

X Conferencia del Observatorio de Cooperación
Descentralizada UE-ALC

**La cooperación descentralizada
en un mundo incierto y desigual:
nuevas narrativas o vuelta
a las raíces**

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Conclusions and Recommendations

10th Conference of the Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation EU-LAC

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Conclusions of the 10th Conference

9 sections on decentralised cooperation.

General Recommendations

10 lines of action for the whole decentralised cooperation system.

Specific Recommendations: Feminist Public Policies

10 recommendations focused on gender, care and intersectionality.

Recommendations for the Observatory EU-LAC

12 lines of work for the Observatory itself.



CONCLUSIONS OF THE 10TH CONFERENCE

1. Introduction: Cooperation in a Changing World

Decentralised cooperation (DC) is undergoing a period of profound redefinition in an international context characterised by the overlap of global crises, including economic, climate, democratic and geopolitical crises, which are reshaping the foundations upon which the international system has been built over recent decades.

The growing **fragmentation of the global order**, the rise of competition among geopolitical blocs and the emergence of new influential actors have transformed the nature of international cooperation. At the same time, there is an **unprecedented concentration of wealth and power**, particularly associated with major technological and financial actors, which directly influence political and development agendas.

In parallel, a **significant ideological shift** can be observed: cooperation has moved from being primarily focused on reducing inequalities and promoting rights towards becoming increasingly linked to strategic, security and economic interests. This trend is reflected both in the reduction of available resources and in the demand for tangible returns for traditional "donor countries" (that is, members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee), as well as in the emergence of "new donor countries" (outside the DAC) and in the growing instrumentalisation of aid.

This situation is combined with a widespread process of **recentralisation of resources and decision-making**, both in Latin America and Europe, which limits the room for manoeuvre of local governments at a time when major global challenges are increasingly felt at the territorial level.

In this context, decentralised cooperation can no longer be conceived merely as a technical or subsidiary policy. It lies at the centre of a broader debate concerning the role of the local level in global governance and the very purpose of cooperation itself.

2. Local Governments as Key Political Actors in Global Governance

Local and regional governments have acquired a central role in contemporary governance dynamics, both because of their proximity to citizens and their capacity to intervene directly in the key areas that shape everyday life.

They manage a substantial share of public investment and hold responsibilities in strategic policy areas such as housing, transport, social services, education, the ecological transition and economic development. This role makes them crucial actors in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, whose implementation depends largely on effective action at the local level.

However, their importance is not limited to policy implementation. In a context of multiple crises, local governments are emerging as **spaces for political innovation**, where responses to complex challenges are tested and can subsequently be scaled up or replicated. Experiences in areas such as care policies, urban regeneration, sustainable resource management and social inclusion demonstrate the capacity of the local level to generate adaptive and transformative solutions.

Moreover, territories have become key spaces of **democratic resistance**. In the face of trends towards recentralisation, authoritarianism and the erosion of rights, many cities have adopted active political positions in defence of democratic values, acting as counterweights to regressive dynamics at national and global levels.

This capacity for action is reinforced by their **electoral legitimacy and proximity to citizens**, enabling local governments to better understand social demands, respond rapidly, and design policies that are more closely aligned with territorial realities.





Nevertheless, this centrality has not yet translated into equivalent political recognition in international arenas. Dynamics persist that continue to relegate local and regional governments to a secondary role, limiting their participation in the definition of agendas and strategic decision-making.

Overcoming this gap requires moving towards a more inclusive model of global governance in which local governments are fully recognised as **political actors with decision-making capacity**, and not simply as implementers of policies designed by others.

3. Reconfiguration of the Cooperation System: Transformations and Tensions

The international cooperation system is undergoing a structural transformation that directly affects decentralised cooperation.

On the one hand, new actors are emerging, including large philanthropic foundations, financial institutions and state actors from emerging economies that operate outside the official development assistance system. While these actors broaden the cooperation ecosystem, they also introduce new intervention logics. These approaches, often linked to techno-solutionism or sector-specific frameworks, may displace the central role of public policies and democratic institution-building.

On the other hand, initiatives such as the **Global Gateway** reflect a shift towards cooperation models centred on investment and projects, where economic or strategic impact becomes the guiding criterion. Although these instruments may create opportunities for local actors, they also entail the risk of subordinating cooperation to external agendas and diluting its commitment to human rights and equity.

This trend is compounded by the weakening or disappearance of programmes that historically promoted horizontal cooperation, peer-to-peer exchanges and the joint construction of public policies, such as the European URB-AL Programme. The result is a reduction in opportunities for mutual learning and collective policy development.

In this context, decentralised cooperation faces growing tension between its original political vocation and new dynamics that tend to transform it into an instrument serving other agendas.

4. Structural Risks: Depoliticisation, Recentralisation and Capture

The evolution of the global context has intensified a series of risks that directly affect the nature and potential of decentralised cooperation.

The first is **depoliticisation**. Growing pressure to demonstrate measurable results, efficiency and economic returns may reduce cooperation to its technical dimension, obscuring its political function and contribution to social transformation.

The second risk is **recentralisation**, which limits the autonomy of local governments and reduces their decision-making capacity. This process manifests itself both in the concentration of financial resources and in the recentralisation of decision-making processes, undermining achievements made in decentralisation.

The third risk is **the capture of agendas** by external actors. The influence of foundations, donors or large economic actors may redirect cooperation priorities towards agendas that do not necessarily respond to territorial needs, reinforcing technocratic approaches and reducing local political agency.

Finally, the **weakening of civil society** and the shrinking of democratic spaces in many contexts erode the ecosystem upon which decentralised cooperation depends, making participation, accountability and collective policy-making more difficult.

These risks are not marginal but structural, and they require a coordinated political response.





5. Reaffirming a Political Narrative: From Development to Global Justice

In response to these challenges, it is essential to redefine the conceptual and political framework of decentralised cooperation.

This implies questioning the limitations of the traditional "development" narrative, which has often been associated with economic growth models that fail to address structural inequalities and environmental impacts. It also requires recognising the shortcomings of a vision of progress centred on accumulation and market expansion.

Instead, decentralised cooperation should be guided by a framework based on **global justice**, placing equity, sustainability and human dignity at its core. This approach enables the articulation of local agendas with major global challenges from a transformative perspective, promoting alternative and sustainable models of living, coexistence and local development.

Within this framework, it is essential to affirm that decentralised cooperation **is not neutral**. It must actively respond to human rights violations, inequalities and democratic backsliding, acting as a public policy instrument committed to clear values and principles.

Strengthening this political dimension does not mean abandoning effectiveness or technical quality, but rather placing them at the service of a coherent political project.

6. Building a Local Government Agenda

One of the key elements for strengthening decentralised cooperation is the construction of **an independent political agenda for local and regional governments**, one that does not depend exclusively on frameworks established by other actors.

This agenda should be structured around strategic priorities that reflect both territorial needs and global challenges. These include local democracy, decentralisation, human rights, gender equality, care policies, environmental sustainability, social cohesion and access to housing.

It should also incorporate emerging priorities such as security, resilience, strategic autonomy and youth participation, always from a citizen-centred perspective.

A key component of this agenda is attention to territorial diversity, including support for small or peripheral territories facing risks of institutional neglect, where the absence of public policies may create conditions for increasing inequalities and the rise of extremist narratives.

This agenda must be not only declarative but operational, capable of guiding policies, alliances and cooperation mechanisms.

7. Networks, Multilateralism and Stakeholder Articulation

In a context of weakening traditional multilateralism, networks of local governments play a strategic role as spaces for coordination, representation and advocacy.

These networks enable local governments to act collectively, amplify their voice in international arenas and advance shared agendas. They also serve as key platforms for exchanging experiences, generating knowledge and building partnerships.

Decentralised cooperation must strengthen its **multi-stakeholder character**, integrating civil society, academia, the private sector and other territorial actors into the design and implementation of policies. In this regard, a vibrant, critical and influential civil society is an essential condition for strong and legitimate decentralised cooperation.

Cooperation among these actors not only improves policy effectiveness but also reinforces democratic legitimacy.



8. Evidence, Narrative and Political Legitimacy

In a context where cooperation is increasingly questioned, generating evidence of its impact takes on renewed importance. However, such evidence should not be understood merely as a technical measurement exercise, but also as a tool for strengthening the **political legitimacy** of decentralised cooperation.

The production of data, along with the systematisation of experiences and lessons learned, should help demonstrate the added value of decentralised cooperation in terms of social transformation, institutional strengthening and territorial development.

At the same time, it is essential to develop a **political communication strategy** capable of clearly explaining the purpose of cooperation, highlighting its achievements and countering narratives that question its legitimacy or usefulness.

In this regard, the connection between the global and the local is fundamental: decentralised cooperation must show how international action contributes to improving people's lives within territories.

9. Conclusion: An Agenda for Political Action

Decentralised cooperation stands at a crossroads. Its future development will depend on the ability of local governments and their partners to defend and strengthen its political dimension.

This requires progress in several areas: consolidating recognition of local governments as global political actors, defending their autonomy and decision-making capacity, building agendas based on global justice, strengthening networks and partnerships, and placing communication and advocacy at the centre of action.

In a world marked by uncertainty and inequality, decentralised cooperation has the potential to become a strategic space for defending democracy, fostering public innovation and building alternatives from the local to the global level.

Ultimately, its future depends on its ability to clearly assert that it is, above all, a **transformative public policy**, contributing to the creation of local institutional frameworks, the promotion of local public policies and the delivery of services through an integrated, sustainable and inclusive approach.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Political Recognition of Local Governments

Local and regional governments must be fully recognised as political actors with decision-making power in global governance, and not merely as implementers of externally defined agendas. This recognition is not only a matter of institutional legitimacy but also a sine qua non condition for the development, effectiveness and sustainability of decentralised cooperation. Without such recognition, cooperation is reduced to a technical function and loses its transformative potential.

2. Strengthening the Political, Innovative and Democratic Character of Decentralised Cooperation

Decentralised cooperation should actively contribute to reinforcing the political role of local governments by consolidating their function as spaces for decision-making, public debate and public policy development. It should also enhance their role as laboratories of public innovation, where solutions to major global challenges are tested from the territorial level. Finally, cooperation should support their function as spaces of democratic resistance against authoritarian backsliding, strengthening their capacity to defend rights and promote democratic values.

3. Guaranteeing the Autonomy of the Decentralised Cooperation Agenda

It is essential to ensure that the decentralised cooperation agenda is not captured by external actors, whether governmental, private or philanthropic. Cooperation must respond primarily to the needs, priorities and decisions of territories, shaped locally and in dialogue with their stakeholders. Preserving this autonomy is crucial to maintaining the political coherence and transformative purpose of cooperation.

4. Strengthening the Structural Priorities of the Decentralised Cooperation Agenda

Decentralised cooperation should maintain and reinforce its focus on structural issues, avoiding displacement by short-term or security-driven agendas. In this regard, it is essential to prioritise areas such as local democracy, decentralisation, human rights, gender equality, care policies, social and territorial cohesion, and environmental sustainability. These priorities form the foundation of cooperation aimed at transformation rather than merely crisis management.

5. Strengthening the Multi-Stakeholder Approach and the Role of Civil Society

Decentralised cooperation should be developed in close partnership with organised civil society, social movements, city networks and other territorial actors. This multi-stakeholder approach not only improves the quality and relevance of policies, but also strengthens their democratic legitimacy. Furthermore, cooperation should play an active role in supporting civil society in contexts of persecution, criminalisation or exile, enhancing its capacity for action, protection and advocacy in defence of human rights.

6. Orienting Decentralised Cooperation towards Global Justice

Decentralised cooperation should be grounded in a conceptual and political framework guided by global justice, equity and human dignity. This requires moving beyond traditional approaches focused exclusively on economic development or donor-beneficiary logics and advancing towards a vision that addresses structural inequalities while promoting sustainable and fair development models from both global and territorial perspectives.

7. Embracing the Non-Neutral Nature of Decentralised Cooperation

Decentralised cooperation cannot be understood as a neutral instrument. It must take a clear position regarding human rights violations, structural inequalities and democratic backsliding. Assuming this position means recognising cooperation as a public policy committed to values, principles and political objectives, rather than merely as a technical management tool.

8. Strengthening Political Communication and the Legitimacy of Cooperation

It is necessary to strengthen communication strategies for decentralised cooperation through a clearly political approach that makes its impact visible, reinforces its legitimacy and counters narratives that question its usefulness. Evidence generation should contribute to this narrative-building effort by demonstrating the added value of cooperation in terms of social transformation, institutional strengthening and improvements in people's lives.

9. Strengthening the Connection Between the Global and the Local

Decentralised cooperation should be consolidated as a key lever for addressing global challenges from the local level, ensuring a genuine connection between both spheres. This requires greater policy coherence, integrating the international dimension into local public policies and recognising that major global challenges are experienced and addressed within territories. Cooperation should help articulate these different scales effectively.

10. Reclaiming the Roots of Decentralised Cooperation and Adapting Them to the New Context

Decentralised cooperation should reaffirm its founding principles, based on horizontality, public policy development and institutional strengthening, while adapting to a context characterised by new narratives, new actors and new frameworks for international cooperation. In this process, it is essential to highlight the accumulated evidence of past successes, including historic cooperation programmes, and their contribution to local public policy development. Cooperation must also preserve its capacity to operate in adverse contexts, supporting both local governments and civil society when institutional spaces become restricted.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS ON DECENTRALISED COOPERATION AND FEMINIST PUBLIC POLICIES

1. Strengthen Institutional Capacities in Gender Equality and Intersectionality

Decentralised cooperation should contribute to the sustained strengthening of technical, political and institutional capacities in the fields of gender equality and intersectionality. To this end, it is necessary to promote ongoing processes of training, learning and exchange aimed at political leaders, technical staff and cooperation practitioners. Strengthening these capacities is an essential condition for effectively integrating feminist approaches into the design, implementation and evaluation of local public policies.

2. Consolidate Feminist Knowledge, Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

Progress is needed towards information, monitoring and evaluation systems capable of rigorously measuring the impact of feminist public policies and cooperation initiatives. The development of gender-sensitive indicators and evidence should contribute to better decision-making, stronger accountability mechanisms and greater visibility of progress and challenges in the field of equality. These systems should also promote institutional learning and the continuous improvement of public policies.

3. Strengthen Feminist Networks and Cooperation Spaces Among Territories

Decentralised cooperation should strengthen collaboration among local governments, civil society organisations, universities and feminist movements by promoting networks for exchange, mutual learning and political advocacy. These alliances facilitate knowledge-sharing, strengthen collective capacities and enhance the ability to respond to common challenges, while contributing to the consolidation of an international feminist agenda built from and for territories.

4. Strengthen Communication Strategies and Feminist Narratives

It is essential to develop communication and awareness-raising strategies capable of countering the rise of anti-feminist discourse, disinformation and hate narratives. Decentralised cooperation should contribute to generating alternative narratives grounded in human rights, equality and social justice, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of feminist policies and promoting a broader understanding of their contribution to collective well-being and democratic quality.

5. Position Care as a Strategic Axis of Local Public Policies

Decentralised cooperation should contribute to establishing care as a central pillar of public policies and territorial development. This involves recognising its social, economic and political dimensions, promoting a fairer distribution of care responsibilities, and advancing models of shared responsibility involving public administrations, communities, the private sector and other stakeholders. Incorporating this perspective is essential for building more inclusive, sustainable and equal territories.

6. Guarantee Inclusive and Diverse Participation in Local Governance

Decentralised cooperation policies should promote the effective participation of women in all their diversity in decision-making, leadership and governance processes. This requires removing barriers that limit the political and social participation of certain groups and creating conditions that encourage the inclusion of young women, migrant women, rural women, Indigenous women, Afro-descendant women, women with disabilities and members of other historically excluded groups. Democratic and inclusive governance requires this diversity to be represented at all levels of decision-making.

7. Strengthen Protection and Support for Women and Human Rights Defenders

Decentralised cooperation should take an active role in protecting and supporting women leaders, activists and human rights defenders, particularly in contexts of persecution, criminalisation or democratic backsliding. To this end, it is essential to strengthen support networks, protection mechanisms, exchanges of experience and joint advocacy spaces that help preserve hard-won rights and reinforce the agency of those defending them.

8. Promote the Territorialisation of the Care Agenda Between the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean

Decentralised cooperation should play a key role in the territorial implementation of the EU-LAC Bi-regional Care Pact. This implies translating political commitments into concrete public policies, adequate resources, cooperation mechanisms and multi-level partnerships capable of generating tangible improvements in people's lives. The local dimension is essential to ensuring that this agenda is translated into effective and sustainable action.

9. Promote Knowledge and Dissemination of Feminist Leadership Experiences

It is necessary to strengthen mechanisms for documenting, systematising and exchanging experiences of feminist leadership developed in different territories. The identification and dissemination of good practices contribute to generating applied knowledge, facilitating peer learning, strengthening local leadership capacities and providing positive role models for new generations of women participating in political, social and community life.

10. Promote Territorial Cooperation in Feminist Urbanism

Decentralised cooperation should encourage the exchange of experiences, methodologies and tools related to feminist urbanism and territorial planning with a gender and intersectional perspective. Such exchanges can contribute to more effectively integrating care-related needs, mobility, safety, accessibility and community participation into urban policies, promoting territories that are more inclusive, liveable and sustainable for everyone.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OBSERVATORY FOR DECENTRALISED COOPERATION EU-LAC

- **Promote** a specific decentralised cooperation agenda focused on local feminist public policies, with particular attention to gender-based violence, including political and digital violence; care and the sustainability of life; women's participation and political leadership; and feminist urbanism and territorial justice.
- **Strengthen** networks of elected women representatives and local women leaders, as well as feminist networks and organisations, especially those operating in contexts of risk, human mobility, persecution, criminalisation or exile, by fostering exchanges of experience, mutual support and political advocacy.
- **Promote** permanent and structured spaces for dialogue among local and regional governments, civil society, academia and other territorial actors, encouraging the construction of shared agendas and strengthening the multi-stakeholder approach of decentralised cooperation.
- **Generate** comparative evidence between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean on local feminist public policies, women's political leadership, local governance and public innovation from a gender perspective.
- **Systematise and disseminate** replicable territorial experiences, lessons learned and good practices, while producing regular reports, studies and analyses on strategic issues such as democracy, decentralisation and recentralisation and their impacts, care policies, political violence against women, feminist leadership and gender-sensitive urban planning.
- **Mainstream** a gender perspective and an intersectional approach throughout research, knowledge-generation and training activities, promoting tools and instruments that support their application in local public policies.
- **Develop** training programmes and modules on global justice, human rights, local democracy and decentralisation, with a specific focus on strengthening the capacities of women holding political and leadership responsibilities in local and regional governments.
- **Study** decentralised South-South and triangular cooperation practices and ensure that they are based on horizontality, mutual learning and approaches free from asymmetric or hierarchical dynamics.
- **Analyse** the transformations of the international cooperation system and the role of new actors, including philanthropic foundations, financial actors and other global stakeholders, as well as their impact on local agendas and on the governance of decentralised cooperation.
- **Advance** research and data collection on current EU-LAC decentralised cooperation practices in order to generate evidence on emerging trends and support knowledge creation and policy debate.
- **Consolidate** the Observatory's position as a reference actor for political advocacy and the promotion of decentralised cooperation in international, European and bi-regional forums.



- **Strengthen** communication, monitoring and evaluation strategies for decentralised cooperation by promoting narratives based on global justice, human rights, equality and local democracy; disseminating evidence and experiences that reinforce its legitimacy; and incorporating new analytical tools that assess not only technical results but also political, institutional and transformative impacts within territories.

