



'Glocal' People-to-People Diplomacy: The Potential of City Twinning in UAE-EU Relations

A diplomacy without culture is an empty, defective diplomacy.¹

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Summary

- Connecting cities across the globe is a practice that has been implemented through formal and informal channels throughout history. Sister-cities agreements and ‘multi-partner networks of civic cooperation’ represent some of the ways of bringing together citizens from different parts of the world.² Cities are often paired because they share historical, cultural, or economic features, even though they are situated in two or more different countries. It is then clear that the practice of city twinning can have an important function in people-to-people diplomacy, a type of diplomacy aimed at enhancing international interconnectedness and exchange.
- If actors collaborate according to a common strategy, city, regional, and national partnerships can benefit all. By thinking globally, but acting locally, governments might better achieve their strategic objectives, including goals shared with international partners, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is in this sense that people-to-people diplomacy can be considered ‘glocal’.³ Moreover, such multilevel partnerships and exchanges can be opportunities to increase mutual understanding and leading by example. When cities and regions are given opportunities to demonstrate best practices and alternative perspectives, states too serve as role models, thus increasing their soft power.⁴
- This Insight first introduces the history of people-to-people diplomacy and the objectives that this type of diplomacy can achieve, especially in strengthening knowledge sharing, inclusivity, and resilience. It will then present city twinning as an example of people-to-people diplomacy that, with its capacity to link populations located in different countries and regions, can act as a glocal diplomatic soft power tool, while also enhancing dialogue and mutual understanding between citizens and their governments.
- The Insight argues that with its openness to the world and the presence of international cultural institutions, such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the forthcoming Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, the UAE could employ city twinning as an additional and valuable instrument to globally encourage tolerance and collaboration amongst peoples. Thus, with its focus on the UAE, this Insight aims at shedding light on the role that people-to-people diplomacy can play in the form of city twinning in the fields of culture, education and beyond. Finally, it explores contributions and limitations of city twinning as a soft power tool in strengthening ties between the UAE and the EU.
- The Insight recommends the development of a city twinning programme in the UAE that would be a pioneering in the region by potentially employing the following tools:
 - Create a city twinning programme involving the Gulf, the MENA region and Europe, identifying common cultural specialties, and sharing knowledge about them.
 - Involve remote towns and regions in twinning programmes with Europe and the rest of the world.
 - Involve young people in twinning exchanges in schools, universities, and sports clubs.
 - Establish scholarship funds and research programmes for students and professionals seeking to study or work in cultural institutions and offer grants to students and professionals to study in the UAE.
 - Cooperate with embassies to launch twinning cultural and educational programmes in the UAE and abroad.
 - Create twinning programmes to host international students and artists in UAE educational establishments.
 - Realise an e-twinning portal aiming at creating networks between teachers in different schools.
 - Encourage student mobility through a student exchange programme at a higher education level.
 - Promote training exchanges with the aim of strengthening mutual understanding and international friendship.
 - Offer the opportunity to learn about the cultural landscape in the Gulf region and Emirati cultural heritage.

The Issue

People-to-People diplomacy was introduced for the first time in 1956, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the People-to-People Program encouraging private American citizens to “create contacts with foreign peoples in an effort to foster a sympathetic understanding of the aspirations, the hopes and fear, the traditions and prides of other people and nations”.⁵ The programme later became the People to People International (PTPI), an organisation which is still active today around the globe. The aim of this organisation is “to enhance international understanding and friendship through educational, cultural, and humanitarian activities involving the exchange of ideas and experiences directly among peoples of different countries and diverse cultures.”⁶

Encouraging better understanding between cultures represents one of the most effective grassroots tools for cooperation amongst populations and, consequently, their governments. Dialogue and social connection can help bridge political and social divides and overcome prejudice and discrimination towards populations perceived as ‘out-groups’. In this framework of communication and cultural exchange, city twinning can play a role in creating mutual understanding and dialogue amongst groups of people geographically distant, helping them to discover commonalities in their history, language, culture, education, and much more.

Through its capacity to overcome the divisive effects of borders, twinning can increase stronger cooperation at a local but also at a state level.⁷ It then becomes evident that: 1) twinning agreements can serve as an effective strategy for bolstering the international profile of local entities, be they cities or regions; 2) grassroots diplomacy, in the form of twinning, can influence state-level cooperation; 3) twinning can contribute to SDG 11 by making cities more inclusive, resilient and safe.

Due to its potential in encouraging inclusivity, cooperation and sustainability, many international organisations employ city twinning in their programmes. Through twinning, the EU, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe (CoE), promote “equality, interaction, and intercultural policy models”.⁸ In the Gulf region, a successful example of twinning is represented by AlUla (Saudi Arabia) and Matera (Italy) that, through their agreement, engage in joint initiatives and knowledge sharing in “areas such as cultural preservation, education, economy and social development.”⁹

In the UAE, Dubai is twinned with 32 sister cities,¹⁰ while Abu Dhabi was recognised UNESCO City of Music and is part of the wider Cities of Music Network.¹¹ The Gulf states are committed to fostering intercultural dialogue and implementing strategies for economic diversification and sustainable development through the arts (museums are an example).¹² In this framework, city twinning represents an effective diplomatic instrument facilitating the achievement of these objectives. The UAE could highly benefit from this type of people-to-people diplomacy, based on knowledge sharing and long-distance social interactions.

City Twinning as Glocal Diplomacy

In its broader definition, twinning encompasses all those practices “involving the establishment of sustained links between communities, usually – but not exclusively – located in different nation-states.”¹³ When referring to urban contexts, city twinning can be defined as the ensemble of “cooperative arrangements between cities, towns and even non-adjacent countries promoting economic and cultural ties.”¹⁴ The practice of city twinning became popular at the end of World War II. It started in 1944, when a group of women from Coventry reached out to Stalingrad (today known as Volgograd), sending there some money and a tablecloth with the words ‘Little help is better than big sympathy’ embroidered on it.¹⁵ Both populations had experienced similar devastation due to heavy bombardments during the war and this gesture represented the first testimony of what became the tradition of city twinning.

Twinning became then an instrument of solidarity between populations situated in different countries, but sharing the hardship and consequences of war. City twinning was also employed to foster peace and reconciliation between cities of countries located on opposite sides of the axis. It was the case of Coventry and Kiel, for example, whose respective mayors George Briggs and Andreas Gayk revived the relations between the citizens of the two cities, “invoking a spirit of humanitarian friendship.”¹⁶ These examples show what people saw in twinning: an instrument to create connection and dialogue against conflict and division. This was the case also after 1945 and during the Cold War, when city twinning served as an important instrument of reconciliation and reconstruction in Europe.

Since the late 1980s, the increasing attention of international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank, and the World Health Organization (WHO) towards the importance of cities, “has made it possible, if not inevitable, for even small cities to act internationally.”¹⁷ Thus, the global focus on urban places has empowered all kinds of cities to actively join the international stage, fostering a more interconnected and collaborative world.

Successful examples of this kind of collective action can be found in: the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) which empowers local and regional communities in the decision-making process; the WHO European Healthy Cities Network emphasising participatory governance and solidarity at a local level in the healthcare field; the C40 Cities, a transnational municipal network coordinating mayors’ efforts to address the climate crisis problems.

The role that cities play in the international political arena has become so prominent that one could refer to the ‘global city’ “to highlight a status of global interconnectedness attained by some contemporary world cities that occupy a core positioning in the complex of the globalizing flows of our time.”¹⁸ The interrelation of the local and the global dimensions through cities generates a practice that could be defined as glocal diplomacy.

This practice, expressed in the form of twinning, has evolved over time and has brought together cities located in different parts of the world, aimed at strengthening cultural, economic, political, and social ties. Not only cities, but also small towns and regions pair themselves with sister places around the world. Sometimes, these locations have cultural or linguistic similarities. Others share similar economic characteristics or have no commonalities, but are seeking to initiate forms of exchange between their citizens. These exchanges translate into the transmitting of best practices, fostering capacity building through peer learning processes.¹⁹

Twinning can also reveal itself useful during violent conflicts. More specifically, from the start of Russia’s war on Ukraine, Kyiv established twinning arrangements with major European cities like Hamburg, Madrid, and Paris, reaching a total of about 63 partnerships by January 2023. The official Visit Ukraine Today website attributed this rise in inter-municipal links to the humanitarian efforts of Kyiv’s sister cities, which provided medical supplies, buses, generators, and other materials to the war-affected Ukrainian capital or offered refuge to Ukrainian citizens.

At the same time, numerous European towns and cities suspended or cut off their longstanding ties with Russian municipalities following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.²⁰ Thus, twinning not only fosters solidarity and support during times of peace but also proves to be an invaluable tool in addressing urgent humanitarian needs and forging strong international alliances during times of conflict.

To summarise, the links created through twinning programmes involve acts of reciprocity and exchange, relating “local politics with the sphere of world affairs” transcending “a variety of conceptual as well as territorial borders.” In other words, twinning contributes to cross-border²¹ cooperation through the establishment of many programmes and initiatives where cities come together toward the achievement of a global, common goal. This aspect of twinning creates a powerful form of glocal people-to-people diplomacy.

Addressing Limitations of City Twinning

This review illustrates the advantages that city twinning can provide in fostering international cooperation and solidarity. However, obstacles and limitations of city and regional twinning cannot be ignored. These are some of the key challenges that can impact the effectiveness of city twinning initiatives:

- Geopolitical tensions can affect the existence of twinning partnerships.

The EU-China NGO Twinning exchange programme was a project of the Stiftung Asienhaus China Program. This programme aimed at developing ties between Chinese and globally active civil society organisations. After seven years of activities, the programme ended in 2019 and never started again.²² The reasons for this rupture are not clear, but one can imagine that the rising geopolitical tensions have not been conducive to restoration of the programme’s activities. Thus, disagreements between countries can strain twinning relationships between cities, showing that cities strongly depend on their countries’ foreign policies.

At the same time, some cities can overcome these tensions and show possibilities for cooperation even in an uncertain global context. Since 1979, San Francisco and Shanghai have been sister cities and in May 2024, the mayors of these cities signed a memorandum of understanding to renew this relationship.²³ This demonstrates that while geopolitical tensions can impact twinning programmes and city partnerships, leading to their suspension or termination, some cities are able to navigate these challenges and serve as bridges between places with limited commonalities.

- City twinning partnerships can remain symbolic.

Sometimes, city twinning programmes do not lead to any meaningful connection. At other times, they consist of official visits from municipalities and government delegations, but they do not involve the participation of local populations, making the outcomes of these visits difficult to identify. As mentioned earlier, Dubai appears to be twinned with 32 sister cities; however, it is unclear how these twinning agreements work and what type of activities are carried out in this twinning framework. A comprehensive and strategic approach to these agreements including a five-year plan, evaluation mechanisms and clear objectives could improve the programmes' implementation and obtain a thorough follow-up on their outcomes.

- Some cities can decide to un-twin from their sister cities and start economic partnerships with other cities.

In 2011, various British cities started to sever their links with their sister cities, while others have not undertaken any twinning action in years.²⁴ Debates about the effects of Brexit on people mobility and financial costs associated with these programmes seem to have contributed to this un-twinning reaction. Despite this, UK cities did not completely abandon twinning. Drawn to the economic benefits of twinning, they began to form new partnerships with their counterparts located in growing and emerging economies such as China and India. There were 52 formal partnerships established between 1980 and 2015, positioning Chinese cities as one of the most favoured choices for these connections.²⁵ The approach to twinning has evolved with time, but this economic strategy cannot be discarded as simply instrumental. Economic links can still serve as bridges to initiate other types of cooperation in the cultural field contributing, for example, to innovation, dialogue, and mutual understanding.

- Twinning programmes can create unbalanced relations between cities.

Due to differences in resources, twinning programmes can sometimes result in asymmetrical relationships, where one side might invest in the programme more than the other side. At first sight, this disproportion might seem detrimental for a long-lasting relationship between two cities. However, this situation can also present opportunities for growth and mutual benefit for both parties involved. The more resourceful side can provide valuable support, expertise, and funding to the less-resourced partner, enabling the latter to build capacity and develop its infrastructure: two aims that align with the scope of city twinning. Partnerships between cities located in the Global North with those in the Global South might prove beneficial to attain these objectives.

- Political crises can present significant challenges for twin cities.

Political crises can lead to disruptions in communication and collaboration between twin cities. When diplomatic or political instability occurs, joint projects and collaborative initiatives may be put on hold or permanently suspended, interrupting all planned activities. This was the case with Munich and Harare, two twinned cities whose partnership was paused twice because of human rights violations reported in Zimbabwe. However, to avoid leaving the population in Harare completely alone, the mayor of Munich decided to keep the twinning programme. Consequently, in 2021, an association in Munich raised funds to assist the habitants of Harare during the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁶ The decision to keep the partnership alive allowed for cultural projects, such as the Munich Harare Arts Gathering, to be successfully implemented.²⁷

EU's Approach to Twinning

Twinning is an “EU institution building tool bringing public sector expertise from EU member states in support of reform processes around the world.”²⁸ The EU attaches great importance to its twinning programmes. One of the most popular ones is the Erasmus+ programme, encouraging exchanges between higher education establishments and different types of organisations around the world. The UAE, together with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, is part of these third countries not associated with the programme and can take part in certain Actions of the Programme.²⁹

The EU also employs twinning in its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as an “instrument for institutional cooperation between Public Administrations of EU Member States and of beneficiary or partner countries.”³⁰ One of the objectives of this twinning programme is the incorporation of the *acquis communautaire* (i.e., transposition, implementation and enforcement of the EU legislation) through a transfer of expertise and best practices to the EU Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood partner countries. Some of these countries went from the status of candidate to that of member, demonstrating the effectiveness of this EU twinning programme.

As part of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV), the EU launched the project ‘Town twinning in times of solidarity’ which allowed seven municipalities from four countries (Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia and Romania) to exchange experiences and ideas on different key areas of the European Union, such as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and discrimination against women.³¹ The abundance of these initiatives exemplifies the EU’s commitment to fostering cross-border partnerships and addressing pressing societal issues through shared learning with the aim of improving the overall functioning of the union.

Not only cities, but also regions benefit from the implementation of EU twinning programmes. The ‘Interreg Programme’ is an example of interregional cooperation among regions and countries within the EU. It is an integral part to the EU’s Cohesion Policy, contributing to regional development, cohesion, and the reduction of economic inequalities. During the 2021-2027 period, Interreg is prioritising responses to contemporary issues such as climate change, digital transformation, social inclusion, and others.³² These interregional exchanges of experience can reinforce capacity building approaches focusing on economic growth and job creation.

Additional programmes, such as Creative Europe and Horizon Europe encourage the creation of partnerships across the continent in a variety of sectors (e.g. culture, education, research and innovation, and others). They also illustrate the strategic use of culture as an instrument of soft power, a similarity shared with the UAE foreign policy.

Potential for Twinning in the UAE

The UAE stands at the forefront of developing and strengthening economic, technological, and diplomatic relations with countries around the world. Over the years, the UAE has finalised Comprehensive Economic Partnership (CEPA) Agreements with a wide range of countries, including Turkey, Israel, Indonesia, Cambodia, Georgia, Mauritius, Kenya, the Republic of Congo, Colombia, Costa Rica, South Korea, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Jordan, Chile, and Vietnam. These agreements reflect the UAE’s strategic efforts to enhance global trade ties, reduce tariffs, and foster economic cooperation across sectors such as technology, energy, manufacturing, and agriculture. More recently, President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and President of China Xi Jinping signed a Memorandum of Understanding on tourism, industry, technology, and other matters.³³ The President also visited Seoul to strengthen defence and energy ties with South Korea.³⁴ The UAE is also reshaping the New Silk Road through ongoing economic and cultural cooperation with Central Asian states.³⁵

Culture

Not only trade, energy, security, and economy, but also culture has been and continues to be at the centre of the UAE foreign policy. An example is the visit of President of India Narendra Modi to Abu Dhabi for the inauguration of the emirate’s first Hindu temple.³⁶ The construction of the Abrahamic Family House (composed of the St. Francis

Church, Imam Al-Tayeb Mosque, and Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue) represents another example of an interreligious project, promoting peaceful coexistence amongst people of different cultures and faiths. These initiatives testify to the UAE's openness to the world and its commitment to reinforcing different types of cooperation and solidarity with partners internationally. They also show once again that diplomacy and more specifically soft power occupy an essential place in the country's foreign policy.

The UAE engagement in cultural diplomacy can also be found in the country's investments in the sectors of tourism, films, and museums. The latter is exemplified in the development of Saadiyat Cultural District, home to the Louvre Abu Dhabi and other upcoming museums, such as the Zayed National Museum, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi,³⁸ the Natural History Museum, and the teamLab Phenomena Abu Dhabi. The establishment of these institutions represents "one of the factors contributing to the UAE's cultural diplomacy and an increase in the UAE's soft power."³⁹

The Louvre Abu Dhabi, together with the forthcoming Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, represent an example of 'glocal museum diplomacy,' entailing the empowerment of "municipal governments to initiate cultural projects of international significance and transforming local urban environments into global centres of circulations of cultural, economic and human capitals."⁴⁰ The realisation of the Louvre Abu Dhabi involved cross-cultural cooperation between the UAE and France, combining French design with Arabic heritage. Through loans of artworks and expertise exchanges, this cultural institution connects with global audiences and nurtures international cultural exchanges.

These exchanges involve also international recognitions that reinforce urban soft power. For example, in 2021 the UNESCO Creative City Network designated Abu Dhabi 'City of Music'.⁴¹ This UN programme was launched to promote collaboration amongst cities and create opportunities for music practitioners to implement music initiatives with their counterparts located in other cities across the globe. The programme offers visibility to Abu Dhabi to pair with cities from all over the world to encourage cross-collaboration in the field of music.

Other emirates, such as Dubai, are also involved in city twinning. Even if these programmes are not officially identified as such, they contribute to the enhancement of the UAE's soft power abroad. Dubai Opera, for example, hosts many European productions, such as Milan's Teatro alla Scala, the Polish National Opera, the Hungarian National Ballet, and the Shakespeare North Playhouse. These city-level initiatives play a significant role in terms of strengthening the UAE's cultural ties with Europe and expanding the country's cultural influence on the global stage. They also contribute to the enhancement of the UAE's soft power, positioning the UAE as a role model for neighbouring countries seeking to expand their own soft power.

Education

In the education field, the UAE is committed to provide students with the skills needed in the development of its knowledge-based economy. Following international leading experiences, the country aims at forming international partnerships and at cooperating with prestigious institutions and communities in the education sector.⁴² The Emirati curriculum promotes peace, tolerance and cultural diversity.⁴³ City twinning could serve as an instrument to strengthen these objectives through international knowledge transfers and exchanges. Student mobility could become one of the main pillars to encourage educational exchanges. The creation of a programme (like the EU Erasmus+ programme) based on the promotion of education, youth training, and sport with institutions in the region and in the world could foster collaboration between students and teachers in different disciplines, in learning and in teaching methods.

At present, some higher education establishments (especially, but not only, foreign universities in the UAE) offer the opportunity to participate in exchange programmes through dual degrees. Applicants have the possibility of spending a semester or two abroad to attend classes in specific disciplines at international institutions. Similarly, students can come to the UAE for the same purpose. This reciprocal exchange offers valuable cultural and educational experiences to all involved. Such initiatives have the potential to foster more caring and empathetic individuals and communities.

The UAE could reinforce these exchanges through the creation of partnerships in the form of twinning programmes at an urban and regional level. Following the example of the EU Interreg programme, each emirate could implement these forms of regional cooperation with regions in the Gulf and with European regions. Currently, individual emirates are not widely invested in these cooperations, even though some cultural exchanges at the emirate level exist in one form or another and appear to be slowly increasing.

The emirate of Sharjah, for instance, has recently organised the first edition of the ‘Youth Cultural Exchange Programme.’ Through this programme, Sharjah Youth received a delegation of participants from the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Communication of the Kingdom of Morocco, and scheduled visits and exploratory tours to the most important cultural landmarks in the emirate with the objective of exchanging innovative practices in cultural heritage.⁴⁴

Since 2019, the University of Sharjah has also implemented student exchange programmes with higher education institutes through dual undergraduate and graduate visiting programmes, hosting students from European and Asian universities, and encouraging UAE students to apply to study abroad at the partner institutions.⁴⁵ Similarly, the American University of Ras Al Khaimah promotes student exchange programmes, as part of its academic curriculum.⁴⁶

These programmes demonstrate that education can represent a strong tool of soft power, where student exchanges implemented at a local level can have implications at a global one. Student mobility contributes to strengthening a country’s image internationally, and favours socio-economic development through the acquisition of intercultural competencies and practices, enhancing overall economic growth by fostering a more skilled and adaptable workforce. This highlights the spillover effect that soft power can have in driving innovation and sustainable development across borders.

UAE-EU Twinning: Strategic Partnerships and Future Growth

Cultural diplomacy stands as one of the most important tenets of the UAE diplomatic agenda, where the UAE is committed to “dialogue, education and cultural exchange in the service of improved mutual respect, international collaboration and global prosperity.”⁴⁷ Similarly, the EU strategy for international cultural relations has the following objectives: “Unlocking the potential of culture and creativity for sustainable social and economic development; promoting peace and fighting radicalisation through intercultural dialogue; strengthening cooperation on cultural heritage” (European Commission, 2016).

Commonalities between the EU and the UAE in approaching culture and education at a local and global level can open ways for twinning programmes impacting many other sectors. More specifically, through knowledge exchanges, people and resource mobility, city twinning could serve as an instrument to: 1) encourage dialogue and mutual understanding; 2) support economic diversification in its potential to create job opportunities and foster economic growth; 3) create joint collaborations amongst EU and UAE peoples at a local level to achieve the UN SDGs goals at a global level.

Encourage dialogue and mutual understanding

UAE-EU people-to-people diplomacy in the form of city twinning could reinforce and deepen knowledge of both regions. The case of the ‘Youth Cultural Exchange Programme’ mentioned earlier is an example of effective cultural collaboration at a regional level that could be transposed into UAE-EU relations. The UAE is already part of the Erasmus+ programme showing that some forms of citizen collaborations exist already between the two parties. Consequently, further cooperation through city and regional twinning programmes could enhance these solidarity networks. Participants in these programmes could strengthen their knowledge regarding different cultures and heritage existing in the UAE. Similarly, UAE participants could learn more about European culture and history. These exchanges would foster a culture of peace and could serve as a model for other countries in the Gulf region.



Moreover, the UAE's involvement in the Erasmus+ programme demonstrates that forms of citizen collaboration between the two parties are already in place. Building on this foundation, expanding cooperation through city and region twinning programmes could further enhance these networks of solidarity. UAE-EU people-to-people diplomacy, exemplified through city twinning, has the potential to enhance communication among citizens and deepen their understanding of each other's regions.

Support economic diversification to foster growth and job creation

The EU and the UAE developed a diplomatic relationship focusing on common regional interests. The UAE is "an increasingly important economic partner for the EU and the EU remains the UAE's second most important trading partner."⁴⁸ The UAE is also part of the EU-GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification Project, assisting GCC countries to reduce their dependence on the hydrocarbon sector. As stated earlier, city twinning has evolved over time and the economic impact that these programmes generate in the medium and long term is significant. Projects such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, NYU Abu Dhabi, and others, support the country's diversification strategy. At a city level, cultural and educational exchanges can contribute to this economic strategy by fostering innovation, investments, tourism, and attract global talent. Exchanges of best practices at a city level can also benefit the EU economic strategy.

Create EU-UAE local collaborations to achieve UN SDGs goals globally

At the city level, all the goals are important, and actions conducted at this scale are crucial to achieve these goals in a timely and effective manner. For example, American cities that have effectively met the UN SDGs are those that have built these goals into their current planning and business operations.⁴⁹ This demonstrates that strengthening connections at a local level can have repercussions globally. Indeed, the achievement of the UN SDGs strongly depends on the implementation of policies and legislation at a local level, integrating the principles of equity and sustainability into national decision-making.

Amongst all the goals, twinning between EU and UAE cities can contribute to the achievement of the SDG 11 goal, focusing on sustainable cities and communities. These international networks, created at a local level, could implement joint actions in the fields of culture, education, climate change, and others.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This Insight has explored city twinning's strong potential in fostering international understanding and cooperation. This form of people-to-people diplomacy aims at bridging cultural and social divides through direct interactions between citizens of different countries. This approach has evolved into a powerful grassroots tool for global diplomacy.

City twinning aligns with the UAE's broader cultural diplomacy's strategy, which includes fostering intercultural dialogue and enhancing international cooperation. By engaging in reciprocal exchanges and collaborations locally, the UAE can bolster its global profile, contributing – inter alia – to strengthen its relations with the EU and to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals in a timely and effective manner.

In view of these reflections, this Insight offers the following recommendations:

1. Create a city twinning programme involving the Gulf, the MENA region, and Europe, with the aim of identifying common cultural specialties and sharing knowledge about them (e.g. music, cooking, fashion and design).
2. Involve remote towns and regions in twinning programmes (Al Dhafra, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, and other emirates) with Europe and beyond to avoid isolation and provide opportunities for in-person and digital interaction with international communities.
3. Following the example of the EU Interreg programme, foster regional cooperation with regions in the Gulf and with European regions through the establishment of joint projects in the fields of culture, education, environment, sustainable energy, and other sectors.

4. Involve young people in twinning exchanges in schools, universities, sports clubs, so that they can get exposure to different cultures and become ambassadors for peace and mutual understanding.
5. Establish scholarship funds and research programmes (like the Erasmus+ programme) for students and professionals seeking to study or work abroad and host foreign students and professionals in Emirati institutions.
6. Cooperate with embassies to launch twinning cultural and educational programmes through calls for proposals circulating in higher education establishments in the UAE and abroad.
7. Create twinning programmes to host international students and artists in UAE educational establishments to promote dialogue and knowledge exchanges amongst young generations.
8. Realise an e-twinning portal aiming at creating networks between teachers in different schools in the Gulf region through the organisation of conferences, webinars, and visits of school premises to exchange and implement good education practices.
9. Establish programmes with European cultural institutions at a city level, to create city networks with the aim of exchanging best practices in conservation and innovation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
10. Implement a twinning programme involving exchanges between locations with recognised UNESCO sites in the EU and in the Gulf region to promote joint cultural projects, serving as a foundation for a shared future.

Endnotes

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