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Municipal Cooperation across Conflict Divides
A Preliminary Study

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September 2007

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Charity Registration No. 208 223

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The author is grateful to Danielle Gould, Alexander Carius, Richard Tarasofsky and Gidon Bromberg, for comments and assistance.

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Introduction

Local governments are subject to different kinds of political constraints and opportunities from national governments. The expectations of local government constituencies do not include dealing with 'high politics' affairs, defence or diplomacy. Rather, municipal leaderships and mayors are expected to deliver services that facilitate a reasonable quality of life for residents, notably including environmental services, planning and creating conditions for economic development.

When municipalities are situated in countries that are involved in intensive national conflicts, often including armed hostilities, territorial and resource disputes, the ability of local government to provide the expected services is severely undermined. This is naturally the case where hostilities occur within municipal jurisdictions. However, political conflict also affects peaceful municipalities that happen to be located near the conflict divide or border. In the absence of cooperation across the border, they are restricted from addressing common transboundary environmental threats, or capitalizing on the benefits of cooperation with neighbouring communities. The absence of a cooperative climate necessary for successful municipal service delivery often means that municipalities near conflict divides are unable to deliver the expectations of their residents. So-called 'low politics' issues such as environment and water rank as low priorities for national governments; while they are attempting to address the high-profile issues of sovereignty, territory or security, environmental concerns that may be important to local residents are frequently neglected.

Municipal jurisdictions are rarely isolated. They are often subject to external influences, and can also impact on neighbouring municipal areas. Environmental nuisance, water and wastewater, air, odour, noise and traffic are but some examples that demonstrate the artificiality of municipal boundaries – despite the fact that it is often municipalities that are expected to solve, plan and regulate such matters. Consequently, municipal as well as national cooperative frameworks can emerge to jointly address problems or create opportunities of mutual benefits. Such cooperation may be within the boundaries of a single state or across national borders.[1]

[1] See for example the joint sewage treatment facilities of San Diego (US) and Tijuana (Mexico); the international Boundary and Water Commission of the US and Mexico; the International Joint Commission of the US and Canada and others.

The need for and institutions of transboundary environmental cooperation in conflict

When the boundaries of environmental systems do not match political boundaries, their management necessitates cooperation by all political entities involved. It is commonly agreed that the protection of regional water resources, for example, is best served by a degree of cooperation between parties to a water basin, ranging from basic coordination to joint management (Wolf, 1995; Lowi, 1993; Feitelson, 2000, 2003; Kliot et al., 2001, Haddad et al., 1999; Tal, 2002: 357).

In conflict situations, the need for cooperation across political boundaries only increases. Carius (2006) identifies three peace-building rationales for such cooperation: addressing causes of ecological conflict (i.e. preventing ecologically induced conflicts); cooperation as a platform for dialogue; and sustainable development as a prerequisite for durable peace. Turton et al. (2003) further note the value of entrenching a culture of cooperation rather than conflict in transboundary resource relations.

However, the ability of political entities in conflict to carry out such cooperation is highly limited. Cooperation between states in such settings has been extensively studied. For example, adversarial countries in the Jordan River basin complied with and implicitly accepted a cooperative plan for using the shared water basin, as suggested by the US-sponsored Johnston unified development plan in the 1950s. This achievement was reached despite the absence of formal recognition between the parties, or explicit acceptance of the cooperative plan (Lowi, 1993; Wolf, 1995; Haddadin, 2002).

Implicit cooperative arrangements such as this probably account for the relative scarcity of armed conflicts over water (see Hamner and Wolf 1998; Wolf 1998). While successful in preventing conflict, implicit cooperative regimes are limited in their functional scope. Further, without recognition of trans-frontier cooperation, the peace-building value of implicit regimes is particularly limited.

Explicit and formal cooperation between adversarial counties appears far more difficult to achieve. Examining several transboundary river basins, Lowi concluded that cooperative regimes over water between adversaries may be possible, but only if

they are preceded by explicit, prior agreement to cooperate – a condition that cannot be met by adversaries (Lowi, 1993: 192–3, 198).

Ashton and Turton (2005) suggest conflict-related difficulties of local state actors can be overcome by resorting to larger-scale river basin management structures through the creation of multi-country institutions to which states will delegate authority. An example of such an effort is the Nile Basin Initiative, which seeks to serve as a catalyst for a new legal framework for the management of the Nile River between the ten countries in its basin (Kameri Mbote, 2007). There are numerous other examples of transnational institutions for transboundary water management (Feitelson, 2000, 2003).

Conca and Dabelko distinguish between environmental peacemaking at interstate level, comprising a 'high politics' issue, and at trans-societal level, where civil society takes the lead on initiating cooperation (Conca and Dabelko, 2002). The subject of this paper – municipal government – may be seen as occupying the middle ground between state actors and civil society.

Motivated by the rationale that municipal leadership is in a unique situation in the context of national conflicts, this study assesses the capacities of local actors to initiate and maintain trans-frontier cooperation on environmental issues where national governments and intergovernmental institutions are unable to do so.

Clearly, it is beyond the mandate of local governments to seek solutions to national or international problems. However, municipalities may be in a position to address local issues of common concern, even across conflict divides. This is facilitated by two factors. On the one hand local constituencies on both sides are under pressure to address issues such as wastewater and other environmental nuisances. On the other hand, local government is not always tied by constraints linked to the wider political situation, and enjoys relative flexibility to initiate ties on local issues with its neighbours on the other side of the conflict divide. Indeed, local governments can sometimes take risks that national governments cannot.

It should be noted that the independence of local government from centralized national government varies in different regimes, affecting the ability of municipalities to act contrary to government expectations. However, at least one of the examples in this paper demonstrates that this is not an unsurpassable hurdle. Palestinian

municipalities are highly dependent on national government through the Ministry of Local Government. Nonetheless, the municipality of Tul Karem nurtured a cooperative relationship with its neighbouring Israeli municipality, Regional Council Emek Hefer, despite surrounding hostilities. As discussed below, this relationship was around the rehabilitation of a transboundary stream and preventing pollution of shared groundwater resources.

In over ten years of work in the conflict-ridden Middle East, EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) has witnessed progress on environmental problems between local communities and municipalities from both sides of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict despite very difficult political and economic circumstances. Such progress was remarkable, especially in the light of the failure of national governments to solve pressing pollution problems during the same period. This brief study aims to examine whether such cooperation is to be found in other conflict settings around the world, and importantly, to determine the conditions necessary for such cooperation to take place.

Case studies

Despite the abundance of conflict regions worldwide, and the multitude of transboundary environmental problems that affect local residents in communities in conflict areas, finding case studies for this report proved more difficult than expected. The abundant literature on transboundary environmental cooperation and conflict treats primarily cooperation between national governments, which are seen as the main stakeholders when it comes to the 'high politics' of security, conflict and cooperation. Municipal cooperation is discussed primarily within national boundaries, or across borders in peaceful settings, not as part of conflict situations.

Nonetheless, the author found three case studies of municipal environmental cooperation across conflict divides: Nicosia, the divided capital of Cyprus, where exceptional cooperation took place over building sewage facilities and consequently the creation of a joint master plan; the communities of the Sliabh Beagh catchment area in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, where joint planning facilitated development of rural environmental tourism ventures and economic development in the once-conflict ridden area; and the case of Tul Karem and Emek Hefer, Palestinian and Israeli municipalities that embarked upon rare cooperation on sewage treatment and groundwater protection despite ongoing armed hostilities.

A. Nicosia, a divided city: sewage facilities and creation of a master plan

Cooperation in Nicosia, the divided capital of the island of Cyprus, began around the specific but troublesome issue of sewage treatment, some three years following the hostilities that divided the city in 1974. Building on the successful cooperation, however, the divided municipalities continued to pursue a joint planning venture, the Nicosia Master Plan.

The establishment of a sewage system for the city of Nicosia began in the early 1970s in response to a pressing sanitation need in the city. However, the 1974 the conflict interrupted the works, dividing the city into two separate, hostile parts: a Greek part in the south and a Turkish-controlled part in the north. The incomplete sewage treatment facility as well as some parts of the main trunk remained in the northern part of the city, unavailable to the southern residents who continued to suffer from untreated sewage.

The construction of a separate sewage facility for the southern part proved economically and topographically unfeasible, while the poorer northern community could not bear the costs of the project by itself, and was unable to attract additional funds. Owing to the pressing need to prevent health hazards, the mayor of the Greek part, Lellos Demitriades, was already making contacts in the first UN-sponsored meeting of national leaders between the two sides in 1977. By the end of that year, cooperative meetings were being held on the issue between Demitriades and his counterpart in the Turkish part, Mustafa Akinci, and in 1978 both mayors formed a team of experts to complete the project for the city's sewage system. Financial assistance was provided by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) through the World Bank.

These contacts were made at significant political risk to both mayors during a period when civil cooperation across the Cypriot divide was unheard of owing to the hostilities and resentment. The meetings were not publicized, and although the national leaders from both sides were aware of the contacts, they did not encourage or help them.

The initiative on working together came from the two mayors, who continued their vision beyond the implementation of the sewage system (which was ready to operate in 1980). Encouraged by their success, the mayors cooperated over the creation of a

joint master plan for the divided city. The aim of the plan was to regulate development so as to enable both parts of the city to function independently, while maintaining long-term planning with the vision of the reunited city which will be able to function as a whole. The Master Plan team consisted of architects, planners and sociologists from both sides, while technical teams remained separate, under a single, neutral project manager from Macedonia. Notably, joint meetings on the Nicosia Master Plan continued even when national level talks stopped. The initial focus of the Master Plan was the renovation, restoration and rehabilitation of two historic neighbourhoods. A bi-communal Master Plan team of experts from both communities, under the auspices of the UNDP and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), continues the work on the Master Plan. The two mayors' collaborative work on the sewage facility and the Nicosia Master Plan between 1976 and 1990 won them an Europa Nostra Award in 2002 for their consistent collaborative work, representing long-term planning for the day when the city will be reunited (Akinci, 2004; Broome, 1998; Europa Nostra).

Factors leading to success

Several factors appear to have enabled successful cooperation across the conflict divide in the case of Nicosia. First, both mayors identified a strong mutual need, as the solution for sewage problems was their responsibility. Each mayor was subject to constraints that did not allow unilateral solutions: northern Nicosia lacked financial resources, while southern Nicosia had no feasible available land for wastewater treatment. A cooperative solution overcame the constraints of both sides.

The second factor is the initiative and vision of both mayors, without which it is unlikely that the required cooperation would have materialized. Reaching out to the other side under severe political difficulties is risky, and likely to entail political costs. Third, assistance was available from several sources: mayoral meetings were always chaired by a UNDP representative and other UN agencies such as HABITAT and UNFICYP provided project management and technical assistance; acquiescence of national leaders was secured, providing a degree of political backing for the risky initiative; and financial assistance was provided from other third parties, such as the UNDP and the World Bank. However, both mayors deliberately avoided media exposure for fear of jeopardizing the cooperation.

The combination of these factors appears to have enabled an impressive degree of cooperation, which in fact became the foundation for even greater collaboration. Furthermore, while the initial project relieved the sewerage problem faced by both mayors, the second, i.e. the joint Master Plan, in fact envisions future reunification of the city, and thus goes far beyond purely functional cooperation.

B. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland: caring for Sliabh Beagh catchment area

The mountain region and lowlands of the Sliabh Beagh area cover some 800 square miles of lakes, rivers and forestry, including Areas of Special Scientific Interest and Natural Heritage Areas. Being a remote border area used for arms smuggling, it suffered severely in the 1980s and early 1990s from security policies, including road blocks, weak infrastructure, and disruption to social life, employment opportunities and livelihoods.

The project embarked upon by the Sliabh Beagh Cross Border partnership aimed to address environmental as well as social and economic regeneration in the area, with a community-wide focus, by committing to care for and treasure the countryside through a range of activities including eco-tourism and recycling.

The partnership comprises 13 Community Associations of rural villages from Fermanagh (Northern Ireland) and Monaghan (Republic of Ireland), with a population of about 10,000 people in total. Participating communities are both Catholic and Protestant. Distrust was addressed through years of activity, with initial activities taking place separately within each of the communities, while later activities linked communities across the religious and political divide.

The cooperation was initiated by local Community Associations in response to their expressed needs. They felt that county councillors, residing in central towns, were not connected to the communities, and that national and local governments were unable to do anything with the remote communities in the region, or had no interest in doing so. Because the initiative was generated at the grassroots level, all activities enjoyed the support of local communities in the Sliabh Beagh area.

As part of the project, a series of walking and cycling trails was developed in an area of 200 square miles, including a 25-mile cross-border walk. The project was completed in 2002 and launched by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for Northern Ireland.

In addition, the partnership implemented a recycling awareness initiative with the aim of providing training for member communities, cleaning up walking trails and the rural environment, and disseminating information on recycling and waste management. These activities were complemented by other community activities and training, including establishing a computer link-up for each of the project partners and providing computer and internet training; conducting an Environment Business Opportunities Training Programme to support members of the farming community interested in diversifying their activities; an arts programme to foster symbolic cultural practices in relation to the environment, emphasizing common environmental connections through drama, dance and festivals; celebrating regional identity; and promoting eco-tourism.

The project succeeded in significantly enhancing the number of visitors to the region. Its success is attributed to the focus and commitment on common regional economic regeneration through emphasis on environmental values. A sense of environmental citizenship and common bonds to place were able to transcend religious and political animosities in favour of regional, environmentally based development.

Funding for the programmes was made available from a variety of sources, notably the European Commission (INTERRREG 2; *Building Sustainable Prosperity* (BSP)); the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (NI); the International Fund for Ireland, and others (Maguire, 2006; Sliabh Beagh Development Organisation; Ellis et al., 2004).

Factors leading to success

As in the previous case study, cooperation in Sliabh Beagh catchment area is characterized by a mutual need. Suffering from economic disadvantage that is greatly associated with past hostilities, communities from both sides of the divide felt the need to reinvigorate the region. With little support for their needs from central or even local governments, which are physically remote from the population, the

Community Associations had the vision to take matters into their own hands, in cooperation across the conflict divide. As in the Cyprus case, external financing from the European Union enabled the cooperation; however, the difference here is that communities were involved through a gradual mixture of intra- and inter-community activities to alleviate distrust, and building on the high sense of regional, environmental identity shared by communities in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

C. Israeli-Palestinian cooperation on sewage and groundwater protection: the case of Tul Karem and Emek Hefer

During the last five years of armed conflict, terrorist attacks, restrictions on movement and targeted killings, cooperation has been remote from the interest of most Palestinians and Israelis. However, the two neighbouring municipalities of (Palestinian) Tul Karem and (Israeli) Emek Hefer, located in close proximity yet divided by the green line, were successful in some important ways to bridge the hostilities and achieve progress in sewerage solutions by maintaining Israeli-Palestinian cooperation at the local level.

Sewage from the city of Tul Karem flows across the Green Line, underneath the recently built separation barrier, into the municipality of Emek Hafer. In the past, the sewage polluted the Alexander River, which flows through Emek Hefer Regional Council on its way to the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, sewage contaminates scarce, valuable groundwater resources which are shared by Israelis and Palestinians.

Addressing this issue, in 1996 the two mayors signed a Treaty of Intentions outlining their mutual interest and initial plans for regional sewage solutions. Although the cooperation encountered difficulties associated with the hostilities that broke out in 2000, progress continued on pollution prevention.

A sewage treatment facility for Tul Karem sewage was established as an interim measure on the Israeli side to prevent pollution. Funds for this emergency project were deducted by the Israeli government from money owed to the Palestinian Authority. However, the treatment provided has not been sufficient, requiring pre-treatment of Tul Karem sewage before it reaches Emek Hefer.

Significant funding for the wastewater sector in the West Bank was committed by the German Development Cooperation (federal funding). However, since the beginning of the recent round of conflict in 2000, there has been no success on implementing any of the several planned sewage facilities owing to the conflict reality. The various attempts of national authorities to reach sewage solutions in several Palestinian cities were unable to overcome the difficulties associated with the conflict.

Following the outbreak of hostilities, ties between the two mayors were initially severed. However, with the help and initiative of EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East and another (Israeli-Arab) neighbouring Mayor, which coordinated the reinstatement of contact, the old cooperation was renewed. The two mayors succeeded in transcending the new reality, and facilitated the establishment of pretreatment facilities for Tul Karem sewage despite the conflict conditions. The Tul Karem pre-treatment plant was launched on February 2005, easing the treatment burden in the Israeli side. Among the guests attending the opening ceremony were members of both communities.

This project could only be facilitated through the cooperative effort of the local municipality, German assistance and the neighbouring Israeli community of Emek Hefer. The ties established between the two mayors and their mutual interest to find solutions for the pollution threat resulted in a close working relationship that was crucial for successful project implementation. It is not the traditional role of municipal governments to coordinate with the military, the Foreign Ministry and the Israeli Water Commission (which partially controls all water projects in the West Bank). It appears, however, that such initiative by municipalities can potentially overcome many conflict-related difficulties encountered by donor countries operating in the West Bank.

Cooperation between the municipalities is supported by community groups from both sides, through the ‘Good Water Makes Good Neighbours’ project of Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME), carried out in both communities since 2001. Tul Karem and Emek Hefer are two of 17 municipalities that have joined the initiative to jointly address water and wastewater issues affecting neighbouring communities in Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, and contribute to awareness-raising on environmental issues across borders. Cooperative efforts are fostered by local field

staff and volunteer groups at the initiative and financing of a regional environmental NGO (FoEME, 2005).

The close cooperation between the municipalities continues to date, with both mayors cooperating to seek additional funding for other additional sewage solution projects. The successful implementation of this project served as an impetus for the continuation of German-supported sewage infrastructure in other West Bank cities, hitherto on hold owing to the conflict situation.

Factors leading to success

As in the previous cases of Ncosia and Sliabh Beagh, the cooperative endeavour between Emek Hefer and Tul Karem was based on a solid foundation of local leadership commitment, and the initiative taken by both mayors. Here too, a strongly felt mutual need motivated both sides to pursue the cooperative effort to solve transboundary water pollution problems, affecting shared water resources and the local environment.

Also similar to the other cases, availability of external funding enabled the implementation of solutions, in this case through the German Development Cooperation (federal funding) assistance for sewage infrastructure in Tul Karem. Additional external input was provided through NGO activities that generated community support for cooperation on both sides, particularly around water issues.

Conclusion

The three case studies discussed above demonstrate that municipal cooperation across conflict divides on environmental issue does take place around the world, with real benefits to both sides and to the environment. In Nicosia, such cooperation not only alleviated wastewater pollution, it facilitated coordinated town planning with a shared vision for the future unification of the city. In Sliabh Beagh area, cooperation between Irish communities on both sides of the border, Catholic and Protestant, facilitated economic development that protects the environment and enhances respect, pride and a sense of local identity with nature where once hostilities and animosity prevailed. In Tul Karem and Emek Hefer, local cooperation assisted in

preventing groundwater pollution throughout the conflict, where efforts by the *national* governments of Israel and the Palestinian Authority were unsuccessful. While the above cases differ in nature and circumstances, they share three significant commonalities:

1) The existence of mutual need to address an issue of joint concern.

2) Strong vision and determination by community leaders and mayors, which was a prerequisite for overcoming initial difficulties, distrust and scepticism. A sense of shared identity with local and natural heritage may help to overcome cultural divides, frequently present in national conflicts. In Nicosia, concern over the future of the historic city led to recognition of the need for joint planning, and was led by the mayors from both sides of the divided city. Sliabh Beagh communities demonstrate strong identity with the unique natural landscapes of their area, and the municipalities of Emek Hefer and Tul Karem were significantly driven by the determination of both mayors to cooperate in solving pressing environmental problems and their desire to rehabilitate the Alexander River which flows through both communities.

3) The presence and availability of a significant third party providing financial support and creating economic win-win situations. This role was played by the UNDP and the World Bank in the case of Nicosia, the European Commission in the case of Sliabh Beagh, and the German Development Cooperation (federal funding) in the case of Tul Karem and Emek Hefer. An additional third party input was present in the Nicosian case, where a UN agency facilitated contacts between the parties, and in the case of Tul Karem and Emek Hefer, where an NGO (EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East) facilitated some of the contacts and generated community support for transboundary cooperation between municipalities.

Finding cases of municipal environmental cooperation across conflict divides proved more difficult than expected, in the framework of this limited desk-study. Given the strong rationale for such cooperation, the author expected that relevant cases would be more widely publicized. Even with respect to the cases identified, the author was privileged to gain information which is not easily accessible. The case of Nicosia was discussed in an unpublished MA thesis containing interviews with both mayors. The little information available publicly on the Sliabh Beagh case was supplemented by

phone interviews; and the knowledge on the Tul Karem–Emek Hefer case was accumulated over several years of close work with the municipalities themselves.

The author is of the firm opinion that unavailability of information on municipal environmental cooperation across conflict divides is not due to lack of such cooperation in practice. In the light of the mutual benefits of such cooperation, and its necessity, we are confident that many such cases exist but are hidden from the public eye. A more exhaustive research may reveal additional cases, with useful lessons as well.

While municipalities may be aware of the usefulness of local cooperation across conflict divides to attain local goals, the full benefits of such cooperation are in fact far wider. In conflict situations, cooperation between national governments is frequently impossible for a host of political reasons. Consequently, conflicting parties may choose not to cooperate even where non-cooperation is to their mutual disadvantage, for example on issues of water and the environment.

As demonstrated by the case studies examined, the ability of municipalities to cooperate across conflict divides on issues that matter to their residents, such as environmental issues, often surpasses the ability of national governments to do so. As such, municipal cooperation of this kind represents a promising avenue of environmental policy in times of conflict. However, this promise is yet to be recognized, and more fully researched.

We consequently view the limited publication of relevant case studies as more than just a methodological constraint. It is an indication that the promise and option of municipal cooperation as a policy tool for environmental management during conflict is, as yet, unrecognized by researchers, practitioners and the communities themselves.

Policy recommendations

On the basis of the case studies and discussion above, the following policy recommendations are proposed to communities, national governments, international organizations and policy researchers involved in environmental management in conflict settings, particularly where mutual needs require transboundary cooperation:

1. **The unique contribution of municipalities cooperating on environmental issues across conflict divides must be clearly recognized and encouraged.** The author believes that through such recognition, a large volume of work currently taking place will become visible, and its contribution to solving environmental problems as well as promoting the conditions for sustainable peace may be adequately assessed. Such recognition may also set an example to local leaders of what may be achieved through local, cross-boundary cooperation.

2. **Third party involvement must complement local leadership through funding as well as presenting opportunities for contacts.** While it is crucial that initiatives for cooperation across conflict divides originate from local leadership, third parties can play a key role to help overcome certain barriers. In some cases such barriers may be opportunities to meet, requiring the good offices of a third party. In others, third parties may be able to help through funding of projects of mutual benefit. All case studies examined benefited from some kind of third party assistance.

3. **Foster a sense of shared identity across the conflict divide.** Environmental, natural and heritage issues are fertile ground for the development of a sense of community identity, either local or ideological. Such identity may present some alternative to national identities that often serve to alienate communities in conflict situations. While a newly developed 'green' identity may not, by itself, be sufficient to overcome deep-rooted animosities, it may nonetheless become a building block of future peace. Joint community activities, awareness raising and educational activities among young and old from both sides are therefore highly significant.

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