

# A very civil partnership

Putting cities together is nothing new: cities all over the world have signs welcoming visitors and informing them that they are twinned with another city. But UCLG's mentor programme, launched less than two years ago, has added new depth to city partnerships by making genuine progress on capacity building and exchange of knowledge. **William Thorpe** reveals how mentoring programmes work and what benefits they can bring to your city

Civil servants around the world are generally not held in high regard by the public. Thrown into the same basket as lawyers, politicians and journalists, one could not blame them for low morale in doing often thankless tasks.

But unlike lawyers, journalists and politicians, it is difficult for civil servants to be masters of their own fate. Governments change and budgets are cut whether or not an individual has excelled or performed well. So where can cities turn to improve conditions for employees and retain the most talented people?

The answer is to look to other cities. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) has launched a new city mentoring programme to help raise team performance and the self-esteem of civil servants. The programme began in 2008 when the Lilongwe City Assembly approached Johannesburg for assistance in developing its City Development Strategy (CDS).

Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, was typical of city administrations according to Jan Erasmus, deputy director of policy and strategy for the City of Johannesburg.

"The Lilongwe Assembly was plagued by corruption and low staff morale and there was no strategic approach or programme to address the challenges facing the city," says Erasmus.

Civil servants in Lilongwe can now boast improved working conditions through new spruced up offices, access to a newer and safer vehicle fleet, and

the removal of corrupt colleagues. These coincide with implementing improvements for Lilongwe's residents at large with better street lighting, repaired traffic signals, and the removal of corrupt practices in the daily markets.

"At the beginning, the concept of mentoring wasn't defined so during the first contact session in Lilongwe we defined it as a trusted advisor and a critical friend," says Erasmus, speaking from Lilongwe on his 14th visit to the city. "It was very important to define that relationship, otherwise it could have been seen like Johannesburg imposing and telling another city what they needed and required."

The governance of Lilongwe had been plagued by indecision and a lack of political will – stemming from the fact that almost all senior positions were filled by people in an acting capacity, due to continuously postponed elections.

"For us it's always problematic if there isn't a political context, because we prefer to ensure that there is a proper democracy in local government to act with," says Erasmus. "But there was a lot of goodwill when we arrived."

The City Development Strategy was formally launched in 2010 and so far Lilongwe is on the way to achieving five of the key targets from the development strategy. These include performance management, by-law reviews, a debt-recovery strategy and initiating a long-term capital investment programme. Smaller, but



just as important, targets include, morale boosting efforts for staff and visible changes to the city.

"The additional expenditure which moved the [Lilongwe] Assembly from a cash negative to a cash positive position allowed for a visible difference in the city, creating a perception that the Assembly is committed to delivering services and managing the city efficiently and effectively," says Erasmus.

A project manager at UCLG says that the mentor programme's key objective is to share experience from one city to another in a manner that promotes development and builds sustainable institutional capacity. Backed by UCLG, Cities Alliance



Members of the teams from Lilongwe, Johannesburg and UCLG in Malawi

and the Norwegian government, the mentoring programme is very different from pre-existing partnership arrangements between cities.

When cities are twinned, this normally happens before any detail has been properly analyzed. With mentoring the idea is to begin with just a small project and then develop the relationship from there. UCLG is the only organization to offer a multi-level partnership without mayors having to first go to a city to shake hands to say that they are twinning.

Erasmus believes that a mentor programme can restructure international partnerships.

“Let’s first recreate a solid basis of interaction and then the traditional

ceremonial type arrangements can follow,” he says. “Up until now it was the other way around. You would enter into an agreement and decide on areas of activity, people cut the ribbon, and nothing would happen afterwards.”

### South-south partnerships

Another difference with the UCLG programme is that while other city partner programmes are more on a north-north or north-south level, the UCLG mentor programme is mainly aimed at south-south partnerships.

“Southern cities have similar environments and experiences, and can share more with other cities in a comparable position,” says a project manager at UCLG. “We appreciate that

southern cities are very much capable and willing to provide assistance. The experiences up until now have mainly come from southern African cities, but in Latin America the potential for cities to join the mentor programme is very promising.”

In Latin America, the other pioneer in the mentoring arrangement, the city of Rosario, Argentina, has developed extensive relationships with Ciudad Sur Association – a group of satellite cities outside of Santiago, Chile.

“The strategy [mentoring and planning] has been crucial in helping us to see the way forward and to act with consensus,” says Miguel Lifschitz, Mayor of Rosario. “When comparing our experiences and vision with my colleagues from other regions, we found similar approaches and concerns of the leaders, although the contexts are very different.”

Top level and political agreements are still required before mentoring can begin but the majority of contact and communication is between the experts in the field and the civil servants from each respective city. UCLG believes that this reveals another distinct aspect of the programme.

“The more intensive level of cooperation is on the civil servant side because they exchange ideas and information more fluidly,” explains a spokesperson for UCLG. “One civil servant can phone and have access to his or her counterpart, and partake more readily in technical visits and exchanges. The technical exchange would be three times higher than the political exchange.”

Although initially tied in with urban planning, the programme is looking to reach out to all issues related to urban development. In less than two years from its inception, the programme has spread to four other city/association partnerships. Mentor partnerships now exist between Durban and Mzuzu in South Africa; the Namibian Association and Durban; Blantyre in Malawi and Ekurhuleni in South Africa; and Mombasa, Kenya, which is partnering with a northern city, Bergen in Norway.

“We are still very much interested in northern cities taking part in this process, as can be seen with Bergen’s involvement,” says the UCLG spokesperson. Mombasa has a lot of land use problems and as they wanted to narrow the field of advice to this area to ensure tangible results, Bergen, with experience in this field, was matched with Mombasa.

**Benefits for mentors**

Many would presume that mayors and city officials already have a hectic work schedule running their own city, let alone assisting another. But Erasmus believes there are benefits for the mentor city too, that make it worthwhile investing time.

**“Once the programme or strategy is implemented, it’s important to give control of the local government functions back to the city you are working with”**

*– Jan Erasmus, deputy director of policy and strategy, City of Johannesburg*

“It’s about the African agenda of Johannesburg,” says Erasmus. “We feel that we should play an important role in Africa to support countries that need it, and also to carefully select countries. Normally you wouldn’t regard Malawi as a key strategic country, but it was the first pilot, and test, with whom we have entered into this positive relationship. A pro-poor and sound governance agenda, that is what Johannesburg stands for and what we want to share with other cities.”

This type of partnership can also create inroads and greater access for future agreements and investments.

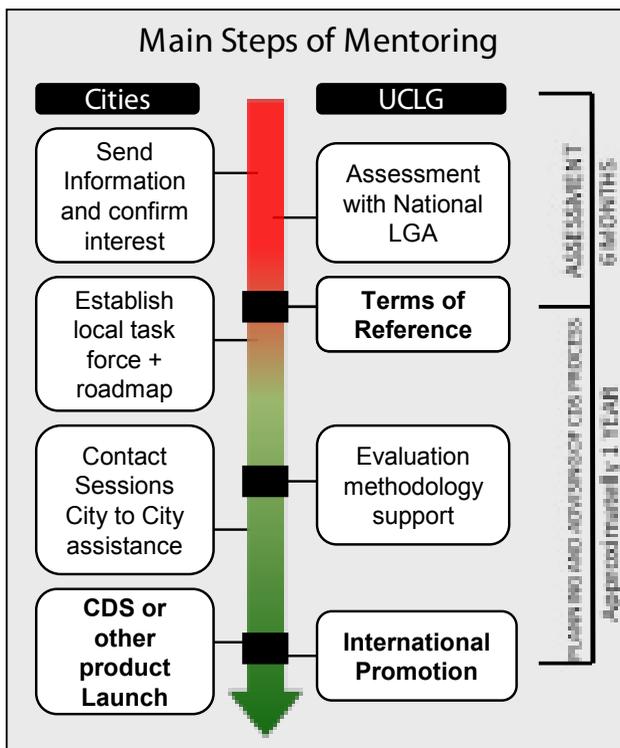
Some Chinese cities, for example, see it as important to be aware of all Chinese investments in Africa and to have a stake in such investments. For them mentoring is a way of creating a stake and having prime access to politicians on a non-commercial basis. So cities can enlarge their own power and influence through a mentor programme.

As in Lilongwe the initiative can reap benefits in providing new challenges to staff, both for the mentor and the mentee city.

“It is a way to refresh your own personnel,” says the UCLG spokesperson. “It’s also an opportunity to have your staff and professionals broaden their horizons with new challenges and to be involved in something more exciting than normal day-to-day business.”

UCLG believes that mentoring is now more accessible and available to cities due to an agreement with the Norwegian government whereby those cities in most need can be assisted with some financing.

“We would like more cities to become mentors,” says UCLG’s project manager. “We have observed, for example, that in Brazil, cities want partnerships such as this but they don’t get off the ground, because they cannot finance them. It’s already a given, that the Brazilian government has set aside several million US dollars for African assistance, but not for cities in particular. If they go through us, they can always go their own way and



Source: UCLG

they are not locked into anything with UCLG.”

Back in Lilongwe, Erasmus believes the most important part of the mentor programme is one of capacity building, passing on knowledge and ownership.

“People didn’t know where to start in Lilongwe as no-one here, including the consultants, knew how to undertake a process like this, but once the programme or strategy is implemented it’s important to give control of the local government functions back to the city you are working with,” comments Erasmus. “I think there are so many initiatives where people lose control and it ends up being dictated from the outside.”

The pride of ownership and renewed energy given to civil servants in Lilongwe from the mentorship is infectious, says Erasmus. “It really provides the opportunity for them to get back control of local government, and that is the governance goal that we are trying to achieve.” ■

For further information on how cities can become mentors or mentees, contact UCLG +34 93 342 8773, or email: [s.hoeflich@cities-localgovernments.org](mailto:s.hoeflich@cities-localgovernments.org)