Friendship, solidarity and mutual assistance: a report exploring the benefits and challenges of UK-Nicaragua twinnings at 30 years old.

A report compiled by Dr. Holly Eva Ryan, with funding from the British International Studies Association and the Research Centre for Applied Social Science, Manchester Metropolitan University. Please address any enquiries to: H.Ryan@mmu.ac.uk

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Overview

From the mid-twentieth century, the practice of ‘twinning’ extended from Europe all across the globe. It has been used to develop a wide array of political, economic and cultural relationships that have variously been categorised under the banner of 'international friendships'. For a variety of reasons, 'international friendships' - and particularly those ranging beyond Europe - remain under-examined. We have little research that tells us how the practice of twinning has evolved and been deployed in rather different ways as it has expanded from an intra-European to an ostensibly global affair. We also have rather few detailed academic studies exploring what kinds of benefits are derived from entering into these kinds of cross-boundary partnerships; and, what sorts of challenges are entailed in maintaining them.

During Spring and Summer of 2017, Dr Holly Eva Ryan conducted a pilot study into town twinning, funded by the Research Centre for Applied Social Sciences at Manchester Metropolitan University and the British International Studies Association, which aimed to shed some new light on these areas. The pilot study enabled Dr Ryan to conduct semi-structured interviews with a variety of individuals who have been involved with twinnings between towns and cities in the United Kingdom and Nicaragua. This report collates interview data on Nicaragua-UK twinning links. It uses the interview data to help recount the history and motivations for these twinning relationships, before identifying several emerging themes and possible directions for future research activity, grouped under ‘benefits', 'challenges' and 'going digital'.
Introduction

There is no settled definition of twinning, but the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) define it as “the coming together of two communities ... with the aim of facing their problems and developing between themselves closer and closer ties of friendship” (CEMR 2015). Although inspired in part by the earlier pacifist, esperanto, and social reformist movements of the late nineteenth century, the practice emerged and spread only after World War II, as national governments in Europe sought to promote peace and goodwill among communities torn apart by recent conflict (Clarke 2009; Gaspari 2002). The 1950's and 1960's saw the establishment of numerous twinning links between localities in Britain, France and Germany, alongside a number of broader regional integrationist projects beginning with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1950.

Some of these pairings between European towns and cities were proposed on the basis of shared characteristics or indeed similarities in industrial profile. Newcastle, for example was twinned with the town of Gelsenkirchen in 1947. Gelsenkirchen, situated in the Westphalian region of Germany, is one of the country's largest coal-mining areas (Newcastle City Council 2018). Other twinnings emphasised the shared experiences of civilians at wartime. As such, Coventry, which suffered heavy aerial bombing during World War II was twinned with Stalingrad (now Volgograd) and then with Kiel and Dresden, whose citizens had also suffered under an extensive bombing campaign. Although some academic literature suggests that post-war twinning was driven in large part by municipal officials, growing small scale and localised studies attest to the crucial role of community groups and civic associations in establishing and maintaining these early trans-local links that would often come to survive decades; and even generations. The post war twinning project was one of peace and reconciliation between beleaguered, fragile, and divided national communities within Europe. As of 2006, the Local Government Association estimated that over 2,000 formal twinning links had been established in the UK. 50% of these were with France and 23% were with Germany.

However, the remaining 28% of UK twinnings included partnerships with constituencies outside of Europe, including formal pairings with towns and cities in Asia, North America, Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa (Handley 2006). Indeed, it is fair to say that in the last forty years or so, twinning has gone global. In 2010, a study by Wilbur Zelinsky estimated that there were around 11,000 pairs of sister cities across 159 countries that had entered into formal partnerships of some kind (Zelinsky 2010). These formal links, normally established by pacts between local or municipal governments have been complemented by a range of more informal partnerships and project-based activities, many of which have been led by community groups, social movements and charities, seeking to extend lines of communication, exchange and solidarity with counterparts overseas.

Whilst some media narratives suggest that twinning is today on the wane (See Self-Pierson 2010 for example), the period from the 1980's onwards has in fact seen a re-politicization of twinning practice and an increased recognition by social movements and civil society groups that twinning can provide a crucial form of visibility and channel of assistance to overseas populations facing forms of oppression and violence. Nick Clarke (2010) is one of the few scholars to have addressed this phenomenon, referring to a number of ‘solidarity twinnings’ that emerged in the Cold War context, often in opposition to the action (or inaction) of national government in taking steps to resolve a situation through its foreign policy. ‘Solidarity twinnings’ are therefore relationships that recall - and in some senses serve as a continuation of - the deeply political ambitions of the post war project. The 1980 twinning between Dundee and Nablus in the West Bank, Bristol's 1990
twinning with Beira in Mozambique, Glasgow's 2002 twinning with Havana in Cuba and the 2011 proposal to twin Royston with the besieged Libyan city of Benghazi in 2017 can all be understood in this context.

This report is based on data derived from a pilot study which took place over 2017/18. A pilot study is a small-scale research study conducted as a primer and/or feasibility test for a larger project. Pilot studies can help researchers to refine their research questions, and make decisions about the amount of time, finances and other materials that would be needed in order to scale-up. They can also help researchers to identify important and emerging research themes and challenges to help give shape to a larger project. This report centres on UK twinnings with Nicaragua, the majority of which began life as ‘solidarity twinnings’, established in the aftermath of the 1979 Sandinista Revolution. Based on interview data captured from individuals involved with the UK-Nicaragua twinnings that remain active as of 2017, it aims to highlight some of the key challenges and opportunities that these formal and informal links face, approximately thirty years on from their births. It also aims to serve as a map and guide for future research activity on twinning practice within and beyond the UK-Nicaragua context.
Methodology

This report is based on data collated from 18 semi-structured interviews undertaken with individuals based in the UK and Nicaragua. The interviews were conducted over the course of Spring and Summer 2017 and the interviewees were selected because they had been involved in some aspect of UK-Nicaragua twinning activity. Participants ranged from local council officers and founders/coordinators of twinning associations to members/subscribers, former delegation members and representatives of beneficiary organisations. The individuals interviewed for this study have been anonymized in this report. They are variously referred to as interviewees, participants or respondents.

A semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of research that uses a predetermined list of questions, known as an interview guide, but reserves the possibility for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further with ad hoc questioning. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they enable the researcher to capture rich interview data, encompassing the participants’ ideas, experiences and opinions with regard to a given topic of interest - in this case 'twinning'.

The limitations of semi-structured interviews are that the data generated from them generally reflects particular or 'situated' experiences, which may not be representative or generalizable across a wider group or demographic. For this reason, it is important and indeed useful to identify, map and explore any patterns, recurrent themes and sequences that arise from the different interviews, whilst not discarding the potential value of 'one-off' opinions and/or observations for shedding light on new and interesting issues.

Each of the interviews undertaken as a part of the pilot study lasted between 35 and 50 minutes and enabled participants to reflect on their own personal experiences of twinning. All of the interviews were transcribed over Winter 2017 and Spring 2018, and the results were then analysed and collated into a series of emerging themes, outlined in the section that follows.
Emerging Research Themes

Transcripts from the 18 semi-structured interviews were reviewed in order to identify recurrent themes and concerns. A number of dominant themes were identified through this analytical process - some of which had been anticipated in advance, through the line of questioning and others of which were ostensibly new and emerged organically. Participants’ insights were collated under five emerging research themes, as follows:

1. **Motivations for twinning with Nicaragua, past and present**

All participants were asked to reflect on how they became involved with UK-Nicaragua twinning(s). Approximately half of the participants had been involved with a formal or informal twinning since the 1980’s and several had played a key role in actually initiating or establishing a UK-Nicaragua twinning link themselves.

**Background: The National Revolution and the beginning of the Contra War**

On July 19, 1979, the small Central American state of Nicaragua ousted its dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, whose family had ruled in a dynastic and autocratic fashion for the previous four decades. Somoza served both as president and the director of the National Guard, giving him absolute political and military control over Nicaragua. He concentrated wealth and prestige in the hands of his family and key allies, took extremely repressive measures against the political opposition and protestors. When a huge earthquake shook the country and destroyed large parts of the capital city in 1971, Somoza appropriated millions in international relief funding to shore up his own personal fortune.

This was one among many of the precipitating factors for the 1979 popular uprising which brought together Nicaraguans from all sectors – workers, businessmen, peasants, students, and guerrillas – to support the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front or FSLN) in a campaign against Somoza and the National Guard.

After 1979, the new government created a Council (or junta) of National Reconstruction and initiated a process of economic reform aimed at bringing improvements to the desperate living conditions of many up and down the country. Alongside this, the new government established a mass literacy campaign, made investments in health care and public services, and sought to promote greater gender equality.

However, upon assuming office in 1981, then US President Ronald Reagan immediately branded the Sandinistas as dangerous “Marxists”. Within the wider context of Cold War proxy politics, his administration authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to begin financing and training irregular forces of contrarrevolucionarios (counter-revolutionaries) in order to destabilise and ultimately overthrow the Sandinistas. Contra tactics included disrupting trade and economic supply lines across the country, attacks on public services – including health centres and schools - as well as acts of violence and intimidation directed towards civilian populations.

Among those who had been involved from this early stage, all cited Nicaragua’s period of revolutionary change as the primary motivating factor for twinning. Several of the participants had travelled to Nicaragua during the 1980’s, in the aftermath of the 1979 Sandinista Revolution. While some had been independent travellers, others had visited the country as a part of international brigades organised, for example, by Peace Brigades International (PBI), the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign (NSC) and TecNica. Developing an overtly political model of ‘solidarity’, the NSC facilitated the movement of 850 people who travelled to Nicaragua between 1983 and 1990 on brigades, study tours and delegations.

Brigades involved a combination of voluntary work, construction, picking coffee and environmental work but also included a programme of visits and talks (Lewis 2016). Study tours consisted of loosely connected groups of people with a specific personal or professional interest such as health, education, or gender. Meanwhile, delegations were made up of individuals nominated by trade unions and other professional organisations to go to Nicaragua. The purpose of these groups was to give people a
short-term experience of the reality of Nicaragua so that they were better informed campaigners for Nicaragua on their return home. Their activities abroad were aimed at offering practical forms of assistance to communities suffering under the effects of a drawn out and bloody war with the US-backed Contra as well as the economic blockade of Nicaragua by the United States, which began in 1985 and lasted for four years.

Several of the participants regarded their journeys to Nicaragua as an emotionally impactful and indeed personally transformative experience. As one participant recounted, "to go somewhere where people have actually tried to take control of things even though they've got very little resources whatsoever, and, to see what can be achieved on with so few resources is very, very inspirational. It was very inspirational to me at the time". Another acknowledged that the experience had altered their worldview, giving them a much wider interest in international affairs and development which eventually led them to study for a new degree. A third participant expressed how moved they had been by the resilience, eloquence and resolve of the Nicaraguan people that they had encountered:

I suppose we went across in order to show people there that we were with them. At the time Nicaragua was asking for people to come and help and when we were there, ordinary people - would just stop us and say "when you go back don't forget about us!"...it was still the time of the Contra war and you could hear shooting at night. My host used to say "don't worry, it's just the campesinos shooting at a cow in the distance" but I'm sure he was just trying to reassure us because there were fresh graves quite often in the graveyard that we walked past. So, it was a very moving experience for me. I've never seen citizen armed like that who I felt that I could actually support somehow; and, I'd never heard such eloquence from people who stood - barefoot and wearing perhaps what was their only item of clothing - and talked so knowledgeably about what had happened to them, about the politics, about the fact that they were learning to read - because, of course the literacy brigades had started.

Whilst some of the brigadistas stayed on in Nicaragua and continued in their efforts to assist with agricultural production, construction, healthcare and/or schooling, many more returned home to Europe or North America and began to brainstorm ways of maintaining visibility and support for the Revolution. It was in this context that the Nicaragua twin town movement was born. As one participant recalls, "We had huge meetings [at the town hall] about what we should do to support Nicaragua". And, within these discussions, which were taking place among community and campaign groups across the country, twinning came to be seen as a way "to support communities in the work they were already doing but in a more concrete way". Political solidarity provided the motivation for twinning: the interview transcripts suggest that this political solidarity was underpinned by empathy and admiration of the struggles of local Nicaraguan communities, which had often been witnessed first-hand.

Although numbers are inexact, it has been estimated that by the late 1980s, Nicaraguan departments, cities and towns had successfully entered into several hundred twinning relationships of some kind. Over one hundred of these were with cities in the United States, including partnerships between New York City-Tipitapa, Sacramento-San Juan de Oriente, Bainbridge Island (Washington)-Ometepe, Gettysburg- Leon and Miami-Managua. Although many of the US links have now dwindled, some remain very active indeed, hosting monthly action meetings, sending regular delegations and financial support to support local projects in their counterpart cities. A large number of links were also established between Nicaraguan and European towns and cities, with links established in the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, France, Spain and the United Kingdom (van Ommen 2016). In the United Kingdom, the number of
twinnings with Nicaragua peaked in the late 1980's with formal, informal or project-based links established between the following towns and cities:

Liverpool - Corinto  Manchester - Bilwi  Lambeth - Bluefields  
Camden - San Ramon  Nottingham - Juigalpa  
Bradford - Tisma  Bristol - Puerto Morazan  
Leicester - Masaya  Swindon - Ocotal  
Sheffield - Esteli  Islington - Managua  
Lewisham - Matagalpa  Reading - San Francisco Libre  
Oxford - Leon  Norwich - El Viejo

As one Nicaraguan participant explains,

Nicaragua in the 80s was the point of reference of the whole world which had become aware of our political situation. On the one hand people outside looked at us as heroic for having overthrown a dictatorship of more than 50 years, on the other hand they looked to us with the soul of solidarity since we were being violated by US imperialism. Nicaragua had been left in ruins after a bloody war, however the US blockade plunged us into even more misery, so the world turned to support us and brigades of all ages and all professions / workers arrived who helped us to rebuild the nation. The historical context for the twinnings was a political context.

For Nicaraguans - and for members of the FSLN particularly - the increased international visibility, potential access to alternative sources of products and assistance through project work and international exchange; and, the sense of hope, respect and validation bolstered through expressions of solidarity all operated as motivations to twin. However, in many cases, “the focus of solidarity has changed. Before, more was contributed in the reconstruction of a country destroyed by the war but now the purpose is more one of cultural exchange, of sustainable economic development and above all it is a bilateral friendship relationship (north-south)”.

Indeed, for many of those who have become involved with the work of UK-Nicaragua twinning associations or projects since the 1990's, the political solidarity component is rather more muted. Some newer UK participants explained that they became involved due to a general interest in politics, culture and/or the Latin American region; others were attracted by the prospect of travel to a new place as part of a delegation; and others still were driven by the opportunity to build or practice their transferable skills - organising, fundraising, campaigning - in a new setting. There were, for example, a number of individuals who had become involved with twinning work shortly after retiring, articulating that twinning gave them a new interest and way of staying intellectually and politically active; as well as a new forum for building social relationships.

Members and organisers of the twinning associations are, in the most part, adults aged 40 and up. However, there are some exceptions - a number of the twinning associations, including the Bristol Link with Nicaragua (BLINC) and the recently revived Tisma Project have sought to involve students and graduates through placement and internship programmes. These are generally organised on a one-off basis via universities or international volunteering schemes.

For a number of years, the Sheffield-Estelí link has been attracting younger participants via Students for Estelí a student society based at the University of Sheffield. According to one
participant, "the society has been running for over 15 years" and its overarching aims are to support and promote the twinning with Estelí whilst maintaining the relationship with individuals, groups and organizations there. Each year, the society's main event is a cultural exchange with the Facultad Regional Multidisciplinaria Estelí (Regional Faculty of Multidisciplinary Studies in Estelí or FAREM). Up to twelve student delegates from Sheffield travel over to teach English for three weeks. Alongside the English programme, students from Sheffield and Estelí co-organize workshops and events which focus on a variety of activities - music, dance, sport - depending largely on the skillset and interests of the particular student groups for that year.

The society attracts new members via 'Estelí week', a yearly celebration of the twinning which showcases the achievements and experiences of prior delegations as well as arts, crafts, literature and film from Nicaragua. In recent years, the student society has benefited from a closer relationship with the main twinning association, whose members have been able to attend events, answer questions about life in Estelí and inform the potential delegates about the politico-historical context of the twinning, which is - for many of the students - something new and interesting.

The sustainability of the student programme is guaranteed as far as possible by the structure of the organization, which is registered with the Students Union. As one member explains, "The society is made up of people who have been on the brigade. So, the idea is that you go on a brigade and when you come back, you are the society for the following year." Students For Estelí can boast some great successes in terms of impact and longevity. "One of the very first Brigades to go out to Nicaragua, featured a couple of people who came back and started an enterprise called Twin café, which uses coffee imported from Estelí". Although the Café has now changed ownership, it remains open and active in bringing a slice of everyday life and production from the north of Nicaragua to the residents of Sheffield. The profits from Twin Café are donated to projects in Estelí and Sheffield.

2. Benefits of twinning today

Aside from commenting on their motivations for becoming involved with twinning, participants were also asked to describe what they believe to be the benefits of maintaining twinning links with Nicaragua today. It was clear from the breadth of responses to this question that benefits from twinning were perceived to run in both directions - ie. both the UK and Nicaraguan sides derive benefits from these relationships - and include a range of material, cultural and emotional elements, elaborated further below.

Responses included showing solidarity with the Nicaraguan people, which was often described in terms of offering forms of ongoing practical assistance to communities so that they can achieve their goals in terms of self-sufficiency, education and celebrating their cultural heritage. As one participant put it, over the years the governments have changed and as a result "the political solidarity element has waxed and waned". When political support has decreased, the twin cities have been able to offer ongoing economic support, cooperation and assistance to local NGOs through small grants for project work, which has helped to solve local problems such as gaps in education or healthcare coverage, infrastructure and housing.

Indeed, for some of the twin groups, there has been a growing emphasis on work that might be more accurately described as cooperation for development. Over the last 16 years, the Norwich-El Viejo link has provided access to primary education for some 200 children from the most deprived families in El Viejo through the purchase of education materials including
computers and the creation of school gardens which provide fruit and vegetables to help supplement basic school meals. The *Proyecto Vista Alegre* initiative supported by the Leicester-Masaya Link Group (LMLG) is another case in point. *Proyecto Vista Alegre* is one of several projects managed on the ground by the *Asociación de Desarrollo Integral Comunitario* (Association for Integrated Community Development or ADIC), a local NGO that strives to improve the productivity and yield of rural farming communities in the wider department of Masaya by promoting organic farming practices, crop diversification and conservation techniques. In 2017, the principle researcher had the opportunity to meet one of the beneficiaries of *Proyecto Vista Alegre*, Manuel Hernández, who has been farming in rural Masaya for around 30 years. Manuel was trained in ADIC's sustainable methods around a decade ago and he has since successfully installed terraces and wind breaks to help with water and soil conservation. He has replaced chemical pesticides and fertilisers with organic alternatives that are both cheaper and kinder to the local ecosystem.

However, LMLG and other link groups are keen to highlight that this is not development work as traditionally understood. Situated within a twinning framework, LMLG's projects are designed to deliver benefits that run in both directions. Support for sustainable development initiatives in Nicaragua is mirrored by Development Education projects in Leicester's schools. ‘Food for Thought’ is one such project, which simulates the bustling marketplace in central Masaya and uses the supply chain for maize as an opportunity for experiential learning. Students take on the role of farmers, millers, bakers and makers and in so doing they learn about the various uses of this versatile, staple crop and the consequences of disruption to the food supply, whether by a natural disaster, economic shock, or climate change. Projects such as this deliver tangible benefits in terms of education at the local/city level. They also arguably feed into wider national obligations to implement the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are the successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were adopted at the UN in September 2000 and expired in 2015. Whilst seven of the eight MDGs were focused on areas of human development in which developing countries had considerable progress to make, the SDG's are much wider in scope and urge developed states - including the United Kingdom - to devise strategies for achieving sustainable development at home while also supporting other countries to achieve the goals overseas.

Arts and sports events - from annual activities like Oxford's *Misa Campesina* (Peasant Mass) and Bristol's *Copa Sandino* (Sandino Cup) to one off visits by musicians, theatre-makers and artists - have also featured prominently among the activities and initiatives of twinning groups. Participants highlighted the importance of these events and exchanges in providing cultural enrichment and facilitating in the transfer of knowledge and skills.

In a wider sense, several participants observed the benefits that they had personally experienced through their close connection with Nicaragua including helping to broaden their worldviews, challenge stereotypes and prompt them to think differently about politics and society. As

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1 Development Education is a pedagogy and practice that encourages and promotes critical thinking and provides a deeper understanding of development through exposure to global themes and challenges. By encouraging learners to make connections between their own lives and the lives of others throughout the world, it encourages more active engagement in society (See Bourn 2014). As a Development Education Centre, the principal role of LMLG to use the link with Nicaragua as a ‘real world’ example and vehicle for exploring key aspects of international development, using educational methodologies that promote a global outlook and encourage critical thinking about issues of global inequality, social justice, human rights and sustainable development.
one participant expressed, "It has made me look outwards…in recent years, I haven't done any travelling beyond Europe, and I haven't really had any involvement in issues or matters beyond those that were very close to home. So, for me [twinning offered] a real opportunity to think broader; and, hopefully through that, I can encourage other people to do so as well".

Lastly, the vast majority of participants also identified personal connections including lasting friendships and even romantic partnerships that they had initiated and maintained through visits, exchanges and ongoing communication with twin towns in Nicaragua. Whilst some twinning associations today take on work of a social or altruistic nature and others still have more of a political orientation, they remain unified in their belief that the sense of personal attachment and responsibility fostered through twinning is extremely valuable. As one participant articulated, "I mean really that's the power of twinning - you gain a commitment to people you know or that you know about and then, when there is a chance to renew that friendship, it is something you actively want to do".

3. Challenges of twinning today

Participants were also asked to reflect on the challenges of maintaining twinning links with Nicaragua in the 21st century. One major challenge articulated by participants comes in the form of financial sustainability and resourcing for many of the UK-Nicaragua twinning organisations. It must first be noted that there is a great deal of variation in the structure and formality of the UK-Nicaragua twinning associations. Whilst some are recognised and enshrined at the local council level in the UK, others have remained informal, having never received or having never attempted to gain council validation. Local government support has been available to formalised twinning associations. It has historically differed from council to council, with some taking a minimalist position and limiting assistance to the provision of support 'in-kind' such as access to photocopiers and meeting rooms; and, others offering more hands-on forms of assistance through the provision of devoted twinning officers. The LMLG provides a third and different example of where council funding is used to draw-down and access other funding in order to support a development worker who is paid independently by the charity/association rather than the council).

The ideological divisions and processes of restructuring which have shaped the political and funding landscape of local government in the United Kingdom over the last half century is too lengthy to recount here. However, in the last decade, it is fair to say that cuts to local government funding have had a significant effect in terms of support available to twinning associations. After the 2008 financial crisis, recession and subsequent collapse in government revenues, the UK’s public deficit rose significantly. Public spending increased from around 41% of GDP to 48% of national income between 2006-7 and 2009-10, and revenue fell to 37% (Ferry and Eckersley 2011). Since 2010 the government has reduced funding to local authorities in England by 36% as part of its ongoing plans to tackle the deficit (National Audit Office 2014; 2017). The effect of this is an ever more challenging funding environment in which local authorities must continue to deliver a range of frontline education and care services which they have a statutory obligation to provide. Within this environment, support for cultural and leisure-based activities has seen a dramatic rollback. Twinning has often, although somewhat reductively, been placed in this bracket. Where “most councils have or previously had an in-house twinning officer, they were often the first ones [to go] when the budget cuts came - or - they had their job roles changed and they became European officers, international officers or similar; twinning became only about a quarter of their jobs”. This reflects the wider trends of job restructuring and cutting to staffing levels which have been observed at the local council level across the UK.
There is a notable difference in the frequency and scale of activities undertaken by the minority of twinning associations that have access to an international links coordinator, twinning officer or development worker and those which are run entirely by volunteers, acting in their spare time. Groups without access to a paid staffer have generally raised funds for their activities by organising sponsored or ticketed events in the local community. In practice this has often meant that budgets for project work in Nicaragua have remained quite modest and UK twinning associations have had to make quite challenging decisions about which project proposals to support.

The value-added by twinning/international links officers come across clearly in discussions with the participants. Whilst groups with access to a paid-staffer are by no means free from tough choices about what to fund, they have, on the whole, been more likely to explore alternative sources of funding for their work. They have also been able to use these opportunities to develop larger and more complex project funding bids - sometimes in collaboration with European partners. In this sense they have been somewhat more agile in an increasingly challenging funding environment. Moreover, paid staffers will frequently act as a liaison with other twinning associations both within and beyond the city/borough. They maintain contact and liaise with different types of projects and this makes them especially well-placed to share knowledge, ideas and best practice.

Beyond the resourcing challenges, there was also broad recognition that - with some notable exceptions such as Students for Estelí - attracting new and particularly younger members has proved difficult. This is a concern, since having an active local twinning group is essential to maintaining the links. Even where there is formal council link and a twinning officer, it’s impossible to sustain a link without a very dedicated, active twinning group present to drive projects, help fundraise and boost visibility. Several participants reasoned that the lack of younger members was a product of today’s social and political environment. Some expressed that because Nicaragua was rarely in the news these days (as compared to the 1980's), the momentum to engage in twinning and wider solidarity initiatives had lessened significantly. Moreover, with so many competing global causes - from the war in Syria to poverty and hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa and the struggles of the Rohingya in Myanmar - brought to our screens, these participants reasoned that it was much harder to convince younger people of just why they should maintain an interest in Nicaragua as opposed to anywhere else in the world that appears to be 'in need'.

This argument resonates with some wider concerns articulated by Lord Anderson of Swansea during a recent debate in the House of Lords, which imply that twinning has no place in today’s hyper-connected, globalised world. However, where technological globalisation - from advances in digital and communications technology (which I return to below) to cheaper and more accessible methods of travel and exchange - has arguably created some new challenges for twinning, it also offers renewed opportunities for once distant communities to come together. As one respondent noted:

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2 Although this was the case at the time that the research was undertaken, as of May 2018, global media attention has once again been focused on Nicaragua as political protests and escalating violence have spread across the country. This cycle of protests and violence, involving a variety of groups and factions, will almost certainly prompt a renewed discussion and debate about what ‘solidarity’ with Nicaragua means today. Whilst questions about the recent violence sit outside of the scope of the pilot study, these are issues that are beginning to be taken up by many of the individuals and groups who have been involved with twinning projects (See Lewis 2018, for example) and will undoubtedly shape the direction of future research into the topic.
One really interesting thing is the number of people who can travel to places like Central America these days. Huge numbers of young people. Virtually every other young person you meet is either going or has been there. However, they have this experience and then they come back and want to get on with their lives…The challenge is trying to translate that fleeting experience into something greater (emphasis added).

This sentiment was echoed by participants in Nicaragua too:

The biggest challenge is to give continuity to the link between both cities…I do not believe that a generational change with the same level of commitment has been achieved because the revolutionary spirit of the past has [already] been lived, but the commitment can be renewed through cultural exchange strategies that are to do with young people either through their schools, universities or on their own. [We want them to] see [our city] as their twin town, where they can learn and live.

The main challenges of twinning highlighted by participants in the pilot study might be usefully summed up as problems of continuity and translation. That is, continuity of project work in light of (increasing) funding and resource constraints; and, translation of that work into a vocabulary and discourse that has resonance for an inter-generational constituency.

4. Going digital: challenges and opportunities

Digital technology includes various types of electronic devices and applications that use information in the form of numeric - usually binary - code. Devices that process and use digital information include mobile phones, laptops and personal computers, satellites and television sets. An explosion in the use and availability of digital technologies and digitally enabled devices over the past two decades has profoundly changed the ways that we interact, trade and learn. This digital turn also has implications for twinning in terms of the extended possibilities for 'keeping in touch' with constituencies at home and abroad, a theme which came up organically in several interviews before it was finally introduced to the interview guide. Interviewees cited the increased use of digital technologies variously as an opportunity and a challenge for twinning. For clarity, these reflections have been distilled into a table, below.
### Benefits

**Amplifying the work of the twinning associations** - Having an up to date website and presence on social media platforms has enabled twinning associations to make their work visible to a wider number of people.

**Attracting new members and supporters** - by amplifying the work of the twinning associations beyond the existing membership base it is hoped that at least some of that new audience be attracted enough to lend their support.

**Staying informed** - keeping existing members/participants abreast of recent developments, projects and exchanges so that they feel involved.

**Ease of communication** - Maintaining more instantaneous and regular contact between residents and projects in the UK and Nicaraguan twin towns.

### Challenges

**Digital access** - Internet access in Nicaragua has widened markedly since the 2000’s, with initiatives such as the “Estrategia de Comunicación Virtual parques WiFi” which has provided free public access to wifi in some 90 central parks across the country since 2015 (La Prensa 2016). However, access still hovers at around only 25% - or one quarter - of the Nicaraguan population (ITU 2016). Internet access is concentrated in urban areas, making it more challenging to maintain digital communications with rural populations and projects.

**Digital literacy** - This is the ability to use information and communication technologies effectively in a range of ways, including being able to find, evaluate and communicate information online. Digital literacy is a challenge for constituencies in the Global North and Global South, due to generational divides with respect to familiarity, skills and training in the use of digital technologies.

**Choosing the right medium** - Some digital and social media platforms are more popular with particular demographic groupings than others. In the UK, statistics show that younger users are much more likely to communicate and engage via encrypted mediums on their mobile phones such as Whatsapp and Snapchat, whereas older users (aged 30+) are more likely to engage via open platforms such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter. There is little to no disaggregated data on social media usage by demographic in Nicaragua so it is hard to make generalisations. However, in terms of devices, mobile phone usage vastly outstrips computer usage. Several twinning projects report that their Facebook pages are especially popular with constituents in Nicaraguan twin towns.

Whilst many of the twinning associations have only quite recently started experimenting with forms of digital technology and social media, it is notable that newer members, interns and support officers to the twinning associations include a number of so-called ‘millennials’ or ‘digital natives’. These are terms that have been variously used by scholars to refer to the generation born after 1980 that has grown up in a world in which the use of digital technologies is both widespread and normalised (See Barlow 1996; Prensky 2001; Tapscott 2008; Bull 2010). This group have some of their own ideas about the ways that twinning could be augmented by digital technologies including the use of interactive/online exhibitions, crowdfunding platforms and online merchandising but some lamented that the available opportunities had not yet been fully investigated or exploited. As one participant summed up, “I think there is amazing potential for [various activities] to be happening on a digital level but there hasn’t been all that much exploration of it yet”.

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<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
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<td><strong>Amplifying the work of the twinning associations</strong> - Having an up to date website and presence on social media platforms has enabled twinning associations to make their work visible to a wider number of people.</td>
<td><strong>Digital access</strong> - Internet access in Nicaragua has widened markedly since the 2000’s, with initiatives such as the “Estrategia de Comunicación Virtual parques WiFi” which has provided free public access to wifi in some 90 central parks across the country since 2015 (La Prensa 2016). However, access still hovers at around only 25% - or one quarter - of the Nicaraguan population (ITU 2016). Internet access is concentrated in urban areas, making it more challenging to maintain digital communications with rural populations and projects.</td>
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<td><strong>Attracting new members and supporters</strong> - by amplifying the work of the twinning associations beyond the existing membership base it is hoped that at least some of that new audience be attracted enough to lend their support.</td>
<td><strong>Digital literacy</strong> - This is the ability to use information and communication technologies effectively in a range of ways, including being able to find, evaluate and communicate information online. Digital literacy is a challenge for constituencies in the Global North and Global South, due to generational divides with respect to familiarity, skills and training in the use of digital technologies.</td>
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<td><strong>Staying informed</strong> - keeping existing members/participants abreast of recent developments, projects and exchanges so that they feel involved.</td>
<td><strong>Choosing the right medium</strong> - Some digital and social media platforms are more popular with particular demographic groupings than others. In the UK, statistics show that younger users are much more likely to communicate and engage via encrypted mediums on their mobile phones such as Whatsapp and Snapchat, whereas older users (aged 30+) are more likely to engage via open platforms such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter. There is little to no disaggregated data on social media usage by demographic in Nicaragua so it is hard to make generalisations. However, in terms of devices, mobile phone usage vastly outstrips computer usage. Several twinning projects report that their Facebook pages are especially popular with constituents in Nicaraguan twin towns.</td>
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<td><strong>Ease of communication</strong> - Maintaining more instantaneous and regular contact between residents and projects in the UK and Nicaraguan twin towns.</td>
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5. Understanding ‘international friendship’

Twinning initiatives across the globe vary significantly in terms of emphasis and levels of formality. As a result of this, it can be hard to define ‘twinning’. However, one cannot escape the prevalence of the word ‘friendship’ which is ubiquitous in policy documents, campaign literature and community web pages related to twinning. Indeed, the language or discourse of trans-local, trans-boundary or international ‘friendship’ is invoked enthusiastically by state and non-state actors alike, who are engaged in twinning arrangements at the international, municipal and local levels. It is also prevalent on websites, marketing and campaign literature published by the UK-Nicaragua twinnings. In this pilot study, one of the aims was to gain a deeper insight into how ‘international friendship’ is experienced and understood by twinning participants. In light of this, interviewees were each asked to offer their own definition of ‘international friendship’.

Responses were quite varied, with several participants taking the question as an opportunity to reflect on the specifics of how ‘international friendship’ is exemplified in their own local twinning link and others making observations of a more general nature. Despite this variation, a close reading of the transcripts revealed that participants’ answers did tend to converge around a handful of key words and ideas, most notably empathy, solidarity, reciprocity, equality, understanding, personal connection, and support.

This differs strikingly from the way that ‘international friendship’ has conventionally been understood in the discipline of International Relations where influential scholars like Alexander Wendt (1999:298) have defined the concept as a role structure within which states ‘expect each other to observe two simple rules: (1) disputes will be settled without war or the threat of war (the rule of non-violence); and (2) they will fight as a team if the security of any one is threatened by a third party (the rule of mutual aid’). Meanwhile, Digeser (2009:327) suggests that there is a necessary distinction to be made between ‘international friendships’ and ‘interpersonal friendships’. He writes that the former must be understood as relationships among states, defined as ‘entities that are ontologically incapable of having feelings’, whilst the latter may have an affective quality and be created or sustained by ‘mutual feelings of attraction, trust and openness’. The problem with both Wendt and Digeser’s positions is that they rely on two outmoded and reductionist images: the first is that of the international as an arena in which the only important interactions are those which take place among states (rather than say, individuals or communities); the second is an image of the state as a unitary actor or ‘black box’ that functions similarly irrespective of culture, history and leadership. Further research on twinning - and particularly work that focuses more closely on the solidarist, emotional and affective bonds that sustain these relationships at the micro-level (among communities) - could therefore offer novel insights for the study of International Relations.
Conclusion

This report has synthesised interview data in order to tease out a number of emerging research themes from the reflections of twinning participants. These converged around the motivations, benefits, and challenges of UK-Nicaragua twinnings, including the possibilities and limitations posed by the recent 'digital turn'. Derived from a pilot study, the data and findings presented in this report are by no means exhaustive. However, they can offer a useful starting point for further exploration and research.

Interview data gathered here under 'Motivations' scratches at the surface of a rich landscape of personal and sometimes deeply transformative experiences that have drawn individuals to pursue and maintain twinning links. Further research could help to develop and map this landscape. It could provide insight into how motivations for twinning have evolved since the revolutionary period of the 1980's and to what extent this evolution/change is also reflected in the way that 'solidarity' is understood and enacted.

Interview data that has been collated under 'Benefits' demonstrates that twinning delivers material, cultural and emotional goods for participants in both the UK and Nicaragua. It also illuminates the wide variety of activities, projects and events that take place under the banner of twinning, including arts and cultural events, sports, education, fair trade and commerce as well as other examples of cooperation for development. Further research could potentially develop in depth case studies to examine just how these activities work on a local or micro-level to serve the communities in question, potentially deriving lessons in best practice and/or reflections on obstacles or challenges faced.

The 'Challenges' section centred on just two issues which came up repeatedly in the interviews. These were summarised in terms of continuity and translation: encouraging new and younger participants to get involved by demonstrating how twinning can be relevant for them. However, that is not to say there are no other challenges to confront. In the UK-Nicaragua context, there is also the more literal challenge of linguistic translation which emerges from working across Anglophone and Hispanophone spaces. The rise of digital technologies and increased use of social media was cited as both an opportunity and challenge, with the issues of accessibility and digital literacy very much shaping what is possible to achieve at present. Further research could help to explore and reflect upon the range of the opportunities, obstacles and barriers faced by UK-Nicaragua twinning associations as they reach thirty years old, with a view to galvanizing debate, offering solutions, and potentially providing inspiration and guidance for future twinning work.
References


does-solidarity-mean-now/


