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## Enhancing the ASEAN Community through Town Twinning Arrangements

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**Abstract:** Philippine external relations is commonly perceived as the sole domain of national government. Yet given the move towards Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) integration and in light of current global trends where diverse players take on a role in regional affairs, there are increased opportunities for the Philippines to strengthen ties with its neighbors not only on a national but sub-national level. This paper explores how the town twinning or sister city program provides a mechanism for Philippine local government units to establish links with their ASEAN counterparts to promote trade, technical, cultural, and educational exchanges. Using document analysis and a case study approach, the paper discusses the processes and outcomes of town twinning arrangements with Cebu as a case in point. While there is much potential for increasing inflows of material resources and human capital through this mechanism, it is noted that the Philippine local government units have not maximized the benefits of town twinning arrangements within ASEAN. Only four Philippine cities namely, Bacolod, Cebu, Puerto Princesa, and Vigan have sister cities with only two ASEAN countries which are Malaysia and Indonesia. The paper argues that there is a need to impress upon policymakers that non-state actors such as, local government units, can be effective players in bringing about stronger ties in the region by means of enhanced bilateral cooperation among ASEAN towns and cities.

**Key Words:** town twinning program; sister-city; Cebu City; ASEAN integration; ASEAN community



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Twin towns or sister cities are borne out of legal agreements between local governments that are geographically apart and politically distinct but have the same interest to pursue people-to-people exchanges to foster understanding and cooperation.

In the Philippines, the Philippine Sisterhood Program started in 1981 as a partnership program for local government under the Office of the President and then Department of Local Government. Its objective was to urge all LGUs to support and actively participate in establishing meaningful international sisterhood relationships with provinces, cities, and municipalities abroad. By doing so, this could lead to lasting relationships where projects and exchanges of mutual interest can be forged in the areas of investments, education, culture, tourism, and sustainable development.

At a time when the ASEAN is gearing up for stronger integration, there is a need to enhance interaction among its peoples to facilitate the vision of a solid regional community by 2020. One way of achieving this is through town twinning or sister city agreements among ASEAN member-countries.

There is, however, a dearth of scholarly work on town twinning programs in Southeast Asia and how they have the potential of contributing to regional integration and development. Most of what has been written on town twinning are on the experiences of Europe and US as the concept originated in these countries - first in Europe as early as 836 between the German city of Paderborn and the French city of Le Mans and continued in the European Union and the US after World War II. To date, the European Union (EU) still adopts this program and sets aside funding to encourage its member-states to establish links with fellow EU towns and cities helping to forge an EU identity.

This paper aims to contribute to the literature on the potential of town twinning in Southeast Asia which could lead to strengthening the ASEAN vision of one economic, political, and socio-cultural community.

Town twinning or sister city arrangements refer to an official partnership between two local government units (LGUs) of two nation-states, forged through the signing of a memorandum of agreement or any official document usually by the elected public officials of the two LGUs (Jose, n.d.). It is a concept whereby towns or cities in geographically and politically distinct areas are paired, with the goal of

fostering human contact and cultural links (Stephen, 2008). The partnership is not only limited to cultural understanding but expands to business, trade, education, and technical exchanges.

Fostering more intensive ties among LGUs in ASEAN countries is vital especially in line with meeting the goals of ASEAN integration. The ASEAN Vision 2020, adopted by the ASEAN Leaders on the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN in 1997, agreed on a "shared vision of ASEAN as a concert of Southeast Asian nations, outward looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies." ASEAN 2020: Partnership in Dynamic Development will hopefully forge closer economic integration within the region. (ASEAN, n.d.)

The ASEAN Community is founded on three pillars - Political-Security Community, Economic Community, and Socio-cultural Community. All pillars are linked together by governments from ASEAN member-states working together to guarantee a peaceful and prosperous Southeast Asian region.

This paper asks how town twinning arrangements can contribute to enhancing ties within ASEAN in support of the vision for an integrated ASEAN community. The paper examines the town twinning experience of Cebu, Philippines as a case in point. More specifically, the paper identifies the internal and external processes entailed in this LGU linking and the benefits that could be derived from town twinning agreements. Cebu's experience of its ties with sister cities will serve as a jump off point to explore the potential of inter-ASEAN town twinning arrangements that can boost greater cooperation in support of integration. The author asserts that this mechanism should be maximized among ASEAN member-countries.

## 2. FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The framework for this study has three components: (1) the town twinning program as the independent variable; (2) linking processes as intervening variable; and (3) enhanced regional partnership as the dependent variable.

In examining the town twinning program, its objectives are identified, as well as, the policy entailed in implementing this program. The linking processes indicate the internal (within



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LGU) and external (local LGU vis-a-vis partner LGU overseas) procedures in establishing a sister-city agreement. Subsequent activities such as, exchanges in technical, commercial, cultural and other areas of cooperation are used to measure enhanced regional partnership borne out of town twinning arrangements.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative data analysis is used in this study. The research adapts a case study approach to have an in-depth understanding of how town twinning is carried out from preparation to implementation. It also provides better insight on the impacts of such agreements on the LGUs with respect to achieving goals on local development, as well as in promoting external relations. Cebu City is selected as a case given that among Philippine LGUs (cities in particular), it has the most number of town twinning agreements and has a track record of being proactive in foreign linkaging.

Reports and memoranda of agreements from the Cebu City government were previously gathered and analyzed. Document analysis is employed for systematic evaluation of the processes, proponents, and motivations of parties entering into town twinning agreements. Secondary data from print and online sources are used. This is supplemented by the researcher's own observation, experiences, and interactions with the city protocol officer having been previously based in Cebu City.

## 4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### 4.1 *Local government units as players in diplomacy*

Town twinning is deemed the highest form of international, inter-municipal cooperation that can lead to relationships which affect almost every aspect of municipal life involving cultural, social, professional, and even economic activities. The program actively involves citizens and communities fostering people-to-people diplomacy.

Among the benefits of this mechanism are:  
(1) it allows an exchange of ideas with cities and

citizens of other countries; (2) it paves the way for better understanding by opening new dialogues with other cultures to find solutions in improving the quality of life; and (3) it allows participation with a real partner in another community and country so community members can contribute to international understanding and peace in a direct way (Roldan, 2003).

### 4.2 *Processes*

Before a town twinning or sister city agreement is formalized, there are internal and external procedures which have to be met first.

The internal processes within the LGU entail a creation of a town twinning or sister-city committee representing a cross-section of the members in the community from business, academe, youth, media, and other sectors. The committee discusses affiliation and determines the proposed city to affiliate with based on mutual interests.

The next step is the preparation of background information on of the LGU to include types of business activities in the locality, human resource profile, school system, cultural institutions, and types of projects the community is ready to undertake.

The twinning committee then submits the affiliation proposal to the LGU for endorsement by the mayor and council. When the LGU decides to proceed, an executive committee is appointed responsible for carrying out the program. The local chief executive serves as honorary chairman of the executive committee. Depending on the scope of the program, sub-committees are formed for year-round planning of activities. Once the twinning has been agreed, a twinning ceremony is held to be attended by representatives of both parties.

Part of the external processes involving the LGU and the sister city is the drafting of a protocol of intent. This signifies the parties' mutual intention to establish sister city relations. The protocol is prepared by the city government and is sent to the proposed sister city through diplomatic or foreign posts.

Next, there is an exchange of information through the help of consuls and their offices. The consul of the proposed city based in the Philippines transmits communication to his or her home country.



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The proposed sister city provides information about the locality. Both cities evaluate the prospects for matching based on mutual interests and information obtained.

Once the two parties decide to match, the city council drafts a resolution expressing the desire to enter into a town twinning or sister city agreement. After the exchange of resolutions, the formal signing of the agreement takes place (Roldan, 2003).

#### *4.3 Cebu City's town twinning experience*

Cebu has started establishing links with other cities as early as the 1960s. The first link was with Kaoshiung, Taiwan with the signing of a Memorandum of Goodwill by the Mayor. This was followed by more sister city agreements to include Harlmermeer (the Netherlands) Seattle (Washington, USA), Honolulu (Hawaii, USA), Salinas City (California), Xiamen (People's Republic of China), Sevilla City (Spain), Guadalajara (Mexico), Punta Arenas (Chile), Yeosu (South Korea), Paramata (New South Wales, Australia), Vladivostok (Russia), Kitchner (Canada), and more recently Bandung (Indonesia).

The activities and benefits that Cebu City derives from the town twinning program are gleaned from the following examples -

1. Kaoshiung. Aside from the yearly Kaoshiung delegation to the Sinulog festival every January to witness the cultural and religious celebration in Cebu, Mayor Osmena secured more than 300 vehicles as donations from this sister-city.
2. Xiamen. Cebu has sent English teachers to teach Chinese students in Xiamen and Xiamen in return sent chefs to teach Cebuanos authentic Chinese cuisine. Xiamen has donated bulldozers, heavy equipment, and fire trucks to the city of Cebu.
3. Honolulu. Dance troupes and students have been sent by Cebu City to Honolulu to foster cultural learning. A Hawaiian business delegation, for its part, visited Cebu to explore business and investment opportunities.
4. Harlemermeer. Harlemermeer donated trauma vans and ambulances to the city and trained Cebuanos in paramedic techniques. It has also given flower seeds to the city in support of Cebu's cutflower industry while Cebu City gave mango seeds to Harlemermeer.

These examples show that sister city linkages have benefited Cebu in that it provided

resource inputs to the LGU and the communities under its jurisdiction. Aside from fostering goodwill and greater understanding through direct interactions of communities involved it has paved the way for the influx of trade, business, tourists from said sister cities.

#### 4. ANALYSIS

As gleaned from Cebu's experience, town twinning has provided capital assets to this LGU in terms of donations of vehicles and equipment that service its constituencies. Cebu is also able to promote itself abroad by showcasing local products and industries in trade fairs conducted in their sister cities. This is achieved by means of directly linking up with LGUs and communities abroad.

While there is much potential for increasing inflows of resources and people through this mechanism, it is noted that LGUs in the Philippines have not maximized the benefits of town twinning arrangements within ASEAN. Among LGUs in the Philippines, only four Philippine cities namely, Bacolod, Cebu, Puerto Princesa, and Vigan have sister cities with only two ASEAN countries which are Malaysia and Indonesia. Other ASEAN countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, and Singapore have not been explored yet as potential town twinning partners.

What does it take for improving ASEAN links on this level? There are a number of requisities that need to be put in place.

First is the impetus to increase awareness on the possible benefits of town twinning arrangements. This is needed on the part of the Philippine national government, LGUs, and their counterparts in other ASEAN member-states. Greater awareness among government officials has to be generated to lend support for this program. Town twinning is commonly associated with tourism but it goes beyond this. Business investments, technology transfer, inputs to education, and local administration are among the benefits that can be derived from such a mechanism.

Second, formal inclusion of town twinning as a useful tool for partnership in the ASEAN can be a driver for local government units to take this up. Mention of this in an ASEAN declaration or document would propel governments to move



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towards this direction. An attendant ASEAN funding allotment can all the more activate this mechanism in the way that the EU sets aside funding which can be accessed by its members intending to go into town twinning partnerships among fellow EU members.

Lastly, bureaucratic bottlenecks within Philippine national and local governments have to be cleared for this initiative to take off. Closer coordination and assistance with the Department of Foreign Affairs and its regional consular offices is needed on information and protocol matters.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the town twinning program can be instrumental in allowing LGUs to be active players in diplomacy. This mechanism can be instrumental for increased international understanding and cooperation which augurs well for stronger ties within the region. While it is observed that most town twinning arrangements are with major countries such as the US, China, and Japan, there needs to be serious work in promoting this mechanism in ASEAN to augment current government efforts to achieve a successful alignment of goals among individual ASEAN member countries. The town twinning or sister city arrangements can pave the way for better ASEAN integration and a stronger sense of an ASEAN community with direct participation and linking by LGUs with counterparts in the region.

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