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Decentralised Cooperation

Decentralised Cooperation in an Uncertain and Unequal World: New Narratives or Back to Its Roots?

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1. Introduction

The aim of this document is not to provide an exhaustive account of the state of the world, relations between Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean or decentralised cooperation. Its objective is to lay the foundations for an in-depth debate on the current state of decentralised cooperation among local and regional governments in the European Union (EU) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

It is intended as a springboard for reflection, seeking to identify trends and the positions of different actors through an analysis of the current global context and its impact on the development cooperation system, as it has been understood from a traditional and institutional perspective. It subsequently aims to analyse the “new” narratives surrounding decentralised cooperation and their impact on cooperation among local governments in the EU and CELAC.

The global geopolitical landscape is rapidly changing. The international order, traditionally based on multilateral cooperation and economic integration, is giving way to a more fragmented and competitive environment, marked by growing state intervention.

We are currently witnessing a form of international development cooperation that, in most states, is being openly incorporated as just another foreign policy instrument¹, and which is also being affected by drastic cuts in funding.

This is compounded by the impact of humanitarian crises and conflicts, which are increasing in number, affecting an ever-growing number of regions around the world and lasting longer.

It is interesting to note that, as of today, many of the insights, dynamics and trends identified in the two previous conferences (Barcelona, 2022 and Bogotá, 2024) have either been confirmed or have deepened and accelerated. The 2022 conference underscored the need to rethink decentralised cooperation in a context of permacrisis and tension, arguing that the threats facing the world were greater than ever before.

¹ The OECD itself recognises that decentralised development cooperation strengthens democracy, national development and the “foreign policy” of OECD Member States.

Four years on, these threats have materialised: international governance and international law have been severely undermined; the planet is approaching its sustainability limits; human rights have become a matter of opinion; and the dehumanisation of the other and the rule of the strongest appear, for the time being, to have prevailed. Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean are not immune to these processes.

Moreover, the three priority areas proposed in the baseline document for the 2024 conference not only remain relevant, but their continued decline in both regions is a matter of serious concern, particularly at a time when the development of local public policies is itself being called into question as a means of responding to the needs of citizens and communities living in these territories. The three areas identified were as follows:

- The capital-life conflict, the defence of territories and the protection of nature and the environment, which give rise to eco-social disputes.
- The feminist approach, which places life and care at the heart of local public action.
- The defence of democracy and the protection of human rights defenders.

It is therefore urgent to review the trajectory of decentralised cooperation between the two regions in light of the above, while taking into account new elements, such as the resumption of the Summits of Heads of State and Government under a purportedly renewed strategy, as well as the new dynamics of decentralised cooperation itself, driven by international agencies and organisations.

Ultimately, the question running through this document is whether we are witnessing a regression in the basic principles of decentralised cooperation developed over the past thirty years by European and Latin American local governments. Or, conversely, whether decentralised cooperation is adapting to respond more effectively to a rapidly changing context and the challenges we face today.

2. A New Old Order: Disruptions to the International Rules and System

If there is any kind of international consensus at present, it is that the system created by the Western world and led by the United States at the end of the Second World War, and to some extent designed to strengthen and preserve a global economic and political agenda, has collapsed.

It would be easy to draw comparisons with the period encompassing the two World Wars of the 20th century or with the 19th-century world. Although certain similarities exist, such as the importance of geopolitics, technological innovation, competition for markets, social divisions, inequalities, struggles for rights, environmental costs, etc., some distinctive features may nevertheless be identified. In particular, there is a concentration of economic, technological and political power in the same few hands.

Since January 2025, the world has been moving towards increasing multipolarity, with a growing number of actors able to influence the global agenda. The geopolitical tensions are also reflected in prolonged conflicts that structurally disrupt access to energy, food and other essential resources.

According to the trends highlighted by CIDOB (Colomina, 2025), we are currently experiencing a global realignment characterised by the instrumentalisation of economic and technological coercion, the rise of new transactional approaches to diplomacy, growing militarisation and a profound restructuring of international alliances.

This creates a context in which actors such as China, India and the Gulf powers, together with an increasingly cohesive Global South, are strategically positioned to reshape the global order.

All this is taking place within an international system strained by unaccountable interventionism, disputes over resources, accelerating technological competition and the dismantling of governance frameworks that previously underpinned multilateralism.

Parallel analyses confirm these trends and warn that global cooperation has stagnated amid geopolitical tensions, environmental crises and accelerated technological transformation, underscoring the urgency of adopting new forms of collaboration to address global challenges such as climate change, security, innovation and inequality.

All things considered, we are facing an increasingly fragmented, volatile and authoritarian world in which adaptive capacity, pragmatic diplomacy and the reinvention of the multilateral system are essential to navigating a rapidly changing international agenda. A world in which Europe is losing its centrality and becoming increasingly vulnerable, while Latin America is reemerging as a major strategic supplier of resources and raw materials.

The strategic rivalry between the United States and China, the use of economic instruments as tools of political pressure and the race for critical technologies and strategic minerals are redefining states' priorities. This dynamic has driven a reshaping of supply chains and a greater emphasis on economic security.

It is interesting to see that even international organisations which perpetuate a predatory socioeconomic model based on continued growth are beginning to question the limits of the very premises on which their model is based. The superficial economic recovery experienced by many regions following the 2008 global financial crisis coincided with a growing debate, particularly in advanced economies, about the value of multilateralism and the unequal benefits of globalisation (IMF, 2023).

This growing scepticism towards multilateralism has contributed to the increasing appeal of inward-looking policies, with policymakers becoming more receptive to the creation of barriers between nations, including in the areas of trade, capital, migration and technology exchange.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) itself admits that the world is facing a series of pressing environmental, economic and security challenges; that global security is in crisis; that the health and wellbeing of much of the population are at risk; that only 17% of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are currently on track; and that the energy transition towards a net-zero future remains in its early stages². And all this in a context in which international relations are increasingly driven by opportunism and transactional approaches.

Under these circumstances, power is no longer derived exclusively from military strength or the possession of strategic resources but is instead exercised across multiple dimensions. Influence in multilateral organisations, control over energy corridors, the capacity to generate technological innovation and the projection of

² Brende, B. and Sternfels, B. (20 January 2025). *Global cooperation has flatlined. Here's how to reinvent it for a new era.* World Economic Forum.
<https://www.weforum.org/stories/global-cooperation/global-cooperation-flatlined-how-reinvent-it/>

cultural narratives and counternarratives on a global scale have become key factors shaping the new geopolitical landscape.

At the same time, the growing weight of the Global South and the consolidation of platforms such as BRICS+³ are redefining power dynamics, expanding the number of actors capable of influencing international agendas and challenging the traditional hegemony of advanced economies.

³ There are currently 10 member states (Brazil, China, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia and South Africa), 1 observer (Saudi Arabia) and 11 partner countries (Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, Uzbekistan and Vietnam).

3. Transformations and Challenges in the International Development Cooperation System

The global process outlined above is reflected in the dynamics of the international development cooperation system; a process of change characterised by the need to respond to the financing needs of Global South countries arising from the objectives of global agendas (as illustrated, for example, by the Pact for the Future⁴ and the Sevilla Commitment on a shared framework for development financing⁵), and which has accelerated markedly over the past two years.

International development cooperation is therefore undergoing a profound transformation, as will be analysed throughout this section.

For the better part of a decade, both the development cooperation system and the very concept of development have been subject to growing scrutiny.

Current evidence and recent studies by the United Nations, the OECD, the World Economic Forum and several research centres indicate that development cooperation is unlikely to disappear over the next decade. However, they point to a profound transformation of the international aid system, with structural, geopolitical and financial changes that will alter its structure, the actors involved and its priorities.

In this regard, although international development cooperation remains indispensable for many low-income countries that depend on Official Development Assistance (ODA) to meet basic needs and finance essential services, four trends have emerged (M. Ramos, 2024):

- A proliferation of actors challenging the uniformity of the system.
- Scrutiny of Official Development Assistance, which has been central to international development cooperation.
- Reform initiatives that seek to go “beyond aid”.
- A shift away from the agendas that dominated development discourse for decades.

⁴ United Nations. (2024). *Pact for the Future* (A/RES/75/1). <https://www.un.org/pact-for-the-future/en>

⁵ UNCTAD. (2025). *Aid at the Crossroads: Trends in Official Development Assistance* (UNCTAD/OSG/TT/INF/2025/1). <https://unctad.org/node/50116>

We are currently seeing a “profound transformation of the cooperation system, with roles being redefined among actors, new actors emerging and new operational frameworks and agendas being established” (M. Ramos, 2024).

On the one hand, there is clear recognition in global agendas of the role of local governments as development actors and of so-called “city-to-city” cooperation as a key instrument for community and territorial development.

On the other, the so-called “Global South”, with all its heterogeneity, is assuming greater prominence, as is the private sector - although the debate over the latter’s role is a cyclical and recurring issue.

The United Nations (UN) and its agencies agree that development cooperation will remain an essential tool for advancing the 2030 Agenda, although it will need to adapt to an increasingly complex and fragmented international environment.

According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), the UN system’s primary instrument for steering action at country level, cooperation should focus on sustainable economic transformation, broad partnerships and the principle of leaving no one behind, strengthening inclusion and the struggle against inequalities in an increasingly challenging global context.

Along these same lines, UNDP recalls that its mission remains centred on eradicating poverty, protecting the planet and supporting countries in strengthening institutions, capacities and public policies aimed at sustainable human development. The agency emphasises that, in the face of mounting pressure - from the climate crisis to inequality - international cooperation remains vital to supporting national processes and providing integrated solutions that can accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

Nonetheless, the drastic cuts made by the largest donors to UN agencies and their own development cooperation programmes cast doubt on the question raised above. If we analyse the results of the latest international conferences, from the Pact for the Future (New York, 2024) to the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (Sevilla, 2025), we can observe a consistent call for the mobilisation of financial resources.

Turning to another issue, the emergence and expansion - as noted in the previous section - of the BRICS+ group introduces new dynamics and calls into question the

the development cooperation model promoted by the World Bank system and the OECD.

As the Government of Brazil points out, this group seeks to enhance the legitimacy, equity in participation and effectiveness of global institutions such as the UN, IMF, World Bank and WTO. Moreover, it aims to foster sustainable social and economic development and promote social inclusion⁶.

It should also be noted that, in addition to Brazil as a founding member, Bolivia and Cuba are listed as partner countries. Also, the fact that Argentina was close to becoming a full member, but withdrew its application under the Milei government, is a clear illustration of the heterogeneity not only of the Global South but also the capacity of these new actors to put forward alternative narratives to those that traditionally prevail.

Behind these narratives there often lies an attempt to replace the notion of development with the idea of progress promoted by China, understood as a continuous, cumulative and non-linear process of long-term modernisation that encompasses dimensions of power, civilisation and influence.

Although new financial mechanisms have emerged, none is yet to reach the scale required to replace the structural role of international cooperation. In parallel, the climate emergency has heightened the need to mobilise global financing for adaptation and mitigation.

Humanitarian crises, armed conflicts and natural disasters have increased the demand for external support. The future of cooperation will be marked by a more diverse system, with a greater number of regional actors, a stronger role for local stakeholders and greater integration between climate action and development.

According to the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), the international cooperation system is anchored in institutional structures that are difficult to reform yet continue to serve as the central pillar of global governance. Everything suggests that the future will involve:

- A multipolar system, in which China, India, the Gulf countries and various regional actors assume a more prominent role, offering alternative models of financing and governance.
- Greater leadership from local and regional actors, who are calling for more reciprocal and less hierarchical relationships between donors and recipients.

⁶ BRICS. (2025). *About the BRICS*. <https://brics.br/en/about-the-brics>

- Greater integration between climate finance and development, driven by the need to redirect investment towards sustainable economic transitions.
- Greater system fragmentation, accompanied by a diversification of sources, formats and instruments, including new development banks, plurilateral partnerships, blended finance mechanisms and heightened competition among cooperation providers.

While the United Nations Secretary-General continues to argue that ODA remains essential for countries lacking viable alternative sources of finance, he also points out that aid flows remain a critical instrument and that their disappearance would leave a gap that would be difficult to fill.

In its second report on trends and progress in international development cooperation (ECOSOC, 2025), it highlights the growing demand for development aid, systemic risks - particularly those arising from climate change - and disaster-related vulnerabilities.

And yet, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), ODA is in crisis, having declined for the third consecutive year following its peak in 2020, falling to USD 160 billion in 2023.

This decrease reduces essential financing for developing countries, making it more difficult to advance the 2030 Agenda, provide debt relief and respond to economic and climate crises.

ODA, expressed in grant-equivalent terms, provided by member countries of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) amounted to USD 214.6 billion in 2024, a 6.0% decrease in real terms compared to 2023.

For their part, total net ODA flows from all providers to developing countries amounted to USD 255.4 billion, a 4.5% drop compared to 2023⁷.

Of the 32 DAC member countries, 22 have reduced their contributions. The most striking example is that of the United States, with the dismantling of USAID. However, traditional development aid donors, such as Germany, Belgium, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, have also imposed drastic cuts, both in absolute and relative terms.

⁷ OECD. (December 2025). *Final OECD statistics on official development assistance and other resource flows to developing countries in 2024: Key figures and trends*. <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/insights/data-explainers/2025/12/final-oecd-statistics-on-oda-and-other-development-finance-flows-in-2024-key-figures-and-trends.html>

According to the OECD itself (2025), “international aid from member countries and associates of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) fell in 2025 by 23.1% in real terms compared to 2024, the largest annual drop in the history of official development assistance (ODA),” bringing aid levels down to those last seen in 2015, the year the 2030 Agenda was adopted⁸.

The only exception to this trend appears to be Spain, which, under Law 1/23 on Sustainable Development Cooperation and Global Solidarity⁹, remains committed to reaching the target of 0.7% of GDP by 2030.

Moreover, when such cuts are combined with persistent and rising global inflation, the purchasing power of development aid erodes significantly, further reducing its overall impact (UNCTAD, 2025).

Within this context, the aim of the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development (Sevilla, 2025) was to reform development finance, drive the transformation of the international financial architecture and address the challenges associated with financing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The conference’s final document, entitled the “Sevilla Commitment”, sets out a renewed financing framework, as well as a proposal for global tax reform designed to promote greater equity. However, given the ongoing cuts to ODA, evolving international dynamics and the hydrocarbons and economic crisis triggered by the United States’ attack on Iran, the room for manoeuvre to launch and implement the agreements reached in Sevilla is extremely limited.

Particularly in a context in which the very viability of the United Nations and its agencies - not only politically and institutionally but also economically - is being called into question, and in which the forthcoming election of the next Secretary-General will dictate their future, for better or worse.

⁸ OECD. (9 April 2026). *International aid fell sharply in 2025, says OECD*. <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2026/04/international-aid-fell-sharply-in-2025-says-oecd.html>

⁹ Spain. (2023). *Law 2/2023 of 20 February, regulating the protection of persons reporting regulatory breaches and the fight against corruption*. Official State Gazette, BOE A-2023-4512. <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2023-4512>

4. European Union - CELAC: A Renewed Strategy?

The resumption in Brussels in 2023 of the European Union-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (EU-CELAC) Summits of Heads of State and Government sought, following an eight-year hiatus, to usher in a new phase shaped by a shared need to relaunch the bi-regional partnership in a global context of uncertainty, geopolitical rivalry and profound transformations.

As the Carolina Foundation points out, “although some of these dynamics remain present, there is now an international context of growing uncertainty and risks that calls for a relaunch of the interregional relationship as a platform for mutual benefit” (Carolina Foundation, 2023), within the broader pursuit of strategic autonomy.

This reassessment is likely driven by three main factors:

First, because political leaders believe that EU-CELAC cooperation can help “jointly expand the autonomy and resilience of both regions in a world of growing geopolitical rivalry, yet one that still requires governance, rules and certainty” (Domínguez and Sanahuja, 2023).

Second, because, in this same international context, the strategic partnership between the two regions, based on shared values, can strengthen democracy, the rule of law and multilateralism.

Third, because both regions were considered well positioned to strengthen cooperation and leverage their respective strengths in addressing what were referred to in 2023 as the social, green and technological transitions facing the world.

All this is clearly reflected in the 4th EU-CELAC Summit, held in Santa Marta (Colombia) in November 2025, which was marked by notable absences on both the CELAC and EU sides.

The Joint Declaration emphasises the depth of this partnership and its strategic focus, stating that it is based on “shared values and interests; resilient, inclusive and democratic societies; the promotion, protection and respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms; the rule of law; free and transparent elections; multilateralism; and international cooperation”¹⁰.

¹⁰ Office of the President of the Republic of Colombia. (9 November 2025). *Joint Declaration of the 4th CELAC-EU Summit*. <https://www.presidencia.gov.co/prensa/Paginas/Declaracion-Final-Conjunta-de-la-IV-Cumbre-Celac-UE-251109.aspx>

Against this backdrop, the participants reasserted their commitment to long-term cooperation across areas ranging from sustainable development to citizen security.

Furthermore, the final declaration lays the foundations for a new architecture for future cooperation through a roadmap aimed at accelerating cooperation on climate action and environmental protection, the energy transition and regional interconnections.

However, in efforts to contextualise and understand the scope of this renewed strategy, four key aspects warrant consideration, namely: the Global Gateway; the Bi-Regional Care Pact; the role of the LAC-EU Civil Society Forum; and, finally, the role of local and regional governments.

On the one hand, the Global Gateway has become a central instrument for channelling this strategic renewal. In previous gatherings, such as the meeting held in Sevilla during FFD4, both regions recognised the need to advance transformative projects addressing the green transition, digitalisation and human development.

Consideration should also be given to the so-called EU-CELAC Investment Agenda, which is backed by EUR 45 billion in concessional financing to promote European strategic projects in Latin America through 2027. Nonetheless, the underlying issue is that “to date, the Commission’s discourse has been ambiguous, seeking to reconcile development narratives with others of a geo-economic and geopolitical nature” (de la Cruz Prego, 2025).

In this regard, specific programmes promoted by the European Union for the region - such as the regional Inclusive Societies Programme (EUR 60 million), the Social Accelerator (just over EUR 15 million) and the EU-LAC Digital Accelerator - are, beyond their own objectives, ultimately at the service of the Global Gateway and, by extension, the needs of the European Union and its Member States. All this is taking place in a context in which the European Union remains dependent on energy resources and raw materials, while its moral, political and economic leadership is increasingly being challenged globally.

This strategy may also be understood as a response to the impact of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to reshape global connectivity through large-scale investments in infrastructure and international cooperation.

According to UNDEF, this Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, has expanded significantly in Latin America in recent years. While initially focused on Asia, Europe and Africa, Beijing has made Latin America and the Caribbean a key region for diversifying trade routes,

securing supplies and broadening its geopolitical influence. More than 20 Latin American countries have signed memoranda of understanding with China.

The impact on infrastructure development in the region is significant; however, the overexploitation of resources is beginning to generate serious social and environmental problems. In the case of Europe, it is worth noting that 17 of its 27 Member States have established some form of relationship with China under this initiative.

Second, we should not overlook the “Bi-Regional Care Pact”, which has not been joined by all CELAC members and was also launched on the occasion of the Santa Marta Summit. The Pact is intended to serve as a permanent forum for dialogue, supported by the EU-LAC Foundation, and responds to a demand from organised civil society for care work to be recognised and fairly valued, as well as for care systems to be strengthened.

It is interesting to note that, on the one hand, it aligns with the social dimension of the Global Gateway and, on the other, identifies the opportunities offered by the care economy.

Third, within the framework of this strategic relationship, consideration should be given to the “LAC-EU Civil Society Forum”, held in Santa Marta ahead of the Summit of Heads of State and Government. This forum, which built on the “EU-Latin America and the Caribbean Forum: Civil Society, Youth and Local Authorities” (Brussels, 2023), excluded local governments, effectively becoming the Summit’s main official interlocutor.

According to DG INTPA¹¹, the objectives of the LAC-EU Civil Society Forum are to:

- Foster collective reflection among civil society actors from the EU and LAC on global challenges and the main themes of the Summit.
- Promote bi-regional cooperation, including through the EU-LAC Global Gateway Investment Agenda.
- Collect perspectives from civil society and youth to inform EU-LAC policies and shape bi-regional strategies.
- Ensure inclusive participation by prioritising gender equality, ethnic and cultural diversity, disability inclusion and balanced subregional representation.

¹¹ European Commission. (2025). *LAC-EU Civil Society Forum*.
https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/lac-eu-civil-society-forum_en

- Produce a Joint Declaration of Civil Society, summarising key recommendations and priorities, which was presented to the Heads of State and Government at the 4th CELAC-EU Summit.

The points above are clearly reflected in the Summit's Joint Final Declaration, which states in one of its provisions that "we recognise the role of civil society organisations and human rights defenders". Similarly, it incorporates the "Bi-Regional Care Pact" by embracing the principle of leaving no one behind in the digital transition, adopting a whole-of-society approach to climate adaptation and addressing issues such as corruption and organised crime.

In addition to the above, a fourth element should be added; one that appears to have become the missing link - or to have gradually lost visibility - within the framework and agenda of the bi-regional relationship: local and regional governments. It is striking that the declarations, programmes and initiatives refer to territories and communities as places where "things happen", while local governments, as legitimate actors and counterparts, responsible for developing public policies and promoting territorial development, remain largely overlooked.

In light of this situation, since 2007, the EU-CELAC Forum of Local and Regional Governments has established itself as a venue for dialogue among authorities representing sub-national governments from both regions and convenes on the occasion of the Summits of Heads of State and Government of the European Union (EU) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

Following a brief hiatus in 2023, the 3rd EU-CELAC Forum of Local and Regional Governments was held in Barcelona after the Summit of Heads of State and Government. Participants expressed their concern and disappointment that the Final Declaration resulting from the EU-CELAC Summit in Brussels had failed to take into account the voice of the local world or provide an opportunity to discuss the renewal of the strategic partnership between the two regions.

Thus, the 4th EU-CELAC Forum of Local and Regional Governments (Bogotá, 5-6 November 2025), promoted by the main networks and associations of sub-national governments in the EU and CELAC, as well as directly by several local and regional governments, was supported by the Government of Colombia - in coordination with local and national partners - and the European Commission, through the Territorial Approach to Local Development (TALD) Facility of the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA).

Within this framework, three objectives were identified:

- Convey to the Summit of Heads of State the political position and proposals of sub-national governments on the bi-regional agenda.

- Strengthen political dialogue and institutional relations between local and regional authorities on both continents.
- Promote the building of alliances and the search for synergies in decentralised EU-CELAC cooperation.

Among the main elements of the Forum of Local Governments' final statement¹², three issues were particularly prominent:

- To develop a strategy for localising and territorialising the EU-CELAC Investment Agenda that recognises the role of local and regional governments in an inclusive manner, both in the preparation of proposals and in their implementation, thereby ensuring that the Global Gateway genuinely responds to the needs of this region, creates local added value and promotes growth, employment and social cohesion.
- To formally recognise the Forum of Local and Regional Governments within the framework of the EU-CELAC Summits of Heads of State and Government and establish an effective, regular channel for dialogue, as well as a firm commitment to strengthening care policies, ensuring access to quality and affordable care services and promoting sustainable development.
- To stimulate and support territorial development by recognising the value and potential of decentralised cooperation among local and regional governments in both regions as a key instrument for building medium- and long-term ties, as well as by establishing a new cooperation programme, "EUROterritorial".

Aside from the fact that the Forum was held days before the Summit in Bogotá, rather than in Santa Marta, no representative of local or regional governments from either the EU or CELAC was invited to present the Forum's final statement to the Heads of State and Government, as organised civil society had done.

In fact, the Joint Final Declaration makes no mention whatsoever of local and regional governments, the proposals submitted to the European Commission and the Government of Colombia or decentralised cooperation as an instrument for social, economic and territorial development.

¹² EU-CELAC Forum of Local and Regional Governments. (6 November 2025). *Declaration of the 4th Forum of Local and Regional Governments European Union-Latin America and the Caribbean*. https://www.observ-ocd.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Declaracion%20Foro%20GLR%20EU%20CELAC%20v%2010092025%20DEF.docx_.pdf

5. Decentralised Cooperation between the EU and CELAC: Challenges, Dilemmas and Opportunities

Local and regional governments in the European Union and CELAC are not immune to global dynamics and the unravelling of the international system outlined in section three of this document. It is no coincidence that, parallel to this, setbacks may be observed at the local level in areas that were once considered consolidated - such as decentralisation, local democracy and institutional capacity - as may the gradual radicalisation and polarisation of citizens.

All this has an impact on the forms and instruments of decentralised cooperation, as will be explored in this section.

It is worth noting that, more than twenty years ago, Professor Draibe, in her assessment of the second phase of the URB-AL programme, indicated that “one of the virtues of network-based cooperation among local authorities (...) is that it provides space for the autonomous expression of the specific demands of each participating partner, reflecting on their particular needs and priorities” (S. M. Draibe, 2005).

In keeping with the foregoing, it is necessary to consider the results of the third and final phase of the URB-AL programme, which, through 20 projects (EUR 64.4 million), was based on Euro-Latin American partnerships involving between 5 and 7 partners and engaged 74 Latin American territories, equivalent to 500 municipalities, with an estimated population of 26 million inhabitants. With 1.8 million direct beneficiaries and 160 participating actors, it supported the development of 131 local public policies.

As noted by the EU-LAC Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation (OCD), decentralised cooperation is currently one of the most active and dynamic forms of development cooperation. In recent years, both the number of initiatives and range of actors have increased, while the forms of cooperation have become increasingly diverse. It has also gained heightened recognition and legitimacy within the international cooperation system and across some of the main global agendas.

Throughout its research on the subject since 2005, the EU-LAC OCD has advanced the development of a concept of public decentralised cooperation that places particular emphasis on the leadership of local governments in decentralised cooperation relations. Public decentralised cooperation (PDC) is taken to mean the set of cooperation actions undertaken by local and regional governments, while the term “direct public decentralised cooperation” refers to a specific subset of these actions, namely, direct

cooperation relationships between local and regional governments across the two continents, based on the involvement and autonomy of these actors.

For this reason, the EU-LAC OCD has paid, and continues to pay, particular attention to forms of cooperation in which local governments play a central role in the programming, promotion and management of cooperation actions, without relying on the central government or international organisations.

According to the EU-LAC OCD, decentralised cooperation is defined by a relational logic that distinguishes it from other forms of cooperation. In this regard, it promotes relationships that move beyond the hierarchical and asymmetrical dynamics of the “donor-recipient” aid paradigm”¹³.

Similarly, it may be argued that there are as many definitions of decentralised cooperation as there are actors involved in or influencing it, although they all share one common element: they place local governments at the centre (de la Varga, 2014). Decentralised cooperation can thus be understood in terms of who leads it (in the strict sense, cooperation established from local government to local government), who promotes it (initiatives aimed at local governments and promoted either by them or by other actors) and its scope (in the strict sense, referring exclusively to development, and in the broader sense, incorporating territorial approaches and foreign policy instruments). All these approaches remain relevant more than thirty years later.

It is also clear that, since the first training course on decentralised cooperation launched by the EU-LAC OCD in 2006, interest in this form of cooperation has steadily grown, generating a body of knowledge and practice that has been instrumental in consolidating cooperation policies and strategies among local and regional governments in both regions. An initial assessment conducted by the EU-LAC OCD has identified more than 18 courses on decentralised cooperation in Spain and Latin America¹⁴.

As a result, decentralised cooperation between the EU and CELAC cannot be considered in isolation from the other aspects addressed in the preceding sections, namely: the global context and the transformations transpiring within the development cooperation system; the relationship between the EU and CELAC; the evolution of decentralised cooperation at global and bi-regional level; and the emergence and

¹³ Retrieved from Module 2 on decentralised cooperation, prepared by the EU-LAC OCD for the Barcelona Provincial Council’s FormaWiki.
https://formawiki.diba.cat/pub/relacions_internacionals/2c560345_m2_la_cooperacion_descentralizada/index.html

¹⁴ This stocktaking exercise is part of an internal assessment conducted by the EU-LAC OCD in 2026 to assess the impact of its training activities over more than 20 years.

strengthening of triangular cooperation and South-South cooperation. In fact, these factors are shaping its priorities and forms of cooperation.

For example, the Global Gateway¹⁵ establishes six core principles for guiding investments:

- Democratic values and high standards
- Good governance and transparency
- Equal partnerships
- Green and clean
- Security focused
- Catalysing the private sector

In this regard, we should consider how these elements will be incorporated into the so-called flagship projects. If democratic values and good governance are key, where do local democracy and governance fit in? These aspects have been central to decentralised cooperation between the EU and CELAC.

Moreover, within a Global Gateway logic, decentralised cooperation can facilitate the involvement of actors from our communities, whose representation is currently not guaranteed.

The Global Gateway Business Platform, for its part, does not include SMEs or local businesses from either region, many of which are involved in local development and the protection of human rights.

As noted above, since its inception, the EU-LAC Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation has consistently advocated for a concept of public decentralised cooperation that serves to build local institutional capacity, strengthen decentralisation and local democracy and develop local public policies aimed at promoting social inclusion, peace and territorial development.

This is very much in line with the three phases of the European Commission's URB-AL programme (Phase I, 1995-2000; Phase II, 2000-2006; and Phase III, 2009-2013), which promoted horizontal cooperation among local governments in both regions, sought to strengthen local governments, responded to the need to build learning networks and promoted the development of local public policies to ensure long-term development and inclusion in the territories.

Building on this experience, the AL-LAs Programme - the Euro Latin American Cooperation Alliance between Cities - was subsequently launched as an international cooperation alliance between local governments in Latin America and Europe, aimed at

¹⁵ European Commission. (2021). *Global Gateway: Overview*. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/global-gateway-overview_en

strengthening the international action of cities and improving local public policies through decentralised cooperation.

In fact, it was in this context that the EU-LAC OCD emerged, initially funded by the European Commission and subsequently by the Barcelona Provincial Council, in partnership with the Municipal Government of Montevideo, its Latin American hub.

A context shaped by progress in decentralisation, as well as advances in human rights and democracy, particularly in Latin America. The first GOLD report on “Decentralisation and Local Democracy in the World” (UCLG, 2008) noted that the world was undergoing a quiet and unstoppable democratic revolution, with local democracy gaining momentum from the highlands of Latin America to the barangay in the Philippines.

The chapter on Latin America reported that “now all of the nations have municipal governments elected by universal suffrage. The majority of the countries are democratising and reforming their states through institutional, political and legal transformations, of which decentralisation and strengthening of sub-national governments are part.”

Sixteen years later, the landscape is radically different. Although legal frameworks may support decentralisation, institutional practice continues to be shaped by a strong tradition of centralism and entrenched presidentialism (TALD Facility, 2025).

The developments of recent years show that having strong regional and local governments contributes to ensuring the democratic resilience of territories and states as a whole. A clear link may also be established between setbacks in democracy, human rights, development and decentralisation.

There are numerous examples throughout the region¹⁶:

- The deterioration of civic space in Ecuador, particularly against Indigenous leaders and human rights defenders, as well as the continued occurrence of enforced and involuntary disappearances.
- The proliferation of environmental “sacrifice zones” in Mexico - territories where entire communities are forced to live with the consequences of industrial pollution, including cancer, miscarriages and chronic diseases, while the authorities fail to protect their rights.

¹⁶ United Nations. (n.d.). *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/>

- The exponential increase in disappearances in Mexico, which predominantly affect men aged 15 to 40, despite the growing trend towards the disappearance of girls and boys aged 12 and older. This is compounded by entrenched femicide, with an average of ten women dying every day.
- The more than 5,000 deaths recorded annually in Haiti perpetrated by gangs, private security companies and paramilitary groups.
- Setbacks in the pursuit of memory, truth and justice in Argentina.
- The steady increase in poverty in Argentina, where various sources challenge the official figures and indicate that as many as 35.3% of households are affected.
- The energy crisis in Cuba, which is hampering the healthcare system, access to food and water and transport.
- Constitutional and legal changes in El Salvador that provide for life imprisonment for children as young as 12.
- The detention of 33,000 people during El Salvador's state of emergency - 36% of the total number of people arrested - who were not listed in official records as gang members or collaborators.
- The more than 10,000 Colombian citizens who may have been recruited into armed conflicts in different parts of the world, through both legal and irregular channels.
- The actions taken by the United States in Venezuela in violation of international law, as well as the continued political persecution through arbitrary detentions and the ongoing use of torture and ill-treatment.
- The use of criminal law as a tool of persecution in Guatemala against judges and lawyers, Indigenous peoples' leaders, journalists and human rights defenders.
- Repression and institutional corruption as methods of governance, alongside the political persecution of exiles in Nicaragua.

- 74% of Latin American and Caribbean countries face high exposure to extreme weather events that undermine agricultural productivity and disrupt supply chains, leaving 40.8 million people in the region facing hunger.
- The 55% to 60% hike in food prices across Caribbean countries, making it one of the regions of the world most dependent on food imports, while its agri-food systems are increasingly threatened by both extreme weather events and global volatility.
- The growing prevalence of digital violence against women elected to public office and women community leaders across the region - a phenomenon also observed in Europe.

Similar phenomena are also patent in Europe, with the rise of far-right parties at national, regional and local levels of government; the tightening of migration policies; and the targeting of people from third countries as responsible for the problems of European societies.

There has also been an increase in attacks against migrants and LGBTI people, compounded by the erosion of certain rights and growing challenges to previously established freedoms. There is also a gradual increase in support among young people - particularly young men - for authoritarian forms of government and a rollback of feminist policies. All this is accompanied by a quiet process of recentralisation, marking a departure from the traditional European commitment to multilevel governance.

Against this backdrop, local and community-based spaces become key arenas for responding to conflicts: by defending territories, nature and the environment; promoting feminist and peaceful territories committed to care, life and a gender perspective; and sustaining peace, democracy and human rights through the protection of women social leaders and human rights defenders. In this sense, coordinated action at the micro level can provide an appropriate response.

From a development cooperation perspective, it is noteworthy that, in recent years, most Latin American countries have established public agencies or institutions to manage cooperation, no longer acting merely as recipients but as full-fledged actors and drivers of South-South cooperation programmes and initiatives.

In many cases, they also promote the participation of local and regional governments¹⁷, strengthening their capacities to implement decentralised cooperation strategies.

In parallel, a process has been underway to recognise local governments not only as actors in local development but also as full-fledged actors within the development cooperation system.

This shift, however, may entail risks given the current context, which constrains local autonomy and the heterogeneity of decentralised cooperation, while also calling its very rationale into question by turning it into yet another instrument of states' international action.

An analysis of the evolution of European programmes shows that, from the end of the URB-AL III programme in 2013 to the first call for proposals under the "Partnerships for Sustainable Cities" programme, there was a period of just under a decade in which no significant decentralised cooperation programmes were promoted specifically for Latin America and the Caribbean or which allowed for meaningful participation by local and regional governments.

Exceptions include the SEGIB Ibero-American Programme for the Strengthening of South-South and Triangular Cooperation (PIFCSS)¹⁸; the AECID INTERCOONECTA programme¹⁹, focused on providing solutions to a range of specific challenges to numerous actors through triangular cooperation; and the European Commission's ADELANTE²⁰ (2015-2020) and ADELANTE2 (2021-2027) programmes, managed by AECID and designed to support triangular cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean. These programmes are chiefly concerned with promoting the generation and exchange of knowledge or providing technical assistance.

Consideration must also be given to the role played by networks such as Mercociudades, through its South-South cooperation programme; Metropolis, initially through its pilot projects and subsequently

¹⁷ Notable examples include: Brazilian Cooperation Agency - ABC (1987); Chilean Agency for International Development Cooperation - AGCID (1990); Peruvian Agency for International Cooperation - APCI (2002); Uruguayan Agency for International Cooperation - AUCI (2010); Presidential Agency for International Cooperation of Colombia - APC-Colombia (2011); Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation - AMEXCID (2011); and Argentine Agency for International Cooperation and Humanitarian Assistance - ACIAH (2022).

¹⁸ Ibero-American Programme for the Strengthening of South-South Cooperation (PIFCSS). (n.d.). *South-South Cooperation*. <https://cooperacionsursur.org/>

¹⁹ Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID). (n.d.). *INTERCOONECTA*. <https://intercoonecta.aecid.es/>

²⁰ European Commission. (n.d.). *ADELANTE: Fostering Triangular Cooperation between the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean*.

https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/programmes/adelante_en

through its “Solution Labs”²¹; and UCCI, all of which are once again geared towards creating spaces for experimentation and learning and are generally not exclusively intended for local and regional governments.

At this point, it is worth noting that, with the launch of the “Partnerships for Sustainable Cities” programme, both the European Commission and the European Committee of the Regions have begun to frame decentralised cooperation through a new narrative.

This is particularly relevant because, of the 57 projects approved across the programme’s three calls for proposals, 16 (28%) were to be implemented in Latin America. Of these, an overwhelming majority of the European partners were Spanish local governments, followed, to a lesser extent, by Italian local governments.

This has led to an indiscriminate use of the concepts of decentralised cooperation, city-to-city cooperation, local development cooperation, local government development cooperation and “peer-to-peer” exchanges. Looking at the document “Why Decentralised Cooperation Matters”, presented at the most recent Forum of Cities and Regions for International Partnerships (Brussels, December 2025), while, on the one hand, the document explicitly states that:

“Cities and local or regional governments represent communities and territories where European goals become tangible. They generate most economic growth and new jobs, translate climate commitments into renewable energy and sustainable transport and ensure that infrastructure is maintained and accessible. They are the places where newcomers find schools and communities, where democracy is lived daily and where pluralism and rights are upheld even when national governments retreat. Cities are also first responders in times of crisis and fragility. By mobilising civil society, academia and business, they ensure development is inclusive, coherent and locally owned. Without their involvement - as catalysts of local democracy and territorial development - Europe’s international objectives will struggle to take root.”

Elsewhere, it reports that EU external action is undergoing a major transition in response to an increasingly volatile and competitive world, in which Europe seeks to position itself as a trusted geopolitical actor.

²¹ Metropolis. (n.d.). *Solutions Labs*. <https://www.metropolis.org/what-we-do/solutions-labs/>

This suggests that the primary objective of these programmes is to serve the EU's strategic interests, rather than advance the model of city-to-city cooperation presented, and even less so the definition put forward by the EU-LAC OCD.

In fact, decentralised cooperation is identified as a practical instrument for removing recurring bottlenecks in public-private interaction. In this regard, it is argued that “peer-to-peer exchanges between European and partner-country local and regional authorities enable problem-solving on procurement, service models and contractual arrangements and regulatory standards” (European Commission, 2026).

Decentralised cooperation is indeed recognised as deriving its added value from its capacity to address problems, with city-to-city and region-to-region partnerships regarded as means of overcoming implementation challenges through peer-to-peer exchange, shared learning and the development of solutions tailored to local realities.

These ideas are also echoed by the UCLG Capacity and Institution Building Working Group (CIB Working Group), which, when referring to local government development cooperation (LGDC) - rather than decentralised cooperation - places particular emphasis on “peer-to-peer” exchanges and the notion that this type of cooperation...

“helps improve planning and project preparation, taxation, budgeting and financial management, procurement and contract management, service delivery operations, maintenance, citizen engagement and crisis response. Local government development cooperation also works with a territorial mindset: it brings in local civil society, local businesses, universities and community actors so that solutions are realistic, locally owned and can be sustained over time” (UCLG-CIB, 220c).

In fact, these defining principles of decentralised cooperation have always been present, as they are inseparable from this form of cooperation (Zapata, 2007): the strong territorial ties of the participating actors; the exchange of experiences through ongoing dialogue and collaboration, extending beyond the provision of financing and the transfer of funds; and reciprocity, which places the interests and benefits of both parties at the heart of the partnership.

Nevertheless, the conclusions of the latest Forum of Cities and Regions for International Partnerships seem to suggest that, beyond seeking to increase its impact in cities and regions of the Global South, this new narrative is also driven by other objectives, namely:

- That decentralised cooperation should be a strategic asset for Europe in addressing global challenges, territorialising the Global Gateway and advancing its own interests and values.
- That decentralised cooperation, by improving local governance and technical capacity, should directly contribute to increasing investor confidence and unlocking private-sector participation.
- That decentralised cooperation should be a valuable instrument for enabling local and regional governments to fulfil their role in Global Gateway projects by scaling up local innovations, mobilising actors and private-sector financing and shaping global norms through local diplomacy.

However, it may be argued that the principles now presented as new - the role of decentralised cooperation as a facilitator and multiplier of development and its impacts, as well as a laboratory for ideas and innovative solutions - have always been inherent to decentralised cooperation. Was this not what the URB-AL programme sought to achieve through a horizontal relationship?

Moreover, this purportedly new narrative makes no mention whatsoever of public policy. Human rights are referred to only in relation to their protection at the local level, with no reference to gender or inclusion.

It is important to recall that decentralised cooperation between the two regions has always adopted an integrated and holistic perspective, taking into account the interdependencies between local public policies and involving all local actors, including SMEs as well as micro-enterprises - often run by some of the most vulnerable groups in towns and cities - while also recognising the territorial and economic development dimension alongside social and environmental aspects.

If there is one key feature of decentralised cooperation, it is its clear commitment to improving the quality of people's everyday lives, leaving no one behind.

Nevertheless, local and regional governments in the North continue to transfer funding, investment and knowledge to their counterparts in the South. Beyond the discourse on partnerships, what appears to be emerging is a renewed yet essentially traditional form of development cooperation, in which care, human rights and vision are losing centrality.

Once again, the European Union's Social Accelerator²² programme for Latin America and the Caribbean provides an illustrative example. Officially, the purpose of this programme is to support innovative social initiatives within the framework of the Global Gateway, targeting the most vulnerable populations. In practice, it promotes capacity-building among marginalised groups to facilitate the implementation of European investments in the region.

In other words, although the programme's primary objective is to strengthen social innovation ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean, it also contributes to advancing the objectives of the EU-LAC Global Investment Agenda, thus becoming an instrument of the EU's investment strategy, despite being presented as a tool for reducing inequalities. The problem lies in the underlying intent behind these innovation environments.

Similarly, the OECD introduces the concept of "new framing", a new narrative for development-oriented decentralised cooperation. For some actors, the technical cooperation provided by European local governments is seen as their niche within the public and institutional cooperation ecosystem.

While elements that have always been inherent to decentralised cooperation are now being presented as innovative, several challenges also warrant consideration, including: recognising the value of the non-financial contributions of decentralised cooperation; measuring its impact not only on local governments in the Global South but also on those in the North; and establishing stable institutional and legal frameworks that facilitate its long-term sustainability.

As the preceding analysis makes clear, decentralised cooperation between the EU and LAC, in line with the positions established at previous conferences, cannot be limited to merely serving as an instrument for implementing other actors' external action strategies, nor can it forgo its commitment to:

- Strengthening local democratic resilience (through local peacebuilding and coexistence plans with an intersectional approach; protocols for the protection of activists; and the defence of civic space).
- Facilitating the territorial eco-social transition (through local pacts on climate, water, energy and food, with community-based governance, while mitigating the capital-life conflict).

²² European Commission. (n.d.). *Social Accelerator*.
https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/projects/social-accelerator_en

- Recognising care and equality as public infrastructure (through budgets developed from a feminist perspective, care services and shared responsibility to strengthen social cohesion).

6. Conclusions and Key Considerations

The EU-LAC Conference on Local Partnerships (Valparaíso, March 2004) sparked the creation of the EU-LAC OCD (March 2005), with a mandate to systematise, research and disseminate decentralised cooperation between the two regions. This legacy positions the EU-LAC OCD as a leading reference point for cities, regions and territories.

Over the years, the Observatory has expanded its scope to respond to new global agendas - such as the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs - and to an increasingly turbulent international context, with the aim of strengthening the role of local and regional governments in multilevel governance and the localisation of global agendas.

In this regard, experience shows that decentralised cooperation constitutes a public policy which, at the local level, contributes to peace, human rights and sustainable development and requires recognition, resources and enabling institutional frameworks to maximise its impact.

Twenty-two years have passed since the Valparaíso Conference, and today we find ourselves in a situation where:

- The rules that governed international relations until now have ceased to exist.
- The recognition of decentralised cooperation by states and institutional bodies carries the risk of turning it into yet another instrument of states' foreign policy, and that, where traditional state-led cooperation is unable to operate for political reasons, decentralised cooperation may be used in its place.
- Decentralised cooperation is currently caught between “political” considerations and a focus on “efficiency and technocratic solutions”.
- Interestingly, in the case of the Global Gateway, many of the projects presented as local initiatives are in fact rooted in long-standing cooperation between territories, built on relationships of trust developed over many years.
- Technical solutions and investment are presented as the sole means of ensuring territorial development and the effective delivery of public services, while also generating sources of funding.

- The pitfall of framing local governments as development actors, despite not being involved in the design of strategies or programmes.
- The narrative is shifting. The term “decentralised cooperation” is giving way to “local development cooperation”, with all the implications this entails. The different layers and perspectives underpinning this form of cooperation are being flattened, risking its simplification or reduction to a mere implementation or resource-channelling instrument.
- It would appear that the local governments leading decentralised cooperation are expected to serve the interests of the major development cooperation actors.
- Is it possible to align decentralised cooperation with national, regional and multilateral development cooperation systems without reducing or constraining its agenda or turning it into yet another instrument at the disposal of other actors?
- A predominantly technocratic model is being pursued, in which the political dimension may be sidelined.
- Highly focused on securing and mobilising funding, and on financial cooperation.
- It seems that local governments are sacrificing their own agenda to avoid being left out of the debates and the increasingly limited institutional spaces for development cooperation.
- There is a clear preference for technical cooperation in a very pure sense, along the lines of DG INTPA’s “Partnerships for Sustainable Cities” programme.
- The debates, in general, make no mention of the impact of humanitarian aid on decentralised cooperation.
- Local governments in the Global North are increasingly being viewed by UN agencies as potential funders of programmes targeting local governments in the South and urban development across the Global South.

- The main European local partners in the programmes are Spanish. There has been a steady decline in the mobilisation of local and regional governments from other EU Member States.
- Is it time to start distinguishing between local and regional decentralised cooperation?
- How can we incorporate into decentralised cooperation the actors - municipal networks, feminist and environmental movements, women human rights defenders, academia and community-based organisations - who are key to the co-production of policies for peace, coexistence, equality and environmental protection?
- Decentralised cooperation has contributed to strengthening feminist policies. How can this agenda continue to be advanced in a context of setbacks in human rights and widespread challenges to gender policies and feminist approaches?

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