

Democracias, autonomía local y migraciones en Centro América

Diálogo Regional del Observatorio de Cooperación Descentralizada UE-ALC

26 y 27 de febrero de 2025: La Antigua (Guatemala)



The **Observatorio de Cooperación Descentralizada Unión Europea - América Latina y Caribe** held the Regional Dialogue “*Democracies, Local Autonomy and Migration in Central America*” on 26 and 27 February 2025, together with **Mancomunidad Trinacional Fronteriza Rio Lempa**, the **Fundación Heinrich Böll para Centroamérica**, **Alcaldía de La Antigua Guatemala**, and in collaboration with **Centro de Formación de la Cooperación Española en Guatemala**.

The event addressed some of the main challenges currently facing the Central American region, such as democratic fragility and the shrinking of civic spaces, the recentralisation of states, the erosion of local autonomy, and the violation of human rights of people in mobility throughout Mesoamerica. The Dialogue focused on identifying new strategies and tools to strengthen decentralised cooperation as a mechanism to address these challenges.

Around 120 people participated in the Dialogue, representing public administrations, non-governmental organisations, global justice and human rights groups, academia, the media, and human rights defenders from the Central American region and several European countries. The event was structured around plenary sessions and workshops in three thematic groups: i) Democracies; ii) Decentralisation and Local Autonomies; and iii) Migration.

During these sessions, participants discussed how decentralised cooperation can help reinforce the decentralisation of states and strengthen local autonomy for territorial development, support democracies, uphold the rule of law and civic spaces, and protect the human rights of people in mobility from Panama to Mexico (Mesoamerica).

The discussions held within the various working groups formed the basis of this document, which aims to serve as a valuable contribution to non-governmental organisations, central governments, embassies, and all national and international bodies working with decentralised cooperation approaches, both in Mesoamerica and in Europe.

The **Observatorio de Cooperación Descentralizada** and the organisations that facilitated the Dialogue are committed to creating spaces for debate that enable the construction of new and innovative models of decentralised cooperation. Above all, they seek to contribute to the consolidation of democracies in the region, the deepening of state decentralisation, the strengthening of local autonomies, and the respect for the human rights of people in situations of mobility.

Below are the main ideas that emerged from the Regional Dialogue, structured under the workshop headings used by the three thematic groups:

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CHALLENGES OF DECENTRALISED COOPERATION

- **Strengthen the capacities of local governments to defend and promote local autonomy.** The situation of local governments in Central America has experienced a significant setback due to recentralisation processes, the loss of competences and local autonomy, and the reduction in resource transfers from central governments.
- **Defend local autonomy and promote the decentralisation of states.** Decentralisation and the development of local capacities are key to strengthening democracy. The decentralisation agenda must support territorial development, place human rights at its core, and take into account migration dynamics.
- **Defend democracy and democratic spaces.** Promote democratic principles and narratives, political education, deepen democracy and local development agendas, and increase and improve democratic, participatory, inclusive and deliberative spaces.
- **Broaden and strengthen civic spaces and inclusive, equal citizen participation** that builds bridges of dialogue between different levels of government and territorial actors, while promoting accountability, with a special focus on youth participation.
- **Recognise and protect human rights defenders.** Through training of rights guarantors and the construction of positive narratives capable of confronting anti-rights discourses, while safeguarding freedom of expression, independent media, and promoting networks of rights-defending organisations.
- **Promote and implement public policies, programmes, and protection spaces** with differentiated approaches and competences to address and assist **mixed migrant groups** according to their diverse needs (economic livelihood, recovery, protection, security).
- **Promote and implement participatory territorial public policies** that foster multilevel governance, incorporate **gender equity and equality approaches**, and address **climate change adaptation**.
- **Promote greater participation of women in municipal bodies and decision-making spaces**, through the active leadership of women and the promotion of gender diversity and gender-sensitive approaches in local governments.

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- **Contribute to the reinforcement of democratic values and human rights at the territorial level as an antidote to authoritarian trends**, highlighting the importance of local governments, local autonomy and democracy, and local public policies.
- **Reduce anti-rights, racist, xenophobic and sexist narratives** and discourses that normalise violence and anti-democratic processes.
- **Strengthen the technical capacity of local governments to manage resources from decentralised cooperation**, taking into account the specific socio-economic and political contexts of each territory.

LIMITATIONS OF DECENTRALISED COOPERATION

- **Co-optation and institutional dismantling of local governments and their representatives, as well as of democratic principles and the rule of law.** Civic spaces for dialogue and debate between territorial actors, elected municipal authorities, Indigenous peoples, women and youth with government institutions have been significantly reduced, particularly in El Salvador and Nicaragua.
- **Regression of state decentralisation processes**, weakening the financial, human resource and operational capacities of local governments in Central American countries, especially in El Salvador and Nicaragua.
- **Centralisation by national governments** that limits access to decentralised cooperation for local governments and civil society institutions with management capacity; at the same time, there is a need to empower citizens to demand and deepen decentralisation.
- **Context of alliances between criminal economies, drug trafficking, extractive industries and megaprojects with certain government authorities**, which hinder public policies and result in the persecution and disappearance of human rights defenders, forced displacement, persecution, fear, and criminalisation of local leaders and journalists who oppose the interests of criminal networks that control territories.
- **Limited organisational, managerial and project formulation capacities** of Central American local governments, hindering their ability to access cooperation resources, manage them, and assess their impact.
- **Rise of authoritarianism, the far right, disinformation and manipulation.** The Central American region is witnessing a marked rise and entrenchment of authoritarian

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governments that promote racist, xenophobic, sexist and populist discourses which normalise violence and anti-democratic processes. These authoritarian regimes propagate anti-rights perceptions and narratives, often with a colonialist and racist bias, by distorting the defence of human rights—particularly gender-based approaches—and disseminate these messages widely via major platforms and media.

- **Increase in mobile populations within territories** due to the forced return of displaced populations affected by climate change, political persecution, criminal extortion or gender-based violence. There is a lack of adequate responses to guarantee their social, political and economic integration from a human rights-based approach.
- **Rise of militarised and securitised approaches in the Central American region** to address human mobility, based on “national security” and border control policies, rather than approaches grounded in the protection and guarantee of human rights for mobile populations.
- **Increase in citizen distrust** towards public institutions, fuelled by fear and high levels of corruption, which deepen political, cultural and historical mistrust and conflicts among local actors, limiting effective cooperation and generating social division.
- **Increase in criminalisation**, at both national and local levels, **of human rights defenders, environmental activists and journalists**, based on prejudice and stigmatisation related to their work with LGTBIQ+ populations and youth activists. This contributes to the breakdown of the social fabric and the dispersal of local and community leadership.
- **Reduction in international cooperation funds** and shift in approaches, moving from solidarity to partisanship and assistentialism.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DECENTRALISED COOPERATION

- **Relevance of decentralised cooperation** to influence local agendas and its transformative potential in adverse contexts.
- **Willingness of local governments** to collaborate with actors involved in decentralised cooperation as agents of change: ability to foster intergenerational and intersectional dialogue with youth leaders, to build leadership, and to prioritise care proposals in collaboration with women’s and LGTBIQ+ associations.

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- **Strengthening of links between civil society organisations and local governments** to drive decentralised cooperation processes.
- **Proximity and subsidiarity provided by local governments to populations in situations of human mobility** position them as key actors, including in the social integration and cohesion of migrant and local populations.
- **Leveraging past experiences** as an opportunity to highlight the value of good practices in public management by local governments and civil society entities.
- **Drawing on experiences from other countries** in decentralised cooperation to design and implement national and local public policies or internationalisation strategies for local governments.
- **Social, ethnic and cultural diversity in the Central American region** fosters a multiplicity of actors and knowledge that promotes innovation.
- **Evolution of diasporas and youth as agents of change**, along with accumulated social and family knowledge on migration, creates favourable conditions for the emergence of new actors and leaderships to humanise the approach to populations in situations of human mobility.
- **Diasporas, within the framework of transnational municipalism**, can contribute to the participatory development and implementation of local public policies on decentralised cooperation, fostering local and regional political spaces to address human mobility through local autonomy.
- **Establishment of alliances, platforms and networks at local, regional and international levels** for the promotion of territorial development.
- **Regional perspective** and coordinated work across Central America.
- **Promoting visibility, protection and formation of regional alliances** among independent media outlets and existing community networks to build narratives that support human rights and democracy, and counter anti-rights discourse, through strategic political communication. This approach values the social ecosystem and independent media to promote political dialogue that strengthens human rights for all.

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- **Harnessing digital communication technologies** to manage decentralised cooperation without the need for central government intermediation, within a framework of inter-institutional and cross-sectoral support through digital platforms.

STRATEGIC LINES OF DECENTRALISED COOPERATION

- **Consolidate a decentralised cooperation that strengthens local autonomy, promotes democratic governance, and contributes to sustainable territorial development in Central America**, with a gender, human rights, childhood and diversity-based regional approach.
- **Promote state decentralisation within the agenda of decentralised cooperation**, advocating for and influencing institutional reforms that grant greater competencies and resources to local governments. A comprehensive assessment of the state of decentralisation in the region is urgently needed.
- **Guide decentralised cooperation towards the strengthening of local and subnational governments**, civil society organisations, social movements, advocacy networks and, in general, inclusive and equal civic spaces and citizen participation, with an intersectional approach.
- **Promote and implement participatory territorial public policies** that encourage multilevel governance and territorial development, with equity, gender equality, and climate change adaptation approaches.
- **Promote the empowerment of women and their political participation**, especially in local decision-making spaces, by supporting women's leadership programmes.
- **Strengthen, both technically and organisationally, local public, economic and social structures and entities** that focus on supporting people in mobility in cross-border territories.
- **Adapt decentralised cooperation response mechanisms to the evolving contexts of human mobility**, through dialogue with Indigenous peoples, attention to local initiatives, and multilevel, multi-actor coordination.

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- **Create knowledge and training networks** by enhancing the exchange of experiences and knowledge management among territorial platforms or entities (including the diaspora) for the participatory development and advancement of local public policies.
- **Promote the regularisation of migrant workers** in cross-border territories through decentralised mechanisms in collaboration with local governments, supporting alternative local economic development models to integrate returnees and migrants who settle in the territory.
- **Support training programmes on human rights, democratic and ethical values, solidarity and a culture of peace** for citizens, public officials and institutions, both local and national, as a mechanism for transformative decentralised cooperation through Global Citizenship Education.
- **Foster alliances between local governments, social actors, the private sector and academia** to promote inclusive territorial economic development models.
- **Promote narratives that counter anti-rights discourse and actions** through assertive mass communication based on human rights and the defence of democracy.
- **Promote and support programmes, mechanisms, training spaces and protection networks** for human rights defenders, land defenders and journalists.
- **Map, identify and create a database of decentralised cooperation initiatives and territorial actors in the region**, including subnational governments, feminist organisations, environmentalists, independent media, migrant rights defenders and human rights guarantors, among others.
- **Promote research on the realities of the Central American region**, based on rigorous data and the participation of territorial actors and academia, to document the challenges faced by local governments (such as recentralisation of states, loss of local autonomy, people in mobility, migratory routes, etc.) with a rights-based approach.
- **Strengthen feminist leadership and local care agendas within territories**, as well as the economic empowerment of women.