developed a cooperation agreement aiming mainly to deepen the relationship between the two places in two areas of great common interest: industry (especially the fishing sector) and tourism.

Standing out in the interview held with the councilor, and when asked about the difficulty of implementing this type of cooperation, is the idea that:

'To go ahead with a twinning arrangement it is necessary to make a detailed and rigorous assessment of what each party expects from involvement in that cooperation, it being important that the partners are committed to the spirit of cooperation, this being considered an intrinsic characteristic for developing its potential. Detailed selection, with objective definition of what is sought from the relationship, is one of the cooperation's success factors, as well as easy communication and trust'.

In the increasingly global and demanding world we live in today, the meaning of cooperation requires local authorities to live on that global scale, gaining in knowledge from the exchange of experience, conquering new spheres and especially strengthening social, economic and political bonds.

The sister-city relationships formed in this local authority show several advantages in the areas of tourism and industry. Linking with other cities has brought a lot of

experiences which are essential for local and regional authorities to achieve their objectives and overcome today's challenges. The broad-based political and administrative support from public administration has been vital for the gradual consolidation of these partnerships. Without these commitments (friendship agreements) it would have been impossible for the authority studied here to develop cooperation programs such as those in the fields of education, youth, sport, culture and professional and economic development.

4.5. Comparative analysis of cases and their discussion

After describing the information, in this sub-point a comparative analysis is made of the sister-city relationships developed by the local authorities (cases) studied. The table below presents the key ideas and advantages obtained from the results of the case studies.

Table 2: Comparative analysis

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3
Advantages of Sister-cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural dynamics - Sports meetings - Youth exchange - Community participation - Cooperation bonds in education and business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural interest - Tourist attraction - Cooperation bonds in business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shared heritage, natural and cultural values - Strengthening relationships in tourism and industry - Expansion of educational programs - Bonds of friendship - Historical maritime relationships

In terms of national and international cooperation, the local authorities studied promoted relationships of cooperation. In case 1, Covilhã developed twinning arrangements in Portugal with Oeiras, Santarém and Madalena (Açores), and internationally with Roubaix, in France, Laleia in East Timor, Trelew in Argentina and, more recently, with Cidade da Praia, in Cape Verde.

Mira (Case 2) twinned internationally with Lagni-sur-Marne in France, and Ílhavo (Case 3) has eight twinning arrangements, one of which is in Portugal (Funchal) and the remainder with local authorities in St. John's (Canada), Newark and New Bedford (USA), Cuxhaven (Germany), Paraty (Brazil), Ihtiman (Bulgaria) and Grindavik (Iceland).

For Ribeiro and Faria (2009), twinning is an agreement aiming at exchanging knowledge and carrying out activities, projects or programs with a medium and long term view. For example, Covilhã and Roubaix have promoted economic and cultural relationships associated with the dynamic organizations of both local authorities, aiming to stimulate and transmit their cultural heritage, promote sports meetings and youth exchanges, directly encouraging the community to participate in these links, preserving and strengthening a culture which is partly common to both.

In the case of Mira (Case 2), through inter-municipal cooperation, the intention is to create tourist and cultural attractions, through folk traditions, gastronomy, cultural associations, drama groups, folk music groups and football clubs. As for Ílhavo (Case 3), the town has participated in inter-local authority associations, relationships of cul-

tural, social, political and economic cooperation with foreign local authorities with which it has affinity and/or interest in the domains referred to.

In this context, Neves (2004) understands that twinning can function as a relational interface between networks, from which advantages can be drawn, such as the ease of integrating technology from other regions or firms in other regions.

Mira (Case 2) also tries to develop the role of inter-connecting local networks, involving the different local economic and institutional agents and organizations to form links between the community, international and trans-regional levels, and the local one (Neves, 2004). Bearing in mind it does not have a single anchor product, but rather various products, it intends to promote them through the use of these networks.

Ílhavo (Case 3), by twinning with St. John's, wished to promote regular exchanges in the fields of culture, history, oceanography, tourism, youth and the economy, at the same time providing its inhabitants with travel opportunities. As stated by Jacques Santer, President of the European Commission in 1997, twinning has the advantage of combining bonds of friendship with a wide variety of exchanges.

According to Ribeiro and Faria (2009), the differentiating character this cooperation can take on (political, economic, technical, humanitarian, demographic, geographical situation, a common language, historical or cultural) can be explained, for example, in Case 1, where the cooperation established with Cape Verde allowed special arrangements to be created for students from that country to be able to study at a Portuguese university.

5. Conclusions and implications

Faced with the factor of economic globalization and the constant and varied social transformations arising from the system's environment, local authorities find their situation becoming more complex. Therefore, inter-municipal cooperation over the years has taken on an increasingly important role, with the result that it is not limited to the local community of the local authorities involved, but spreads to regions and countries all over the world.

This study, based on three case studies (Portuguese local authorities), identified and characterized a specific form of inter-municipal cooperation, i.e., sister-city relationships, whose underlying success factors are essentially the exchange of experiences, sharing common problems, friendly relationships, credibility, transparency, commitment, understanding and cultural awareness.

Also based on the empirical evidence obtained, it was concluded that cooperation between local authorities, similarly to other forms of inter-organizational cooperation, is governed by the idea of synergy, where the result is more than the sum of individual performances. Indeed, there is a joint effort of cooperation that allows common benefits to be reached, via the link between inter-organizational partnerships that permit competitive advantage to be gained.

Considering the results of the case studies made, we can also conclude that in the selected local authorities, the success factors of the cooperative relationships formed

are in evidence. Indeed, without the relationships of friendship, trust and loyalty observed in the twinning agreements studied, it would not be possible, or at least not be so simple, to attain the success and improved performance of the local authorities involved.

The results are important in several ways. First, previous theoretical work has not paid enough attention to the perceived elements of importance in sister-city relationships. There is a need to look into these aspects of inter-organizational cooperation in more detail, particularly within the Portuguese context. Second, Portuguese local governments also consider the benefits of sister-city relationships in addressing environmental, health, educational, social and cultural matters.

This study also intends to enable public managers to better integrate cooperative initiatives both within and outside their community. Nevertheless, despite this development, Portugal experiences a problem of mentality which will be aggravated by the future extinction of some local authorities and amalgamation of others.

Public managers should also be aware that inter-municipal cooperation today is a new form of organization that allows a local authority to stand out and adopt a local and regional stance, making it more agile, flexible and competitive. This type of relationship between local authorities lets them grow in scale, i.e., transform resources in products so as to gain fame and recognition both nationally and internationally.

This study presents other practical implications. More precisely, it contributes to showing how the sister-city phenomenon explored here facilitates the global dynamics public organizations face in the emerging landscape of the twenty-first century. Public managers in several countries, particularly developing countries, seeking to enter emerging markets should recognize the ability of international sister-cities to fill institutional voids, through business links aimed at providing quality data, contacts, identification of opportunities and information sharing. International sister-cities present a major opportunity for connections through sustained face-to-face contact to enable people and organizations alike to better function in a world characterized by increasing globalization. In fact, the evolution of sister-city relationships into a mechanism facilitating cooperation is a model of inter-organizational cooperation that deserves greater recognition, as it can ensure the sustainability of the economic and social vibrancy of international organizations.

As with almost all studies, this one also presents some limitations. One of these concerns the fact of only studying three local authorities (cases). Therefore, inclusion of more local authorities would have supplied more data for a deeper analysis of this subject, and carrying out more interviews with other professionals concerned with participating in cooperative initiatives would also have benefited the study. Therefore, in the future it is hoped to complement this study with more case studies and greater qualitative analysis. Another limitation regards the shortage of research made into cooperation between local authorities, but this aspect became one of its strengths, due to the originality and innovation of this study. Thus, further research is necessary to investigate whether some of the findings can be replicated in other countries.

Finally, determining the role public managers play in cooperative relationships, analysing other forms of inter-municipal cooperation, studying the differences between cooperation in the public and private sectors, and the individualization of conditions for success, so that all benefits can be reached, are lines of research to be considered in future investigations in this field of knowledge. Indeed, more studies are necessary to understand the problems of developing cooperation in local authorities and it is appropriate to apply this study in a wider sample and in wider geographical areas in order to generalize results.

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