

DECENTRALISED  
COOPERATION AS  
A MECHANISM FOR  
ADDRESSING  
INEQUALITIES AND  
STRENGTHENING  
DEMOCRACY IN  
TERRITORIES



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It is a pleasure to present this new publication by the Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation EU-LA, which is the result of the debates and conclusions from the VII Annual Conference of the Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation that, under the same title as this publication, was held in Montevideo on the 4th and 5th of December 2019.

On this occasion, and after not having held an Annual Conference for eight years, at the centre of the debate was the analysis of how decentralised cooperation can be a mechanism for tackling one of the greatest current challenges: the progressive and alarming increase in inequalities both in Europe and Latin America. This unstoppable increase in the gap between the world's richest 1% and half of the world's population (about 3.8 billion people) living in extreme poverty has led to the second phenomenon addressed by the Conference: an increased mistrust in state and public administrations.

Faced with this situation, for two days in Montevideo, more than 50 professionals from Europe and Latin America discussed how to position decentralised cooperation in order to reduce inequalities and strengthen democracy in the territories. Through plenary sessions and group workshops, the debate was coordinated around three topics: a) strengthening the competences, technical and sectoral capacities of local administrations through the transfer of knowledge; b) the mechanism for fostering an improvement in the efficient and relational management of public policies; and c) the alliance with territorial actors in decentralised cooperation.

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Agustí Fernández de Losada, the author, was responsible for drafting the background document around which the debate was centred, the main contributions and conclusions of which are included in this publication. Furthermore, we would like to note that, in the time between the Conference being held and this study being completed, COVID-19 has shaken up the entire world and, in particular, the local governments that have been on the front line tackling the health crisis and that are currently key players in the face of the new social, economic and political challenges that the pandemic has activated. In this sense, at the Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation EU-LA, we believe that now more than ever we need to review the current development model that COVID-19 has shown to be unsustainable. It is now urgent and necessary to proceed with a new local agenda that puts life and the defence of human rights at the core of our local public policies. Therefore, we think that the reflections put forward in this publication come at a rather significant time where decentralised cooperation must find new strategies at the service of future public policies that allow us to move towards a new model for the development and management of cities and territories.

Finally, we would like to express special thanks to all the people who participated in the VII Conference in 2019, whose contributions have helped us to put together this publication.

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# I. Introduction

Inequalities are currently one of the main challenges facing our societies. In Latin America in particular, but also in Europe, the gap between those who have the most and the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups is becoming increasingly significant. A gap that, if possible, will increase even more if we measure it at the territorial level and that will undergo a critical evolution after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, and according to the report “Latin American Economic Outlook 2019”<sup>1</sup> published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), poverty and inequalities increased once again in Latin America (after a decade in decline) and the middle class, which was on its way to consolidation, was placed in a situation of extreme vulnerability. All of this had led the region to having little trust in public institutions, a surge or resurgence of populist movements and the risk of breaking the social contract. In fact, the Latinobarómetro 2018<sup>2</sup> report indicated that the percentage of the population that has little or no trust in national governments reached 75% in 2017. Trust in other institutions such as the judicial system, political parties or elections had also deteriorated, while dissatisfaction with the quality of public services grew (OECD, 2018).

This same reality, although with different magnitudes, was also apparent in Europe and strongly conditioned the management of some of the main challenges facing the region. In 2017, at least a quarter of the EU’s population (22.4%)<sup>3</sup> lived at risk of poverty or social exclusion and regional disparities continued to increase. The GDP per capita of the richest region (Inner London) is 6.3 times higher than the European average and almost 20 times that of the poorest region, Severozapaden (Bulgaria).

Within this context of inequalities and strong distrust in public institutions, both Latin America and Europe were experiencing intense processes of social protest whose history is yet to be discerned. Citizens of Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia in Latin America; France, Spain, the United Kingdom or Turkey in

Europe; had shown, across the board, just how discontent and fed up they were with the inability of the ruling elites to address the real problems that are linked to the enormous inequalities and growing vulnerability.

The two regions had been facing important challenges that conditioned social cohesion and the well-being of citizens, the most vulnerable in particular. Challenges that will be critically aggravated by the situation brought about by the pandemic and by the severe economic slowdown that the International Monetary Fund foresees for 2020. According to the financial institution, global GDP will fall by 3%, that of Latin America by 5.2% —Mexico -6.6%, Brazil -5.3% or Argentina -5.7%—and that of Europe (euro zone) by 7.5% —Spain -8%, Italy -9.1% or Germany -7%—. Although the forecast is for the economy to start growing again in 2021, the impact will be huge and will require large social agreements, cross-sectoral alliances and the promotion of very robust, comprehensive policies that cover economic development and the social emergency, without leaving out the climate emergency.

The following table put together by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)<sup>4</sup> shows a projection of the increase in poverty and extreme poverty in Latin America within a context of falling GDP and rising unemployment.

Table 7 – Latin America: poverty and extreme poverty in a scenario of a 5.3% drop in GDP and a 3.4 percentage point increase in unemployment in 2020 (in millions of people and percentages)

Year	2018	2019	2020
Population	607.7	613.5	619.2
<b>Poverty</b>			
Latin America (18 countries)	180.6	186.0	214.7
Rate	29.7%	30.3%	<b>34.7%</b>
<b>Extreme Poverty</b>			
Latin America (18 countries)	62.5	67.5	83.4
Rate	10.3%	11.0%	<b>13.5%</b>

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL)

\* These estimates are preliminary and do not take into account the diversified impact among the productive sectors and the employment generated in each of them.

1. [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/latin-american-economic-outlook-2019\\_g2g9ff18-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/latin-american-economic-outlook-2019_g2g9ff18-en)

2. <http://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>

3. Eurostat regional yearbook 2019. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-statistical-books/-/KS-HA-19-001>

4. <https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/45445-dimensionar-efectos-covid-19-pensar-la-reactivacion>



The OECD pointed out in the aforementioned report the need for Latin American countries to strengthen domestic capacities by improving public policy-making processes and financing systems, placing particular emphasis on territorial inequalities. In Europe, the formula does not vary significantly. According to the 7th report on economic, social and territorial cohesion,<sup>5</sup> there was a growing consensus around the fact that the quality of government and institutions constitutes a critical precondition for achieving sustained increases in the levels of prosperity, well-being and territorial cohesion in the EU. The region is, in this sense, highly heterogeneous since the quality of government differs significantly between the 27 EU countries and even within them. In any case, the need to strengthen governance mechanisms will be even more pressing, if possible, in order to address the recovery process and manage the social and climate emergency after the pandemic.

In this context, local governments must play a fundamental role. The policies they promote and the services they provide in most situations will be key to addressing this recovery process and making progress in the logic of sustainable development, as stated in the GOLD V report.<sup>6</sup> The policies they promote will be essential to guaranteeing an economic recovery that generates prosperity, protects the most vulnerable and fosters social cohesion. They must also prevent the necessary economic stimulus measures from jeopardising the efforts being made to mitigate the climate emergency.

Being able to unleash their full potential, both in terms of the development of efficient public policies, the mobilisation of the necessary resources and accountability, is essential in order to regain the trust of citizens, stimulate recovery, serve and empower the most vulnerable and preserve the social contract. The generation of international agendas<sup>7</sup> represents a unique opportunity insofar as they propose a universal frame of reference that should guide progress towards sustainable development at these critical times. A frame of reference that is committed to transformative logics in the process of designing, implementing and monitoring public policies.

The 2030 Agenda is indeed committed to a universal, holistic and comprehensive approach to sustainable development, taking into account its economic, social and environmental dimensions as well as the interrelationships that exist between them; it calls for coordination between the different levels of

5. [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/cohesion7/7cr.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/cohesion7/7cr.pdf)

6. <https://www.gold.uclg.org/reports/other/gold-v-report>

7. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the New Urban Agenda, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing sustainable development, etc.

government and the necessary complementarity of their interventions; the need to articulate alliances with the different operators, being civil society, the private sector or the different authorities linked to knowledge; it is aimed at not leaving anyone, or any territory, behind, which involves paying close attention to the most vulnerable groups and territories; and it is clearly committed to accountability and social control mechanisms, to learning from experience and capitalising on best practices.

Along with the guidelines offered by the global agendas, the so-called **territorial approach to sustainable development** also contributes to offering a frame of reference for improving public policy-making processes. The approach considers the territory as a whole, as a resource in itself made up of its different dimensions; physical, natural, social and cultural, environmental and economic, its institutions and its citizens. It recognises the responsibility of local governments to be accountable to the public for autonomously leading the planning, management and financing processes of sustainable local development, taking advantage of and enhancing the contribution of the actors that operate on multiple levels to produce public goods and services tailored to local realities and, in turn, contributing added value to the development efforts carried out at the regional or national level.<sup>8</sup>

However, to unleash this potential, local governments need to make progress in addressing two challenges: on the one hand, in improving the regulatory and institutional environments in which they operate; and, on the other, in reinforcing their operational capacities. In order for them to deploy efficient public policies that respond to the needs, interests and aspirations of the citizens and operators in the territory, local governments require an adequate regulatory framework, clarity of competence, recognition and protection of local self-government and subsidiarity, coordination mechanisms with the other levels of government and a fiscal and tax financing scheme that provides them with sufficient resources to operate.

Indeed, having sufficient resources is key, to the extent that it allows them to have the capacities, the knowledge, and the material and technological resources that facilitate the creation of quality public policies; drawn up from the real needs and priorities expressed by the actors in the territory; properly planned and with the necessary resources; and implemented with monitoring, transparency and social control systems that allow for exercises of accountability and capitalisation of learning.

8. European Commission, DEVCO (2016), "Supporting decentralization, local governance and local development through a territorial approach".

The reality, however, indicates that, in most contexts on the global level, local and regional governments operate in an adequate regulatory and institutional environment and that, despite the many innovations they foster, they do not have the resources and the necessary capacities to produce public policies that respond efficiently to the major challenges facing them and the solutions that citizens demand. In the current context, in which national governments have had to mobilise their capacities to the greatest extent possible to respond to the crisis, operating with basic competencies in matters of health, citizen security and border control, drivers of recentralisation can be accentuated.

Taking this context into account, the complexity of the situation that will be unearthed after the pandemic and the critical need to move forward with a sustainable and inclusive recovery, international cooperation should play a decisive role in improving the environment in which local governments operate and strengthening their capacities. Nevertheless, as the aforementioned OECD report points out, we must commit to a new approach to international cooperation in line with the new paradigm of sustainable development included in the international agendas. An approach that places the OECD as a facilitator of national and local efforts (regardless of the level of development) aimed at improving economies and societies in transition.

Within the framework of the current system of international development cooperation, and in the logic set by the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation<sup>9</sup>, decentralised cooperation emerges as one of the most innovative modalities, strongly aligned with global agendas (especially the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda) and with a proven track record in the field of institutional strengthening and capacity building at a local level. A type of cooperation focused on peer-to-peer collaboration that seeks to transcend competitive and hierarchical logics and operate in a scheme of shared challenges.

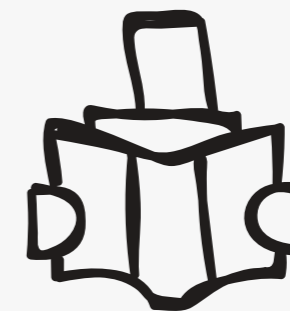
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9. <http://effectivecooperation.org/>

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Cooperation and solidarity will be essential to addressing the post-COVID-19 world. In a deeply interrelated world, managing the recovery process will require a shared effort. An effort that must take into account the lessons learnt during the crisis, the consensus generated on a global level and the needs of the most vulnerable. This will require strong governments capable of fostering efficient policies that respond to the real needs of citizens. Decentralised cooperation will be a key tool to strengthening the capacities of local and regional governments. For this reason, it is more important than ever to promote the most efficient forms of decentralised cooperation.

This study brings together the main reflections, experiences and recommendations made during the VII Annual Conference of the Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation held in Montevideo in December 2019. Despite having been held weeks before the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis on a global level, the debates and exchanges on how to move towards more efficient decentralised cooperation modalities adapted to the needs of the territories, their citizens and the actors that operate in them is now becoming even more relevant, if possible. There is no question that this form of cooperation is effectively taking on greater importance during the crisis and will continue to do so when it comes to tackling the recovery process from the moment the pandemic begins to recede and the reopening of the economy points the way towards the “new normal” that is to come. As it is the role that local and regional governments should play.



## II. Has decentralised cooperation evolved?

As various studies carried out in recent years have shown, the concept of **decentralised cooperation has evolved remarkably, from the classic, assistential, vertical configuration models, in which the added value is located solely and exclusively in the transfer of resources; to horizontal models coordinated around the logic of association and the construction of peer-to-peer partnerships that have to address similar problems, although in different environments and from different realities.**

However, this evolution has occurred more in narrative than in praxis, in academic constructions and in models drawn up based on knowledge, than in the reality of local and regional governments. Apart from the most professionalised, those who have been able to define decentralised cooperation as a public policy, the assistential logic continues to prevail, which revolves around the transfer of resources and the subsidised project as a central instrument. The narrative exists, having been built over the years; there is consensus on where decentralised cooperation should be heading, on how things should be done; but there is strong resistance to change among local and regional governments themselves and among the actors that work with them (in particular, NGOs). Breaking with such resistance is not turning out to be an easy task.

The current panorama of decentralised cooperation is very broad and heterogeneous. Diverse modalities and instruments coexist that respond to often conflicting logics.

The following table lists some of the main modalities recognised by current literature:

Type of Cooperation	Modality	Approach	Channel	Flows	Type of Intervention
<b>Direct cooperation</b>	Partnership	Vertical	Bilateral or multilateral cooperation agreements Subsidies	North-South	Transfer of aid
		Peer-to-peer (horizontal)	Bilateral or multilateral cooperation agreements	North-South South-South Triangular	Political advocacy Transfer of knowledge and experiences Technical cooperation Learning Funding
	Agency	Vertical	Bilateral or multilateral cooperation agreements Subsidies	North-South	Transfer of aid
		Peer-to-peer (horizontal)	Bilateral or multilateral cooperation agreements	North-South South-South Triangular	Political advocacy Transfer of knowledge and experiences Technical cooperation Learning Funding
<b>Networks</b>	Conventional networks	Peer-to-peer (horizontal)	Affiliation	North-South South-South Triangular	Political advocacy Transfer of knowledge and experiences
	Multi-actor	Various actors (horizontal)	Affiliation	North-South South-South Triangular	Political advocacy Transfer of knowledge and experiences
<b>Indirect cooperation</b>	Support to third parties (NGDOs, universities, private sector, etc.)	Intermediation	Subsidies	North-South	Funding
<b>Delegated cooperation</b>	Peer-to-peer	Intermediation	Delegation agreements		Funding

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Source: Review by Fernández de Losada, A. (2017)



Despite the fact that we may question the real evolution in the forms of intervention, or that the pace of said evolution has not been desirable, what is clear is that decentralised cooperation mobilises an increasing number of stakeholders; going from 335 to 695 stakeholders among Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members and resources (OECD, 2018).

The following table shows the evolution in terms of Official Development Assistance (ODA):

Donors	2015		2016		2017	
	DDC USD disbursements	DDC as % of Total bilateral ODA	DDC USD disbursements	DDC as % of Total bilateral ODA	DDC USD disbursements	DDC as % of Total bilateral ODA
<b>DAC total</b>	2 418 327 071	1.82%	2 283 587 545	1.55%	2 328 257 292	1.58%
Austria	170 806 287	20.92%	244 839 799	24.05%	252 691 838	41.91%
Belgium	96 331 159	8.24%	98 100 825	6.64%	81 692 348	8.24%
Canada	385 433 610	12.80%	411 447 946	14.81%	419 931 726	13.35%
Czech Republic	941 574	1.24%	926 670	1.22%	982 599	1.32%
France	63 634 428	1.20%	91 842 309	1.59%	92 230 543	1.08%
Germany	985 465 203	6.68%	1 041 151 864	5.12%	1 077 682 185	4.99%
Italy	35 146 651	1.86%	23 125 642	0.93%	23 722 191	0.78%
Japan	3 727 463	0.06%	3 451 311	0.05%	3 339 674	0.02%
Portugal	122 828	0.08%	199 453	0.15%	206 418	0.12%
Spain	219 993 296	60.13%	254 278 243	9.69%	259 304 768	23.90%
Sweden	21 618 575	0.44%	23 329 402	0.66%	23 867 865	0.66%
Switzerland	60 797 701	2.31%	73 508 631	2.66%	73 222 332	3.48%
UK	18 455 630	0.16%	17 385 470	0.15%	19 382 805	0.15%
<b>Non-DAC</b>						
Latvia			36 072	1.01%	40 423	3.72%
Lithuania	319 415	3.03%	276 213	1.87%	400 934	9.75%
United Arab Emirates	12 591 693	0.29%	10 159 910	0.24%	9 292 928	0.32%

Source: ROECD (2019)

As can be seen, in some OECD countries such as Germany, Canada, Spain or Austria, decentralised cooperation mobilises significant amounts of resources that also represent a significant percentage of the total ODA that they themselves contribute. The cases of Canada and Austria are relevant since their decentralised cooperation has increased notably in the last decade (going from USD 90.8 and 22.7 million to USD 419.9 and 252.6 million, respectively). As is the case of Spain, whose decentralised cooperation was severely affected by the crisis, going from USD 570.1 million in 2010 to USD 259.3 million in 2017, despite the fact that these figures represent a percentage no less than the total of Spanish ODA (60.13% in 2015 and 23.90% in 2017). In fact, various studies show how Spain's decentralised cooperation withstood the crisis much better than the national government (or showed greater commitment).

It is worth noting that Spanish decentralised cooperation channels a good part of its efforts through offering support to NGOs (indirect cooperation, despite the fact that direct cooperation (especially through technical cooperation) is becoming increasingly important. Similarly, German decentralised cooperation involves minimal outlay in partner countries since most of it is dedicated to financing scholarships for students from developing countries in Germany. It will be important to see, both in Spain and throughout Europe, how decentralised cooperation evolves in the scenario that will present itself with the pandemic and the economic recession that will follow. Maintaining and even strengthening this commitment will be key for many territories, in Latin America and other regions, which will be situated within a context of extreme fragility and vulnerability and will need, more than ever, strengthened local and regional governments capable of promoting efficient public policies.

It should also be noted that the above table does not take into account the resources mobilised from South-South decentralised cooperation, a type of cooperation that is becoming increasingly relevant in terms of impact; nor the resources made available by multilateral agencies such as the European Union or the national agencies of some countries to support cooperation between local and regional governments. Countries such as France have incorporated decentralised cooperation as yet another instrument of their foreign action in an interesting multi-level articulation logic. In Latin America, countries such as El Salvador, Brazil, Uruguay or Ecuador have adopted legislation to incorporate decentralised cooperation into their national policies, although it is not yet clear what the impact has been.

It is worth commenting on the support that the European Union has traditionally given to decentralised cooperation in general and to Euro-Latin American cooperation in particular. Support that, in recent years, has been substantially reduced with the elimination of a benchmark programme such as URB-AL; or with the reorientation of instruments such as the “Civil Society and Local Authorities” thematic programme that has operated mainly through country programmes or strategic partnerships with city networks; although, in 2019, it has reopened calls aimed at financing direct partnerships between local and regional governments around the world.<sup>10</sup>

### Partnerships for Sustainable Cities<sup>11</sup>

The call “Partnerships for Sustainable Cities” launched by the European Commission for the second consecutive year in 2020 promotes the establishment of partnerships between local governments of the EU and partner countries aimed at strengthening integrated urban development processes. The programme has different lots, one dedicated to Latin America and the Caribbean (Lot 3) that has financing of €20 million. The programme sets the following specific objectives:

- Strengthen urban governance
- Ensure social inclusion in cities
- Improve resilience and ecology and cities
- Improve prosperity and innovation in cities
- Strengthen institutional resilience within a context of fragility

Triangular cooperation initiatives, Smart Cities and initiatives aimed at generating employment and economic activity in the territory are also prioritised. Partnerships are made up of a local government that acts as a leader (European or Latin American) and one or more co-applicants (European or Latin American). The presence of a European and a Latin American local government is the minimum required.

10. Partnerships for Sustainable Cities

11. <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/europeaid/online-services/index.cfm?ADSSChck=1581673482079&do=publi.welcome&orderby=upd&searchtype=RS&orderbyad=Desc&nbPubliList=15&aofr=167744&userlanguage=en>

The actions (in Lot 3) have to be developed in the territory of the Latin American partner. The European partner contributes knowledge and technical capacity. The programme focuses on cooperation actions between territories and peer-to-peer cooperation. The funded initiatives receive a contribution from the European Commission that can vary between 50% to 95%.

Although the programme clearly has a territorial approach and is focused on the logic of peer-to-peer cooperation, the intervention logic continues to be based on the transfer of knowledge and capacities from European local governments to those of its partner countries, identified as beneficiaries. No attention is brought at any time to the learning that European local governments can extract from cooperation with their Latin American partners, or from other regions. Similarly, and although it may seem like a contradiction, the high level of co-financing by the European Commission, which can reach up to 95%, may make it difficult for the participating local governments to take ownership of the initiatives.

In this regard, the initiative, despite the clear commitment to territorial logic and technical cooperation, may represent a certain setback in relation to previous programmes, especially URB-AL, which, based on fostering networking, supported multidirectional flows of knowledge, capacities and resources. In hindsight, after operating for nearly 20 years and with three editions (from 1995 to 2014), the cancellation of the URB-AL programme cannot be considered a wise move by the European Commission. The programmes and initiatives that have followed have not achieved the impact or mobilisation of efforts and commitments achieved by one of the programmes that has contributed the most to the evolution of decentralised cooperation models.

It remains to be seen how Europe will define support for Latin American cities and regions within the context of the new 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework; if, following the proposals of the OECD and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), progress is made towards a logic of support for economies in transition that could be very beneficial for the countries of the region; and if Europe becomes aware that, within the context of economic recession and strong social vulnerability that will be caused by the COVID-19 emergency, cities and territories in general can and must play a key role in the process of recovery and construction of a “new normal” that must really take into account climatic and social emergencies, technological disruption and the inability to continue building upon an economy based on production and consumption patterns oriented towards unlimited growth.

## II.1 Evolution in intervention modalities

As noted in the previous section, the evolution of decentralised cooperation has been hampered by significant resistance to change. Nevertheless, this resistance has not prevented intervention modalities from developing that are much more advanced and efficient; modalities whose capitalisation has served as the basis for an important evolution in the narrative about what decentralised cooperation is and should be.

### II.1.1 Direct cooperation: from assistentialism to peer-to-peer cooperation

**Direct cooperation** is definitely the type of decentralised cooperation that generates the greatest consensus due to its potential to strengthen the institutional and operational capacities of local governments. It refers to international development cooperation relationships exercised directly between the local and regional governments of different countries. **Relationships that have evolved more significantly in the last half century, in particular in terms of modalities and forms of intervention.**

The first manifestations of this reality can be traced back to the 1950s with the twinning between European cities and cities of the former colonies in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The **intervention logic** was eminently **vertical and assistential**, and it took shape in the unidirectional transfer of aid, from North to South, whether in the form of economic, material or specialised knowledge resources. In this context, there were also relationships that were more political in nature, especially those focused on supporting revolutionary movements in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Despite the political component, this type of relationship was also of an assistential nature and was based on the sending of resources.

Assistential logic has played (and continues to play) a significant role in direct cooperation relationships. There are dynamics that are very difficult to overcome and the resistance to change that we have pointed out occurs both among the operators considered “donors” and among the “beneficiaries”. However, more and more critical voices are appealing to the need to become aware of the counterproductive effects of relationships that generate dependency and no sustainability whatsoever.

That is why, in recent years, other forms of direct cooperation focused on building peer-to-peer, **horizontal partnership relationships** have been gaining strength and centrality, even if they operate in asymmetric conditions (Fernández de Losada, 2018). These relationships are bi-directional in nature in which, although the financial component may be of substantial importance, **the added value lies in the transfer of knowledge, the exchange of experiences and mutual learning.** This type of relationship usually takes the form of technical cooperation agreements or learning initiatives **aimed primarily at reinforcing the institutional and operational capacities of the partners.**

It should also be noted that decentralised cooperation initiatives in general, and those that operate from the partnership modality in particular, constitute a privileged element for **the internationalisation of the city or territory** in question. For decades, decentralised cooperation has been the gateway that local and regional governments from around the world have passed through on their way to the international arena. Various cities from around the world have built their internationalisation strategies based on the experience and capacities acquired in their decentralised cooperation relationships, strategies that today are also focused on political advocacy, cultural or scientific diplomacy, or international economic projection.

However, the potential of horizontal partnerships goes beyond the transfer of knowledge or the exchange of experiences. These relationships can help strengthen the leadership and capacities of local and regional governments in order to **politically influence** improvements in the regulatory and institutional environment in which they operate. There are important experiences of decentralised cooperation partnerships, whether bilateral or, in particular, multilateral, that have helped to elaborate on decentralisation processes, defining fiscal reform proposals aimed at improving local or regional financing, or promoting better multi-level coordination mechanisms, to give three relevant examples.



Along with the partnership modality, direct cooperation relationships are also fostered and managed based on what has been called the **agency modality** (Fernández de Losada, 2018). **Within a context of advanced decentralisation, there are associations and local and regional governments from certain countries that have promoted cooperation policies endowed with significant resources and highly professionalised teams that operate through ad hoc structures.** This modality has been developed by regions in strongly decentralised countries, such as Spain or Belgium, and by some cities that are highly innovative and active in the field; the paradigmatic case is that of the Agency for International Cooperation ACI Medellín, and by associations of municipalities in countries such as the Netherlands (VNG International)<sup>12</sup>, Sweden (SKL International)<sup>13</sup> or Canada (FCM).<sup>14</sup>

### The Agency for International Cooperation ACI Medellín<sup>15</sup>

The experience of ACI Medellín is especially significant. The Agency was set up in 2002 with the firm purpose of attracting resources to strengthen the development of the city and its metropolitan area. However, today, it has become its main instrument for international projection, attracting investment and for innovation. Although in the beginning it was aimed at raising funds for cooperation, participating in the vertical assistential logic, little by little it transformed its approach to operate from the construction of strategic, horizontal alliances with other actors at the international level, whether they be other cities or national and international agencies, the private sector, universities or civil society organisations.

The ACI has a highly professional team (53 people), a significant budget (close to €2 million) and is linked to the main cooperation networks operating in Latin America (Mercociudades, Euro Latin American Cooperation Alliance between Cities (AL-LAs)) and at a global level (United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), etc.).

It is of interest to note that, in recent years, the ACI's experience has led other cities to create agencies with a similar profile. A good example is the Agency for Cooperation, Investment and Foreign Trade<sup>16</sup> promoted by the city of Santa Fe, in Argentina.

12. <https://www.vng-international.nl/>

13. <http://sklinternational.se/>

14. <https://fcm.ca/en/programs/international-programs>

15. <https://www.acimedellin.org/>

16. [http://mtafilter1.santafeciudad.gov.ar/gobierno/estructura\\_gobierno/agencia\\_cooperacion\\_inversiones\\_comercio\\_exterior.html](http://mtafilter1.santafeciudad.gov.ar/gobierno/estructura_gobierno/agencia_cooperacion_inversiones_comercio_exterior.html)

### The Basque Agency for Development Cooperation

In Spain, there are several Autonomous Communities that have specialised agencies for international cooperation. Those of Andalusia, Catalonia and the Basque Country stand out due to their budget, capacity and projection. The latter operates within the framework of the Basque Cooperation Law and its master plan, a planning tool through which it deploys its public policy.

Basque international cooperation focuses on contributing to the fight against poverty, the promotion of human development, education for development in the Basque Country, gender equity in the organisational module, humanitarian action in contexts of disasters and conflicts, and encouraged cooperative action. It operates through different tools: aid for development cooperation projects and programmes, training fellowships and grants to support cooperative activity, emergency funds, gender unit, publications, etc. A substantial part of its activity is carried out in collaboration with agents, both social (NGOs, academia, etc.) and public (other institutions, both in the Basque Country and throughout the world). It has an annual budget of just over €49 million (2020).





## Local and regional government networks and decentralised cooperation

### II.1.2

Beyond direct cooperation relationships, local and regional government networks also favour and channel decentralised cooperation relationships. The rise of cities and territories on the international scene has meant that today more than 200 city networks are operating globally (Acuto and Rayner, 2016) in a complex ecosystem, both rich and stressed by a supply of services and activities that much of the literature on the subject deems to be poorly dimensioned and coordinated.

City networks are positioned in various ways when it comes to decentralised cooperation. There are some networks that place decentralised cooperation among their foundational and operational purposes; in other words, networks that are established in order to foster decentralised cooperation relationships between local and/or regional governments. They focus their actions on the transfer of knowledge and the exchange of experiences to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of the local and regional governments that comprise them and improve their capacity to foster and manage efficient public policies in various fields. These types of networks do not place political advocacy as the axis of their actions, but they make forays into the subject, doing so frequently in some cases. A weakness that can be seen in some of these networks is that they may rely excessively on the city that originally promoted them, leads them and even finances them.

#### Ibero-American Centre for Strategic Urban Development<sup>17</sup> (CIDEU)

CIDEU is the network of Ibero-American cities that shares and promotes the culture of urban strategic thinking. Created in 1993, it is made up of **152 partners** from 21 countries: 124 cities and 28 collaborating institutions. The network offers specialised training in strategic urban planning, technical assistance and spaces for the exchange and transfer of knowledge and experiences. Likewise, it promotes collaboration between partner cities for the development of innovative methodologies and projects.

17. <https://www.cideu.org/>

The vast majority of networks, however, operate with a two-fold, broader logic that is not necessarily based off of decentralised cooperation. On the one hand, they are constituted as platforms for the exchange of experiences, the transfer of knowledge and learning, being aimed at strengthening the capacities of local and regional governments. On the other hand, they seek to influence political agendas, mainly international ones but also regional and national ones, trying to condition the public policies that are promoted so that they respond more effectively to the interests and needs of their members.

Trying to specifically link the work of these networks with decentralised cooperation is complex. However, it is also complex not to do so to the extent that their activity seeks to and has an impact on the sustainable development of communities, cities, territories and countries in general, whatever their latitude and geographical location, north, south, east or west, and their position in the list of aid recipient countries established by the DAC of the OECD.

Within this context, we can highlight two good examples.

On the one hand, the **learning community promoted by UCLG**<sup>8</sup> to reinforce the competencies and capacities of the local and regional governments that are part of the network, offers various resources in the field of learning, including a peer learning system, a learning forum, and face-to-face and online training sessions (developed in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)).

On the other hand, the **C40 repository on climate action**<sup>19</sup> offers a comprehensive database with information on public policies and innovative solutions that are encouraging the network's partner cities to fight climate change and comply with the Paris Agreements.

18. <https://www.learning.uclg.org/>  
19. <https://www.c40.org/research>

It is significant how some of the networks that operate in the current ecosystem do so from a multi-actor approach. This reality is relevant insofar as it can contribute to linking certain actors; national governments and multilateral organisations, civil society organisations, universities and knowledge centres, philanthropic and business organisations, etc. to the sustainable development strategies of local and regional governments; and to providing them with the resources, knowledge and capacity to develop their innovative solutions.

**Cities Alliance**<sup>20</sup> is a good example of this. It is a platform that at one time was promoted by the World Bank, and is currently coordinated by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), which operates on the basis of a multi-actor membership, fostering urban development initiatives in less developed countries. Cities Alliance is made up of national development agencies, major city networks, civil society organisations, universities and philanthropic organisations.

The high added value of the networks that have emerged around decentralised south-south cooperation should also be taken into account. These are efforts that have generally served to advance the logic of horizontality, of peer-to-peer work, who exchange and transfer knowledge; but who also join forces to influence national, regional and international political agendas.

20. <https://www.citiesalliance.org/>

**Mercociudades**,<sup>21</sup> despite not being a network that was designed based on decentralised cooperation, generates spaces for the transfer of knowledge, exchanging experiences and development joint actions between the cities that compose it. Among its many activities and the benefits it offers its partners, Mercociudades fosters the South-South Cooperation Programme<sup>22</sup> within the framework of which it finances projects developed by cities in the network, in collaboration with public universities and civil society organisations. In its 2020 edition, the programme focuses on SDG 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities.



21. <https://mercociudades.org/>  
22. <http://sursurmercociudades.org/>

## II.1.3 Indirect and delegated cooperation

Indirect cooperation is one of the most common forms of decentralised cooperation in some European countries, especially in Germany, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom (OECD, 2018). It can be defined as support mechanisms for specialised NGOs, although more recently other institutions have been included, conceived by following (or emulating) the parameters established by the main national development cooperation agencies to work with the “sector”. These mechanisms generally operate on the basis of calls for subsidies divided into thematic and geographical priorities and based on co-financing schemes.

In countries such as Spain, most of the regional governments and the governments of medium-sized and large cities have financial instruments to support the NGOs that operate in their territory. Said support serves a dual logic. On the one hand, it contributes to the sustainable and human development of the partner countries with which the entities work; and, on the other hand, to strengthening the social networks of solidarity and raising critical awareness and an informed citizenry about the significant challenges facing the planet.

Beyond helping to reinforce their own social networks, working with NGOs has allowed many local governments in Spain (and other European countries) to come into contact with other realities and with international cooperation, to establish contacts and partner with local governments from other regions of the world, and to acquire knowledge and experience that is difficult to find in the local government itself and/or in the city or region. However, the preponderant role that NGOs have played and continue to play in many contexts has led to a series of dysfunctions that call into question the effectiveness of indirect cooperation.

On the one hand, the logic of working through public calls has delegated to many European NGOs the role of mediating projects and has alienated their counterparts, the civil society entities in the countries in which they work and the local government entities that finance the projects. Furthermore, the logic of project-based work collides on many occasions with support for processes with a longer history and, presumably, that have greater potential to generate sustainable

transformations. Finally, the dependence of many NGOs on the aid and subsidies granted by local and regional governments (related to a loss of social base) is leading, in some cases, to resistance to changes being introduced and accepting the involvement of other key actors to development such as the third sector, universities or the private sector.

Furthermore, **an analysis of reality tells us that, in most cases, local and regional governments that foster indirect cooperation strategies do not link them to their own direct cooperation strategies;** in other words, NGOs and other institutions that receive funding do not necessarily develop the initiatives in the territories of the partners (local and/or regional governments) of the government that funds them. The lack of coordination between direct and indirect cooperation strategies **can contribute to the fragmentation and isolation of the funded initiatives;** something that is clearly contrary to the principles of aid effectiveness and policy coherence.

Beyond indirect cooperation, some local and regional governments have tried to foster other modalities more typical of national cooperation agencies or international organisations, such as delegated cooperation or budget support. Operating through these modalities can allow for greater resources to be mobilised, among other elements, leaving behind the project logic to work directly in support of specific policies and to improve coordination between certain donors (Rimez, 2010/Martínez, Sanahuja, 2010). However, beyond academic proposals and the few specific experiences that exist, these modalities are marginal in decentralised cooperation since they require teams with high levels of expertise and large budgets.

The **Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation (ACCD)**<sup>23</sup> forged a delegated cooperation agreement in 2016 with the **Flemish Government** to foster an initiative in Mozambique. This cooperation modality refers to the agreement between two subnational governments whereby one of them delegates to the other the management of its decentralised cooperation funds to promote a specific programme in a partner country. In this case, both governments agreed to launch a project in the field of promoting the rights of women and girls. The objective was to promote safe environments, free from violence and sexual assaults, in the municipalities of Marracuene, Manhiça and Maputo. The project, with a budget of €500,000, of which Flanders contributed €400,000 and Catalonia €100,000, is implemented by a local NGO (Action Aid) and coordinated by the Catalan agency. The Flemish Government, in addition to providing a significant part of the initiative's financing, participates in its monitoring and evaluation together with the ACCD.

## II.2 The territory as a frame of reference for decentralised cooperation

In recent times, there has been an increasing trend to place the so-called **territorial approach** as a frame of reference for the most evolved and efficient forms of decentralised cooperation. This approach places the territory, its actors and its resources as the focal point and frame of reference for sustainable development processes. Territorial development has been seen as a process that coordinates all the resources available in a specific territory from a holistic and comprehensive approach, which takes into account the economic, social, environmental and institutional dynamics, with the aim of improving the quality of life of citizens (Fernández de Losada, 2018).

Very much in line with the 2030 Agenda, the holistic and comprehensive model that is advocated by the territorial approach is an opportunity to promote synergies among the sectoral policies promoted by local and regional governments, favouring internal coordination mechanisms that ensure a cross-sectoral approach, avoiding the intervention logic by silos as well as fragmentation, and moving towards policy coherence frameworks for sustainable development.

On the other hand, the territorial approach calls for the potential and the contribution of all the actors that operate in the territory to be taken into account, which are considered its main asset. To do so, mechanisms need to be defined that foster and facilitate their involvement, as well as the coordination and search for synergies between them. This includes, on the one hand, citizens (especially the most vulnerable), as well as civil society, the private sector, philanthropy and all institutions linked to knowledge. And, on the other hand, the different spheres of government, from international organisations to the national government and regional and local governments. At this point it is very important to point out the need for multilevel articulation to be based on intergovernmental cooperation logics instead of hierarchical subordination schemes.

23. <http://cooperaciocatalana.gencat.cat/ca/inici>



### Territorial approach to the Sustainable Development Goals. OECD<sup>24</sup>

The OECD proposes a regional development approach aimed at unleashing the full transformative potential of the SDGs. It is based on an approach to territorial development that is holistic, multi-sectoral, bottom-up, inclusive and localised. The methodology advocated by the OECD offers tools for the more efficient planning of territorial development strategies, in which the different levels of government, and the different stakeholders that operate in the territory, contribute all their capacities and resources. The OECD is committed to public policy monitoring systems and offers a system of indicators designed to measure progress in the implementation processes of the 2030 Agenda at the territorial level.

### The territorial approach to local development proposed by the European Commission

According to the Policy Note<sup>25</sup> prepared by Professor Leonardo G. Romeo for the European Commission in 2013, the Territorial Approach to Local Development (TALD) is a national policy that promotes endogenous local development, in which local governments mobilise all the resources and capacities of the territory; as well as integrated local development, based on the action of all operators, public and private, that act in the territory; and multi-scalar local development, to the extent that the different levels of government coordinate and complement each other, each within the framework of their competencies. Within this context and with this frame of reference, the primary responsibility for planning, financing and managing local development lies with local governments. Local governments that must have the competencies, resources and capacities to do so.

In 2013, the European Commission promoted the **Communication “Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes”**<sup>26</sup> based on which it supports the TALD as a reference methodology for the deployment of its different cooperation programmes, especially in the Thematic Programme for Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities.

24. <http://www.oecd.org/regional/a-territorial-approach-to-the-sustainable-development-goals-e86fa715-en.htm>

25. <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/public-pub.sector-reform-decentralisation/documents/territorial-approach-local-development>

26. [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-local-authorities-in-partner-countries-com2013280-20130515\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-local-authorities-in-partner-countries-com2013280-20130515_en.pdf)

Taking the territorial approach to sustainable development as a frame of reference allows decentralised cooperation to highlight the importance of its cross-sectoral and comprehensive dimension as public policy. Furthermore, it places the partners in a scenario of interconnections in which the territories, with disparities in resources and environments, face shared challenges that respond to global dynamics with strong local impacts; inequalities, global health, migrations, climate change, technological revolution, etc.

Decentralised cooperation experiences that focus on the development of solutions that can be shared by the partners in a bidirectional scheme are becoming increasingly frequent. Despite the fact that, as has been pointed out, partnerships can be uneven or asymmetric in terms of available resources, and the ability to innovate does not have a specific geography and the most effective and best-oriented solutions to the needs of citizens and stakeholders in the territories can occur in very different contexts and not necessarily in the most developed countries.

**Participatory budgets** have been one of the most significant innovations to emerge from Latin American municipalism and which has had the longest run at a global level based on very diverse decentralised cooperation practices. The Forum of Local Authorities for Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy (FAL) is a good example of this, as was Network 9 of the URB-AL Programme<sup>27</sup> on financing and participatory democracy.

Learning in regard to internationalisation processes that takes place within the framework of the AL-LAs network is clearly multidirectional. The experience gained by cities such as Mexico City or Montevideo in their citizen dialogues and consultations for internationalisation processes can be very useful to reinforce the strategies developed by their European partners.<sup>28</sup>

The territorial approach also offers the possibility of mobilising the different stakeholders, both public and private, that operate in the territory of the partners and involving them in decentralised cooperation partnerships, highlighting the importance of all the resources and capacities that they can contribute.

However, mobilising and maintaining the commitment of the territory's citizens and actors requires a significant effort to be made aimed at accountability and submitting public policies to social control. All of this applies to the initiatives developed within the framework of decentralised cooperation partnerships that must be able to be monitored and evaluated based on effective information systems and verifiable indicators that serve, on the one hand, to extract learning from the experiences developed and, on the other, to capitalise on the innovations identified in the best practices.

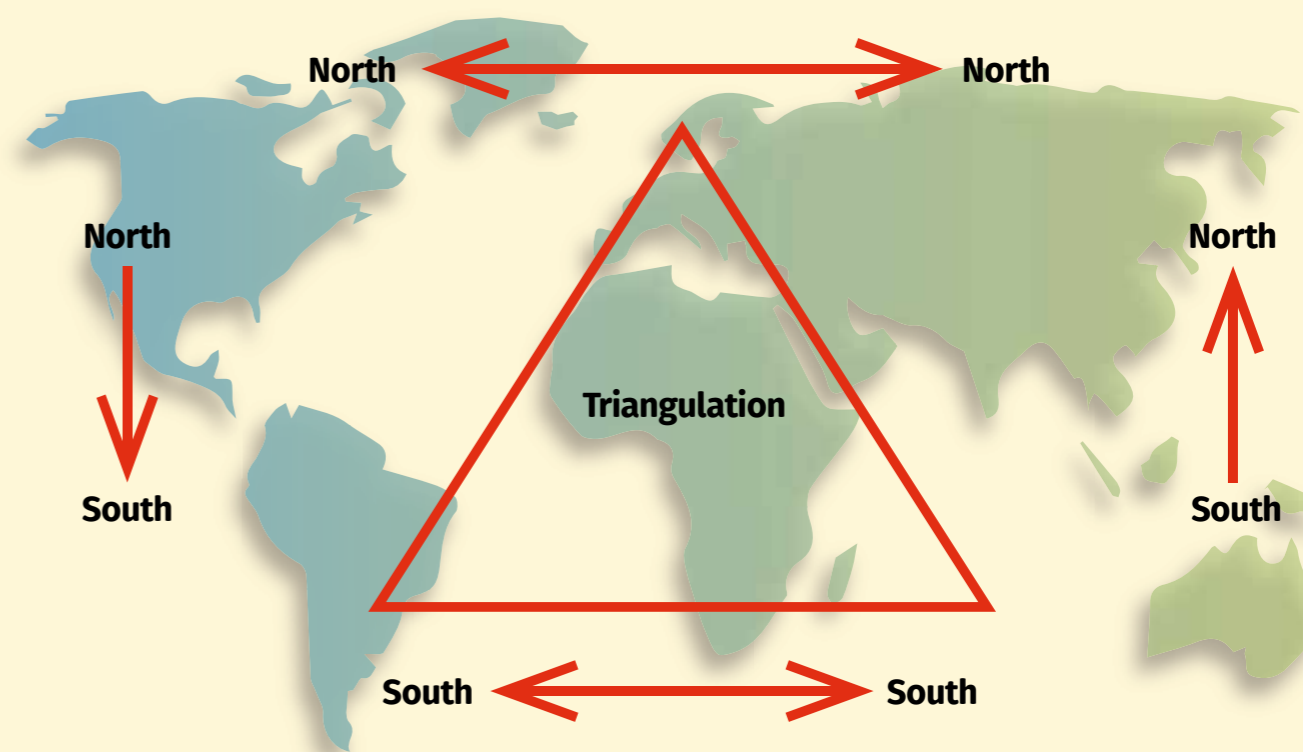
Applying the territorial approach to decentralised cooperation in such a way so that the entire endogenous potential of the territory can be deployed also requires local and regional governments to operate in adequate regulatory environments, based on clear competencies, sufficient funding, and with the appropriate capacities to be able to promote efficient public policies.



## II.3 The flows of decentralised cooperation

The flows of decentralised cooperation have evolved as much as the modalities of intervention have. Although the traditional North-South relationship schemes remain highly relevant, in the current panorama of decentralised cooperation, South-South and triangular cooperation practices are appearing with increasing strength and visibility. In addition, the intervention schemes with which it operates also facilitate the occurrence of flows of South-North and North-North transfer.

### NEW FLOWS OF DECENTRALISED COOPERATION



AGUSTÍ FERNÁNDEZ DE LOSADA PASSOIS

Source: Fernández de Losada, A. (2017)

In recent years, South-South decentralised cooperation has become very important. This type of cooperation has high added value, strongly oriented towards the transfer of knowledge and the exchange of experiences among peers that generally operate in symmetrical conditions. However, as recent studies have shown,<sup>29</sup> when it comes to this type of cooperation, partners can also fall into the contradictions that occurred and still occur in traditional North-South relationships.

Despite being the contexts that are closest in nature, in South-South relationships there are also asymmetries; think of, for example, the differences in development between Brazil and Bolivia, which can lead to the definition of intervention frameworks of an assistential nature.

### Decentralised South-South Cooperation in Central America

The Lempa River Tri-National Border Association<sup>30</sup> maintains a South-South cooperation partnership with two associations of municipalities in El Salvador, within the framework of which the inclusive territorial economic development policies (DETI) are strengthened in both territories. This partnership has facilitated the exchange of experiences and good practices, as well as training initiatives aimed at reinforcing the design and implementation of a local policy for associations of municipalities that intends on promoting economic development based on the Social and Solidarity Economy.

The initiative of the Lempa River Tri-National Border Association has the support of Diputació de Barcelona and a long history of decentralised cooperation with other governments in the region, in Europe and globally.

AGUSTÍ FERNÁNDEZ DE LOSADA PASSOLS

Although less widespread, triangular decentralised cooperation is a mixed modality through which local governments from at least three countries cooperate with each other. It is a modality that leans towards horizontality in the exchange and logic of transfer, which makes it more effective. It is usually supported by a local government with greater financing capacity or by regional and national cooperation agencies or by international organisations. In fact, the European Union, through URB-AL (in its different phases) or thematic programmes such as that of local authorities (in its previous phase), has been supporting this type of initiative for years.

The European Commission's Partnerships for Sustainable Cities initiative gives priority to partnerships that are developed within the framework of triangular cooperation actions. These actions must include local and regional governments from two partner countries and one EU country. The actions must be developed in the territory of one of the partner countries while the other two, including the European one, contribute knowledge, experiences, capacities and resources.

Finally, it is worth noting that, although outside the focus of conventional analysis, decentralised cooperation tends to generate flows of knowledge and resources that go from South to North; likewise, when operating through networks or other multilateral platforms, knowledge also flows between the local and regional governments of the North, in a scheme that we could describe as North-North.

LA COOPERACIÓN DESCENTRALIZADA COMO MECANISMO PARA ABORDAR LAS DESIGUALDADES Y FORTALECER LA DEMOCRACIA EN LOS TERRITORIOS

29. <http://cooperacionsursur.org/images/DT11.pdf>  
30. <http://www.trinacionalriolempa.org/mtfr/>

# III

## Improving the regulatory and institutional environment and strengthen capacities to promote more efficient public policies

As pointed out in the preceding sections of this study, the most efficient decentralised cooperation partnerships are those that, on the one hand, are aimed at improving the regulatory and institutional environment in which the local and regional governments operate; and, on the other, at strengthening their capacities so that they can design and implement public policies that respond to the real needs and interests of the territory. In both objectives, knowledge and experience play a determining role.

## III.1 Decentralised cooperation and political advocacy

Decentralised cooperation can be a very good instrument for influencing, at a national, regional and even international level, the improvement of the regulatory and institutional environment in which local and regional governments operate. The political agenda of decentralised cooperation can address structural elements inherent to the liberal state model or specific elements of public policies.

In recent years, decentralised cooperation has made a significant effort to help certain countries make progress in decentralisation, fiscal and tax reform processes, to consolidate fundamental principles such as local self-government or subsidiarity or fundamental norms such as that which refers to the local public function (and to the stability of local officials in the context of a changing electoral cycle). All of these elements have been at the core of numerous initiatives promoted in Latin America, albeit with rather controversial results. In some cases, the issue has managed to be placed on the national or regional political agenda, but with rather limited results in terms of legislative reforms and advocacy in the review of the state model.





The **Ibero-American Forum of Local Governments**, a political space made up of Ibero-American local government associations, individual local governments and the Ibero-American General Secretariat, promoted the Ibero-American Charter of Local Self-Government. A letter that was drawn up by the Ibero-American municipalism but that never ended up being adopted by the national governments or recognised in legislation (unlike the European Charter of Local Self-Government).

The Ibero-American Forum continues to meet periodically with the aim of influencing the Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government. For years, the space has received the financial support of various local governments and networks of municipalities, as well as the support of the Ibero-American General Secretariat. The Forum's next event is scheduled to take place in the city of Andorra La Vella, linked to the Ibero-American Summit that will be held in Andorra in 2020.

Decentralised cooperation has also served to strengthen the capacities of local and regional governments in order to effectively influence their national governments and the regional and global authorities. There are interesting experiences focused on promoting training strategies and, in particular, on the generation of knowledge.

The **Euro Latin American Cooperation Alliance between Cities (AL-LAs)** has dedicated part of its efforts to strengthening the capacities of the governments of its member cities to influence regional and international political agendas. It dedicated one of its learning workshops<sup>31</sup> to analysing how cities should and can influence global agendas; as a result, Notebook 7 was published. Local governments in the international agenda, actors or spectators?<sup>32</sup>

The **Prefeitura of Belo Horizonte** in Brazil, with the support of ICLEI South America, has promoted the Horizon 2030 Programme, an integrated platform to localise global development milestones in the municipality, such as the SDGs, the Paris Agreement, the New Urban Agenda and the Sendai Framework, among other treaties and conventions, which seek to improve public services and to develop the city in the social, economic and environmental spheres, without leaving anyone behind. To do so, they have structured a far-reaching institutional relationship with the United Nations and its agencies, as well as other national and international organisations.

The link between decentralised cooperation and political advocacy is established in various ways. On the one hand, direct cooperation relationships tend to reinforce the partners' capacities to politically influence their respective environments. Be it expressly, through specific initiatives focused on political advocacy; or indirectly, through activities aimed at other purposes; direct cooperation helps encourage local and regional governments to have an impact on improving the environments in which they operate.

On the other hand, as has already been pointed out, networks, in all their diversity in terms of institutional forms, geographic and thematic scope, and objectives, most certainly constitute the privileged instrument that is available to local and regional governments for influencing the political agenda. Networks generate critical mass, which makes it easier to be heard; but they also invest in the generation of knowledge, empirical evidence about the realities they intend on changing, which benefits the construction of solid arguments that are critical to having an impact.

31. <https://proyectoallas.net/our-work/learning/workshops/7th-workshop/>

32. <https://proyectoallas.net/2016/03/16/cuaderno-7-los-gobiernos-locales-en-la-agenda-internacional-actores-o-espectadores/>

The **GOLD report**<sup>33</sup> that **UCLG** has published every three years since 2008 has become an international reference point for providing information about local democracy and decentralisation worldwide. The report provides first-hand data and information on issues as sensitive as that of decentralisation, the financing of local governments, access to basic services, or urban agendas. In its latest report, **GOLD V**<sup>34</sup> assesses local, regional and national strategies for the implementation of the global agendas in each of the world's regions. To do so, it analyses the evolution of the institutional frameworks of local, metropolitan and regional governments, paying special attention to the efforts made by local governments to achieve the proposed objectives and promote transformative change. The report demonstrates that cities and territories play a central role in social, economic, environmental and cultural development, and shows their commitment and contributions to addressing the climate emergency, while sharing the lessons learnt with their peers around the world.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the strategic alliances (Malé, 2019) aimed at influencing specific areas of the international or regional agenda, which find decentralised cooperation relationships to be a necessary facilitator in forming alliances. These ad hoc, non-formalised alliances operate in parallel with traditional networks and multi-actor platforms, and are aimed at fostering advocacy strategies in specific areas in which local governments are subject to citizen pressure; housing, or a context of confrontation with their national governments; climate crisis, migration and refugees.

33. <https://www.gold.uclg.org/reports>

34. <https://www.gold.uclg.org/reports/other/gold-v-report>

The Municipalist Declaration "**Cities for Housing**"<sup>35</sup> was promoted in 2018 by a significant group of cities around the world to stand up for the right to housing and the right to the city. Presented in New York before the United Nations, it is a collective effort between cities and transnational civil society organisations that has made remarkable strides and has helped to bring the issue of housing to the table as one of the most sensitive issues on the international agenda of cities. Many of the signatory cities have a long history of cooperation in the field of decentralised cooperation. This may be the case of Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Medellín, Mexico City, Barcelona and Paris.



35. <https://citiesforhousing.org/>

## III.2 From technical cooperation to learning

As has been repeatedly pointed out in this document, decentralised cooperation has become one of the privileged instruments for strengthening the institutional and operational capacities of local and regional governments. In this context, in which knowledge transfer is key, horizontal modalities that are committed to bidirectional flows have been shown to be the most effective and those that generate the most relevant impacts.

Bidirectionality does indeed involve adopting the logic of shared challenges, taking ownership of the experiences and solutions that are being worked on and their adaption to local realities. Assistential logic, on the contrary, has for a long time involved the transfer of experiences and solutions designed from the North and that do not necessarily respond to local realities and the effective needs of the “beneficiaries” or “recipients” in the South.

The transfer of knowledge and the exchange of experiences takes place in different ways. The so-called **technical cooperation** is the most widespread and with the greatest potential for decentralised cooperation. It is the practice by which local governments, within the framework of their direct cooperation relationships, work together in the development of public policies that are better adapted to the needs, interests and aspirations of the territory and its stakeholders; and in the implementation of more efficient organisational and governance models.

Technical cooperation involves technical and political personnel from local and regional governments, which, on the one hand, generates a greater commitment to the government itself; and, on the other, to the decentralised cooperation policies that are being developed. Different studies carried out also indicate that technical cooperation serves to reinforce the professional and personal capacities of the personnel involved, who generally value their experience in a very positive light.

Technical cooperation can involve other actors in the territory, be the companies, civil society organisations, universities or research centres. As can be seen in the following section of this study, these actors can contribute knowledge, experience, technology and

resources, whether financial or material. Their involvement can help them to build alliances or work dynamics with other actors, counterparts or not, from the partner territory. In general, extremely rich dynamics are generated with positive impacts in the medium and long term that can go beyond the transfer of knowledge and enter the field of commercial, cultural or educational exchanges, the joint development of projects, etc.

Technical cooperation requires resources to be available; whether financial resources to defray the related costs; or human resources that provide knowledge and experience. As far as financial resources are concerned, they may come from the local government itself and be located in the cooperation budget or in the sectoral line items of the government departments involved. Or their origin may lie in programmes fostered by national or multilateral cooperation agencies.

The **Delegation for the External Action of Local Governments (DAECT)** has a programme aimed at supporting the decentralised cooperation actions of French local governments<sup>36</sup>. This programme basically covers technical cooperation and capacity building actions developed by French local governments with their partners in the partner countries. Among the various calls included annually in the programme, we can highlight the one that supports actions promoted by local governments aligned with the bilateral agreements between France and its partners.

36. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/action-exterieure-des-collectivites-territoriales/appels-a-projets-et-fonds-en-soutien-a-la-cooperation-decentralisee/>

The **International Urban Cooperation Programme**<sup>37</sup> of the European Commission promotes the transfer of knowledge on sustainable urban practices. It does so through three components:

- 1.- City-to-city cooperation
- 2.- Actions within the framework of the Global Covenant of Mayors Initiative
- 3.- Interregional cooperation for innovative local and regional development

The exchange of experiences and knowledge within the framework of the first component is geared towards the development of local action plans that define pilot projects and actions in the area addressed. To date, a rather significant number of partnerships between Latin American and European cities have been promoted, such as Madrid – Buenos Aires, Milan – Sao Paulo or Hamburg – Mérida (Mexico), to give just three examples. Within the framework of the second component, the signatory cities receive technical support to promote their energy and climate commitments. Finally, within the framework of the interregional cooperation component, collaboration with innovative companies is also promoted to support international value chains.

Despite the consensus surrounding its added value, technical cooperation encounters some important obstacles when it comes to consolidating itself in the field of decentralised cooperation.

On the one hand, there is strong resistance among the management teams of the local and regional government itself to let go of highly qualified personnel. In general, this type of personnel already has a very heavy workload in their job, whose involvement in technical cooperation actions would add an extra burden. Being able to resolve this resistance would require a strong political commitment and that the work carried out within the framework of technical cooperation actions be recognised, considered to be its own job and not representing a greater workload for those involved.

37. <http://www.iuc.eu/>

On the other hand, the difficulty of measuring the benefits of technical cooperation actions in terms of results also does not help to consolidate it. Despite the efforts made by different organisations to capitalise on initiatives in this area, their added value, situated in the sphere of strengthening the capacities of people and teams, is subjective and is not always easy to assess in the short term.

These obstacles are particularly significant in the local and regional governments of the most developed countries. Outside of their generally well-informed cooperation teams, it is not easy to convince others about the learning opportunities that may arise from working with counterparts from less developed countries. Therefore, committed leadership with a broad and long-term vision is required. The universality of the challenges referred to in the new international agendas can help overcome many of these obstacles.

The **Fons Català de Cooperació** promoted the elaboration of a Municipal Technical Cooperation Guide<sup>38</sup> to guide Catalan municipalities in their technical cooperation initiatives. The Guide offers an approach to the concept, an analysis of the modalities and the main areas of intervention. It also gives practical guidelines for deploying municipal technical cooperation, delving into the necessary political base, planning elements, stakeholders involved, resources and how to manage the legal and labour aspects or risk prevention.

Along with technical cooperation, alternative ways of transferring knowledge and experiences have been developed in recent years. Special reference to training should be made, an area in which decentralised cooperation has evolved significantly. An analysis of the current map of decentralised cooperation helps us to identify diverse modalities that range from face-to-face and distance training to peer learning, while also including collaboration with specialised institutions (universities, training centres, multilateral agencies or philanthropic organisations).

38. [https://www.fonscatala.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Guia%20CT%20municipal\\_es.pdf](https://www.fonscatala.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Guia%20CT%20municipal_es.pdf)



In this area, the alliance with other actors is also significant, especially multilateral organisations, universities or philanthropic institutions.

**UCLG, together with the UNDP, UN Habitat and Diputació de Barcelona,** fostered the development of Training of Trainers (ToT) modules<sup>39</sup> to enhance their knowledge about the localisation processes of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. These modules have helped train hundreds of local and regional officials in regions all over the world.

The **Observatory of Decentralised Cooperation UE-AL**<sup>40</sup> has 14 editions of its online training course aimed at promoting local public policies for decentralised cooperation. It is a specialisation within international relations and cooperation, closely linked to development and local governance. This training is designed to adapt to the new reality in international relations, taking into account the increased prevalence of relationships of exchange as compared to relationships of assistance, in a world in which the so-called “North-South” divide is becoming increasingly blurred. The result is a course comprised of 5 modules that is designed to support the efforts of local governments to project themselves on the international stage. The programme primarily targets technical and political decision-makers in international relations and development cooperation from local and regional governments. Similarly, it encourages the participation of profiles from other spheres of government, who guide and manage decentralised cooperation programmes.

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## IV

The alliance with territorial actors in decentralised cooperation as a mechanism to promote more efficient and inclusive public policies

The Territorial Approach abounds in the determining role played by the territory's agents in the processes of sustainable development and in the need to move towards more efficient forms of collaborative governance. These agents **provide their knowledge, skills, experience, resources, technology and capacity for innovation; as well as, in most cases, a strong will to contribute to the common good.** It is clear that their partnership helps improve the efficiency of the public policies that are promoted. The challenge continues to lie in being able to define mechanisms that facilitate their participation and allow them to unleash all of their potential.

As pointed out in the preceding chapters, associating the territorial actors with decentralised cooperation initiatives can significantly improve and expand the impact thereof. Their participation can be especially relevant in practices that are based on a horizontal approach, on the construction of partnerships between territories with all their actors. Recent studies speak of the optimal relationship between decentralised cooperation and the logic of **multi-actor partnerships** as an approach that can serve to move towards more efficient decentralised cooperation dynamics (Fernández de Losada & Calvete, 2018).

39. <https://www.learning.uclg.org/sdg-learning-modules>

40. <http://www.observ-ocd.org/es/e-training/curso-line-en-cooperacion-descentralizada-14ava-edicion>

The United Nations defines multi-actor partnerships as “voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both public and non-public, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task and, as mutually agreed, to share risks and responsibilities, resources and benefits.”<sup>41</sup> In Europe, the so-called Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3)<sup>42</sup> approach multi-actor partnerships based on the so-called Quadruple Helix Model. A model that links innovation and sustainable development in a framework in which the government, the private sector, academia and civil society work together to co-create sustainable development and promote structural changes that can go far beyond what any of the actors could have promoted on their own.

However, for these partnerships to be able to unleash their full potential within the framework of decentralised cooperation relationships, the roles of all the actors involved must be clearly defined. As should be that of the local and/or regional government, and especially its role as a leader, catalyst and coordinator.

Mobilising and engaging these actors and ensuring that they contribute everything they have to contribute requires governance structures that facilitate their articulation and participation in all the phases described. An analysis of reality shows us that defining a good architecture for collaborative governance in the field of decentralised cooperation is not an easy task. There are, however, some good practices that are worth considering.

### Barcelona Cooperation Council<sup>43</sup>

This council is a consultative and a sectoral participation body of the Barcelona City Council, created to foster and drive international cooperation actions for development, humanitarian aid and the promotion of human rights and peace. It responds to the principles of collaboration and complementarity between public powers and solidarity and cooperation initiatives for the development of society. It is a space for dialogue and participation of civil society, it encourages agreements to be reached among the social networks of solidarity in order to create synergies and cross-relations.

41. United Nations Resolution A/RES/70/224 “Towards global partnerships”.

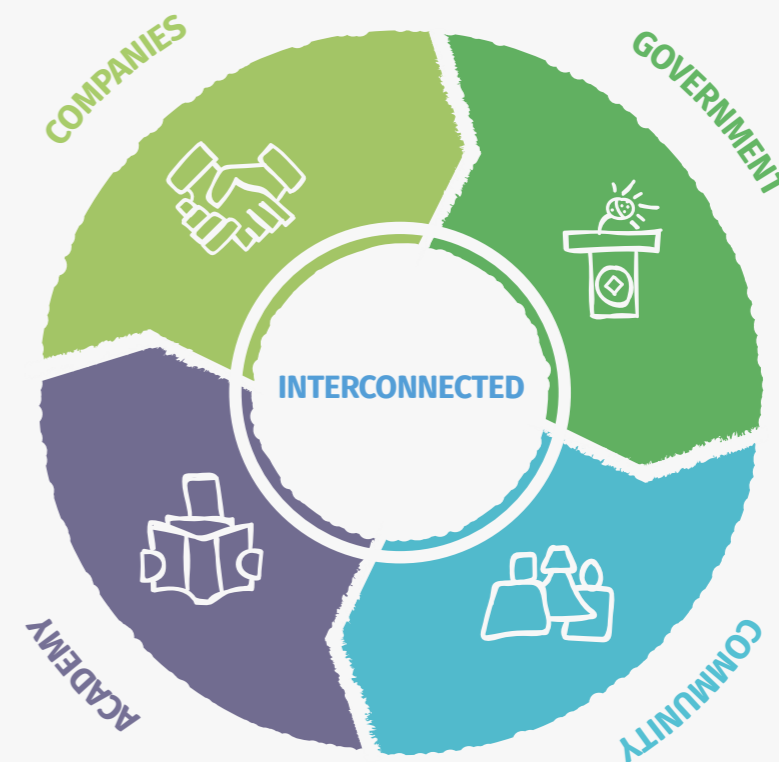
42. [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/smart\\_specialisation\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/smart_specialisation_en.pdf)

43. <http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/relacionsinternacionalsicooperacio/ca/cooperacio-internacional/consell-de-cooperacio>

## IV.1 What actors to involve and how?

In the territories, there is a vast amalgam of actors that influence sustainable development and that can add value to decentralised cooperation partnerships. They need to be mapped out and determine to what extent they can contribute to the development of these partnerships.

Following the logic of the quadruple helix, we can group them into the following categories:



Source: UCLG, Module 1. Localisation of the SDGs

## IV.1.1 Civil society organisations

In this section we refer to civil society from a very broad perspective that includes all **private non-profit organisations**. From NGOs to third sector social organisations, including grassroots organisations, social movements, cultural, environmentalist and union organisations, etc. All of them can play a relevant role in **guiding decentralised cooperation towards a logic of public/social collaboration**.

### Trinational alliances of the Lempa River

The Tri-National Territorial Information System (SINTET) has been operating since 2009 as an instrument for monitoring local public policies, generating information and managing knowledge in the border area between El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. It is an initiative that has received support from Diputació de Barcelona and the European Union (URB-AL III Programme) and that has been promoted by a partnership that includes the University Centre East (CUNORI) of the San Carlos University of Guatemala, the Lempa River Tri-National Border Association, five associations of municipalities, civil society organisations from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, and the Central American Integration System (SICA). Currently, SINTET has more than 35 thousand visits per month, with more than 240 thousand downloads of information.

This territorial alliance between local governments, academia, civil society and international cooperation also develops an ongoing training programme (certification). Since 2014, more than 370 local officials and technicians from the 3 countries have been trained in matters such as: i) Integrated territorial management of forests and watersheds; ii) Food and Nutrition Security; iii) Comprehensive management, adaptation to climate change and governance of water resources; and, iv) Inclusive territorial economic development. This alliance has also managed to promote studies on topics of shared interest, such as monitoring the water quality of the Lempa River. These studies have served as the basis for launching the “We Can Rescue the Lempa River” campaign in the three countries.

The civil society alliance is, a priori, the most obvious and easiest relationship to manage. However, it has certain complexities and elements that must be taken into account. In the countries of the North, the so-called “sector” of development cooperation is made up of specialised NGOs, as we have already pointed out. Their intervention usually goes in two directions: on the one hand, they promote the financing and implementation of projects in the countries of the Global South in which they work; and, on the other, they mobilise citizens to generate critical awareness about the major challenges tied to development. Nevertheless, despite the fact that they have knowledge, experience and a political-social agenda whose importance must be recognised, they tend to bear little connection to the direct cooperation partnerships promoted by the local and regional governments that finance them. Linking them in a comprehensive intervention logic would facilitate more efficient actions geared towards sustainable results.

For their part, the NGOs in the countries of the South work in a partnership with their partners in the Global North, executing projects and initiatives with an often-bureaucratic link to local and regional governments. Making this alliance more strategic, inserting the projects implemented in the development plans promoted by the local and regional governments of the (southern) territories in which they operate, would also result in greater effectiveness and sustainability of the interventions carried out.

However, beyond the NGOs, it is also necessary to take into account the third sector organisations, social movements, those that promote peace and human rights, as well as environmental, cultural, sports or recreational organisations. All of them have a lot of potential, resources and important capacities to contribute to decentralised cooperation relationships. Despite the fact that some of these institutions are beginning to be highly internationalised, their link to decentralised cooperation is still unclear, especially in the North. However, there are local and regional governments that are making significant efforts to involve them, promoting specialised initiatives aimed at, for example, environmental organisations or institutions specialised in promoting peace and human rights.

In a context of disconnection and increasing distrust of citizens towards the public, which, as we have seen, materialises, on the one hand, in the rise of populisms and nationalisms and, on the other, in protests and resistance, strengthening the link between local and regional governments and social movements and civil society in the framework of decentralised cooperation initiatives can have very positive results.

## IV.1.2 Universities and centres of knowledge

The link between decentralised cooperation and the knowledge sector is increasingly frequent and strategic. Universities, research centres and think tanks can provide very relevant added value in the form of knowledge, data and information to build evidence, the capacity for innovation, technology and contact with the scientific community.

Contributions from the knowledge community can serve to improve decentralised cooperation practices. They can be aimed at strengthening the available professional resources (via specific training), facilitating more innovative intervention methodologies, providing solutions for a more efficient development of ongoing initiatives, or providing technology and other resources.

The University of Rosario (Bogotá, Colombia) and the Autonomous University of Mexico have been directly involved in the Euro Latin American Cooperation Alliance between Cities (AL-LAs), generating knowledge, supporting the participating cities through academic training sessions and promoting lines of research.

Along these same lines, the Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation EU-LA has been conducting training through the online course “Specialist in Decentralised Cooperation” since 2006. The 14th edition is currently taking place with the support of the coalition “Platforma”. Over these years, it has received the support of various academic centres with which it has established collaboration agreements for the development of training courses such as the Foundation’s School of Politics and High Government, the Ortega y Gasset University Research Institute and the Open University of Catalonia. This training course has educated more than 600 professionals from Europe and Latin America in decentralised cooperation.

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On the other hand, linking the knowledge community with decentralised cooperation partnerships can serve to build bridges between universities and research centres in the territories involved. Bridges that facilitate the promotion of joint academic programmes, the exchange of students, professors and researchers or the development of research projects to address shared challenges.

It is also worth highlighting the contribution that universities and research centres can make to improve decentralised cooperation as a modality of international development cooperation. Various universities are beginning to promote specific study and research programmes focused on this modality. An effort that can be complementary to that made by local and regional governments, generally through networks and other platforms, and can contribute to highlighting the importance of the modality and making it visible.

Finally, we can point out the close collaboration that occurs in various contexts between local and regional governments and universities in the field of **promoting critical or global citizenship**; that is, a collaboration aimed at building a citizenry aware of the challenges and injustices that occur on the planet and committed and mobilised in the fight against them.



LA COOPERACIÓN DESCENTRALIZADA COMO MECANISMO PARA ABORDAR LAS DESIGUALDADES Y FORTALECER LA DEMOCRACIA EN LOS TERRITORIOS



## IV.1.3 Private sector

The contribution of the private sector to decentralised cooperation **still has a long way to go and in many contexts draws red lines.** The fact that companies and business associations can contribute resources, knowledge, skills, technology, contacts and vigour to decentralised cooperation partnerships is beyond any doubt. Nevertheless, the for-profit status of the private sector, inherent to its *raison d'être*, generates resistance in a universe that has traditionally stayed far away from the logics of the market.

There are many ways to facilitate private sector participation in decentralised cooperation partnerships. On the one hand, **business associations and chambers of commerce** can play a relevant role in supporting their peers in partner cities or regions through training initiatives, innovation transfer mechanisms or by building bridges to foster commercial exchanges.

The focus of decentralised cooperation is usually placed on the **MSMEs** (micro, small and medium enterprises) to the extent that they are the most widespread business structures, which most decisively contribute to sustainable development processes. The link of decentralised cooperation to large multinational companies usually occurs through the philanthropic foundations that these companies usually have.

**Philanthropic organisations** are becoming increasingly interested in cities and territories and their relationship with decentralised cooperation has strong potential. Some philanthropic organisations have begun to generate work platforms between cities in which the core element is the transfer of knowledge and experiences aimed at sharing solutions. However, their focus on facilitating links to the private sector and generating a point of contact between the solutions that the private sector proposes and local and regional governments, as the recipients of these solutions, leads to questions and reservations among many of the actors of decentralised cooperation. Reservations and questions that need to be addressed and debated.

Today, reconverted into the **Global Resilient Cities Network**, the **100 Resilient Cities**<sup>44</sup> platform funded by the Rockefeller Foundation fostered the development of resilience strategies and the creation of municipal resilience offices in a hundred cities around the world, many of which are in Latin America and Europe. The now network that was once a platform is a space conducive to decentralised cooperation to the extent that it puts cities in contact with the knowledge and experience they need to develop solutions.

But it is undoubtedly the sector of the Social and Solidarity Economy that has the greatest potential for collaboration with decentralised cooperation. In fact, there are very interesting experiences in the area of fair or ethical trade, as well as in the field of co-development.

In 2018, the **United Nations Joint Migration and Development Initiative** published a Guide<sup>45</sup> for the integration of migration into decentralised cooperation practices. It is a very useful tool for reinforcing the contributions of migration to territorial development processes, which analyses and systematises a diverse range of experiences in the field of co-development, many of which are linked to the Social and Solidarity Economy.

44. <https://www.100resilientcities.org/>

45. [http://migration4development.org/sites/default/files/guidelines\\_on\\_decentralised\\_cooperation.pdf](http://migration4development.org/sites/default/files/guidelines_on_decentralised_cooperation.pdf)

## IV.2 How to link them? Collaborative governance mechanisms

The link between territorial actors and the decentralised cooperation strategies promoted by their governments is an element of added value that gains even greater importance, if possible, if we contrast it with the traditional forms of cooperation promoted by national governments. In this regard, there is no doubt that a cooperation policy designed from the local level and supported and legitimised by the local social and productive networks is clearly oriented towards democratic quality.

However, beyond becoming aware of the potential that all of these actors have in decentralised cooperation, the key question lies in how to link them and articulate their participation so that they can unleash their full potential. This is an issue related to the broader challenge of **fostering collaborative governance mechanisms that respond to the reality of the territories, that are mobilisers, that generate commitment and engagement, and that allow progress to be made in the logic of co-creation and co-responsibility in the design and development of public policies.**

Collaborative governance mechanisms should serve to involve the territorial actors in all phases of decentralised cooperation.

1. In the phase of defining the partnerships, when needs are detected, resources are prioritised, planned and assigned.
2. In the implementation phase of decentralised cooperation initiatives, when planned actions are executed, partial results are monitored and what has been done is corrected or consolidated.
3. In the evaluation and accountability phase, when the results of the phases are analysed, learning is extracted, good practices are capitalised on and it is reported to the public.

In no way does this imply that all actors have to participate in all phases, rather only those actors who provide added value and in the phases of the partnership in which they provide it.

There are important experiences aimed at involving territorial actors in decentralised cooperation. All of them have factors in common:

- Well-defined leadership
- Fully oriented to sustainable development
- Open to all territorial actors that provide added value
- Commitment to co-creation and co-responsibility
- Management of data and information
- Oriented to accountability

As far as **leadership** is concerned, it must be ensured by the local or regional government, which has the responsibility and the democratic mandate to promote the sustainable development of its territory. However, there are some contexts, especially in less developed countries, where international cooperation agencies, whether public-national agencies, multilateral organisations, decentralised cooperation agencies or private NGOs, can take on this role. This does not create a problem in the case of institutional support and reinforcement processes; but distortions can be generated if the role they take on extends over a longer period of time, seeking to endure and consolidate themselves.

El programa **ART GOLD del PNUD**<sup>46</sup> impulsó una de las metodologías más avanzadas en el desarrollo de mecanismos de articulación de actores para el diseño e impulso de estrategias de cooperación descentralizada. En línea con el enfoque territorial para el desarrollo local, la iniciativa del PNUD lleva años promoviendo espacios de interlocución entre los diferentes actores del territorio —gobiernos locales y nacionales, cooperación internacional, sociedad civil, sector privado y academia—, reforzando el liderazgo local y orientando las acciones de cooperación descentralizada que se desarrollan en el mismo, desde una perspectiva estratégica e inclusiva.

Buscando mecanismos para promover una acción internacional comprensiva, inclusiva e integrada, la **Dirección de Relaciones Internacionales de Belo Horizonte** estructuró los Diálogos Internacionales, una plataforma de trabajo y comunicación continua con los principales actores internacionales en el territorio. Divididos en cinco grupos (consulados, cámaras de comercio, academia, asociaciones de clase y sociedad civil) se llevan a cabo reuniones de trabajo periódicas, intentando potenciar las diferentes agendas del municipio, creando sinergia entre los actores y generando compromiso.

46. [https://www.undp.org/content/brussels/en/home/ourwork/democratic-governance-and-peacebuilding/in\\_depth/UNDP-ART-local-authorities.html](https://www.undp.org/content/brussels/en/home/ourwork/democratic-governance-and-peacebuilding/in_depth/UNDP-ART-local-authorities.html)

Beyond collaborative governance structures, some decentralised cooperation actors have established innovative ways of promoting comprehensive decentralised cooperation partnerships that favour the establishment and development of direct relationships between the actors in the territories, regardless of whether or not they are peers; in other words, that favour links between universities or research centres, trade unions or business organisations, third sector organisations or those in the cultural sphere.

The comprehensive cooperation agreements promoted by the Madrid City Council and the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities<sup>47</sup> fits this logic very well. The tool offers a flexible framework that focuses their programming on the needs and aspirations of the partners involved and those of the actors in their territories (academia, civil society, private sector). Partnership is understood as a process that evolves according to the evolution of the needs of the partners and the territories involved, as well as the available resources.

Comprehensive cooperation agreements move away from isolated and specific actions and opt for medium and long-term comprehensive development processes. They focus the partnerships on exchanging experiences, mutual learning and reciprocity, the transfer of resources and good practices, etc. They introduce key elements such as priority-based planning, performance monitoring and accountability.

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## V

## Increasing public trust through accountability and a focus on results

In a context of distrust towards the public and deep social discontent, transparency and accountability become even more important, if possible. There is a demand among citizens directed at government leaders to have them take responsibility for the public policies they promote. But accountability goes beyond taking responsibility; it is a practice deeply tied to efforts aimed at designing and implementing more efficient public policies that intend on achieving measurable results in terms of sustainable development.

**Guiding public policies to achieve results** requires, on the one hand, priorities to be established based on the real needs of the territory; and, on the other hand, interventions to be planned by clearly defining the results to be achieved. In parallel, to **efficiently hold leaders accountable and facilitate social control**, it is essential to have information on the reality of the territory and the impacts achieved with the developed policies. In this regard, monitoring and evaluation are key practices aimed at obtaining the necessary information to assess these impacts and draw conclusions in the form of learning. All of which is done within the framework of collaborative governance systems that facilitate citizen participation. On the other hand, learning, which must be communicated with maximum transparency, should, on the one hand, lead to responsibilities being assumed and, on the other, to the systematisation of experiences and the capitalisation of best practices.

In this sense, decentralised cooperation, conceived as public policy, cannot be an exception. It requires monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, supported by systems of verifiable indicators and proven sources of information; regulated public information access systems and mechanisms for reporting and communicating results and experience capitalisation.

47. <https://ciudadesiberoamericanas.org/cooperacion-integral/>

## V.1 Decentralised cooperation aimed at achieving measurable results

**For starters, defining measurable results requires in-depth knowledge of the needs and interests that are to be addressed** through decentralised cooperation actions. Public policy planning processes incorporate different methodologies aimed at needs assessment and diagnosing the reality of the territory and its operators. These methodologies must serve to establish the strengths and opportunities of the territory that must be taken into account and promoted; as well as the weaknesses and threats that must be addressed through decentralised cooperation interventions.

The processes of drawing up cooperation master plans are accompanied by participatory diagnoses in which the city's main actors participate. Diputació de Barcelona<sup>48</sup> has developed a consolidated and recognised methodology for accompanying the municipalities of its territory in the processes of drawing up cooperation master plans.

Both the needs assessment and the diagnostic processes require **multi-level governance mechanisms** (to coordinate with the different levels of government that operate in the territory) as well as **citizen participation and multi-actor articulation**. Furthermore, it is necessary to have information and data on the different dimensions linked to the economic, social and environmental development of the territory and the actors that operate in it. Linking the territory's citizens and actors to these processes requires a significant effort to be made when it comes to transparency, making said information and data available to them.

48. [https://www.diba.cat/es/web/ri/cooperacio\\_desenvolupament](https://www.diba.cat/es/web/ri/cooperacio_desenvolupament)

Based on the needs detected, the **actions to be developed must be prioritised and planned to achieve the desired results**. The prioritisation and planning processes, which must also be developed in conjunction with the actors in the territory, must serve to mobilise and allocate resources, whether human, material or financial. In the field of decentralised cooperation, there is considerable experience in the planning of interventions. However, **strongly bureaucratic methodologies continue to prevail**, in other words, processes led by the funding entity in which territorial actors have little or no participation.





## V.1.2

# Monitoring and evaluation for accountability and learning

In a logic of advanced public policies, **monitoring and evaluation are processes that should be inescapable**. They fulfil different functions, but are developed based on a similar logic and common tools. **Monitoring** refers to the monitoring of implementation processes and aims to define corrections when it appears that the defined results are not being achieved. Monitoring processes are usually internal, that is, developed by the team in charge of managing the initiatives that are being implemented.

**Evaluation**, for its part, is a systematic process that aims to measure the design and implementation of an intervention and the results achieved. It seeks to facilitate accountability processes, extract learning that serves to improve the subsequent phases of planned initiatives, and systematise experiences and good practices. Evaluation can also help decentralised cooperation to demonstrate its added value, its specific contribution and its comparative advantages. Furthermore, evaluation represents an important source of legitimacy for the decentralised cooperation policy, reinforcing its value and giving it visibility and generating public trust.

Evaluation processes must be carried out by external, impartial teams that can objectively interpret the impacts achieved without any conditioning factors; and include the participation of citizens and actors in the territory.

Evaluation is a practice with deep ties to the logic of the effectiveness of sustainable development cooperation. There is a very wide range of models and methodologies; that of the DAC is the most common, each with its own specific tools. In the case of decentralised cooperation, participatory evaluation is recommended that takes into account policy coherence, paying special attention to structural factors that condition the effectiveness and viability of cooperation, such as other public policies.

The classic evaluation criteria have evolved and today, in addition to the criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact, those of coherence, coverage, innovation and learning have been added, which are especially relevant for decentralised cooperation. In particular, the coverage criterion makes it possible to assess whether groups of citizens who are the object of the intervention have faced biases or access hurdles. It is therefore extremely useful to verify whether public policies supported through decentralised cooperation contribute to reducing inequalities. It is also important to take into account the inclusion of gender as an evaluation criterion relevant to any type of evaluation.

As established in the methodological guide **“Evaluation of Public Decentralised Cooperation Initiatives”** published in 2012 by the URB-AL III Programme Coordination and Orientation Office, “the nature of decentralised cooperation may suggest orientation towards evaluation models that are more focused on processes than on results”. It emphasises the importance of taking into account the diversity of actors, noting that “concern for the diversity of agents and perspectives is reflected in trends that increasingly highlight the impact of evaluations on improvements in agents’ capacities. Evaluation is not limited to the provision of findings and recommendations applicable to the initiatives analysed, but should rather encourage participants to acquire new knowledge and skills in order to improve quality and foster development in their institutions, systems, ideas and values.”

In addition to the DAC methodologies, recently progress has been made in more relevant approaches and methodologies for the evaluation of decentralised cooperation, such as that which is oriented towards organisational learning, the mapping of achievements or communities of practice. Whatever the evaluation methodology, it is essential for local governments to integrate evaluation and learning into their mechanisms and structures and use the knowledge produced by evaluations to improve the quality of their decentralised cooperation policy.

Despite this, an in-depth analysis of the map of decentralised cooperation indicates that **both monitoring and evaluation are underdeveloped practices** and that, when they are encouraged, especially evaluation processes, it is at the request of external funding entities. They tend to be bureaucratic processes, aimed at mere compliance and not at accountability or the capitalisation of learning.

The evaluation provides information about the general performance of the interventions carried out. Said information is the central element of the **accountability** processes that seek to disseminate the results that have been achieved, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Although the demands to justify the use of resources and attainment of results very often come from donors, the accountability beneficiaries can be very diverse. In this sense, an effort must be made to link it with the logic of **social control** that involves making the citizens aware and, where appropriate, taking responsibility for the impacts of decentralised cooperation relationships, reporting on whether they have contributed to improving the local public policies and in what way. **Accountability requires regulatory frameworks that ensure transparency.** Transparency, when properly implemented, leads to an increase in the credibility and legitimacy of the governments participating in decentralised cooperation initiatives.

However, beyond accountability, the information derived from the evaluation processes also serves to obtain **learning** aimed at improving the processes of developing and implementing public policies for decentralised cooperation. It serves both to improve future actions that may take place within the framework of the policy, to enhance the impact on other policies that are promoted by the local or regional government and to promote institutional improvements and improvements in the capacities of the participating actors, from management mechanisms to strategic planning elements.

This learning can be extended to other actors in what we could define as the will to promote **collective learning** processes. This requires efforts to be made to systematise and capitalise on experiences in order to share them using existing mechanisms for the **exchange of experiences and the transfer of knowledge.** And as we have pointed out in this study, decentralised cooperation has increasingly focused its efforts on these purposes.

Both accountability and social control, as well as advances in the logic of learning, require good **communication strategies.** It should be taken into account that, nowadays, the assessment that citizens make of their governments has a lot to do with the capacity of institutions to communicate well and build adequate perceptions. In this sense, to govern well is “to do well” but also “to communicate well”.

When communicating, it is more common to communicate “about results”, where communications work as an external tool and does not participate in the different cycles of the process. On the contrary, in order to make communication useful and effective, it is important to move towards communication “for results”, understood as a cross-sectoral and strategic tool, which is present in the programme or policy from the moment it is conceived and which participates in all the cycles of the process.

Communication should be aimed at establishing bridges of relationships and dialogue with citizens, with the actors in the territory and the rest of the actors of decentralised cooperation (whether they are local and regional governments or transnational actors linked to or interested in decentralised cooperation).

As explained in **Notebook 2 of AL-LAs**, “communication is a backbone that contributes to the democratisation of the design and management of public policies because it involves the community in the definition and resolution of problems, it allows policies to be disseminated among citizens, the media and decision-makers, and it mobilises shared knowledge and practices.”

Despite this, communication remains an ongoing challenge in most decentralised cooperation policies and its potential for increasing public trust is not taken advantage of.

## VI Conclusions and recommendations

Latin America and Europe are, without a doubt, facing one of the most complex scenarios that has occurred in recent history. The COVID-19 crisis will significantly aggravate the already delicate situation of the most vulnerable sectors of society; the economies of most countries in the two regions will go into a deep recession this year and the pace of recovery remains to be seen. Will it be fast, as some analysts have forecasted, or will it stretch on, leaving behind a devastating trail? On the other hand, the need to focus many of the recovery strategies on the economy should not represent a setback in the efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change.

The pandemic brings certain lessons to the table that we cannot ignore. On the one hand, it has highlighted the weakness of public services in many countries, especially in areas such as health or education, and the impact of not investing in or having cut back on services that are essential for the well-being of the population. On the other hand, lockdowns have further exposed the digital gap between countries and societies. Finally, there is the difficulty that governments are having in managing scenarios of uncertainty that require, now more than ever, resilience and mitigation strategies.

As noted in the introduction to this study, reports prior to the outbreak of the pandemic already showed that both in Latin America and in Europe, not only had inequalities not decreased, but rather they were on the rise again. The vulnerable situation of important sectors of the population, especially the middle classes, was jeopardising social cohesion and social contract. Distrust in public institutions and the services they provide was increasing, which had resulted in the emergence of populist governments, on the one hand, and important processes of citizen protest, on the other.

Within this scenario, and, in particular, within the one that will bare its head when the pandemic begins to recede, governments and their public policies will be more relevant than ever, along with the absolutely urgent need to strengthen them. That is why, with a global roadmap such as the one provided by the 2030 Agenda, the main international organisations are calling to strengthen the international cooperation system and enhance its effectiveness.

As has become apparent during the management of the pandemic, local governments play a crucial role in defining the responses that citizens demand. Responses that must be designed, as indicated in the global agendas related to sustainable development, from a multidimensional approach to prosperity, the protection of the most vulnerable, social cohesion and the management of the climate emergency.

In this context, decentralised cooperation becomes even more relevant, since it must be considered a frontline tool for strengthening the institutional and operational capacities of local and regional governments. For this reason, it is necessary to invest in and further explore the most efficient ways of doing so and focus them on promoting processes for the development of better public policies that respond to the real needs of citizens and territories, based on the guidelines set by the 2030 Agenda.

### Recommendation 1

Within a context of economic recession and social and climatic emergency, we must intensify efforts to make the contribution of local and regional governments visible, improve the environments in which they operate by fostering decentralisation processes and the recognition of local self-government, and reinforce their institutional and operational capacities. Decentralised cooperation must be recognised as the most efficient way of doing so and the 2030 Agenda, along with the rest of the sustainable development agendas, as the roadmap to improving public policy-making processes. On the other hand, it will be important to ensure that the commitment of local and regional governments to decentralised cooperation remains firm and that the resources they mobilise are not reduced within a context of fragility and extreme vulnerability in many territories.



As analysed throughout this study, decentralised cooperation has evolved significantly in recent years. This evolution can be seen in the number of actors involved, in the resources it mobilises and in the diversity of modalities and flows that occur. It is also reflected in the interest that has been sparked in some national governments and international organisations such as the OECD or the European Union itself. In fact, the programmes fostered by the latter, in particular URB-AL and the current calls focused on partnerships for sustainable cities, have brought about significant improvements in decentralised cooperation between the two regions. Specifically, they have served to put the territorial approach on the table and strengthen the logic of technical cooperation and knowledge transfer as a core element of partnerships.

## Recommendation 2

Taking into account the fact that European Union is in the process of reviewing its 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework and the public policies that the new budget will promote, there is a very good opportunity to re-open the debate on elements of excellence identified in programmes such as URB-AL (especially the logic of networking) and to review the aspects in the current tools that have ended up not working. In particular, emphasis should be placed on the importance of the European Union breaking away from the North-South logic that, although veiled, continues to appear when the assumption is made that the flow of knowledge and experience goes only from European local and regional governments to their Latin American partners.

The evolution is also extremely noticeable in terms of intervention models. A shift has been made from assistentialism models, with a classic North-South configuration, to horizontal models, based on reciprocity and the exchange of experiences and the transfer of knowledge, whose added value and focus on the principles of effectiveness create consensus. Despite this, it is difficult to speak of a single form of decentralised cooperation; from the various forms of direct cooperation to indirect or delegated cooperation, as well as the rich and heterogeneous reality of local and regional government networks, decentralised cooperation presents a complex, rich and very dynamic ecosystem.

This evolution has also occurred in the flows of resources (financial or in the form of knowledge, experience, etc.) that are increasingly bidirectional and occur in multiple directions, North-South, South-North, South-South, North-North and triangular. Within this context, decentralised South-South cooperation is taking on considerable significance, although, as noted in this study, it can (and does) also engage in assistential logics.

The most advanced decentralised cooperation models with the highest added value are clearly aimed at strengthening the institutional and operational capacities of local and regional governments and the territories in which they operate. In this context, the territorial approach gives these models an inescapable frame of reference. It places the territory as the axis of the intervention, based on a holistic approach to its sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) and the need to have all its actors, public and private alike.

## Recommendation 3

Although decentralised cooperation models have evolved in a remarkable way, the most evolved forms continue to be identified in the most professionalised local and regional governments. There is a need to capitalise on and highlight the importance of the most efficient practices and enhance the existing training spaces to educate professionals who can accompany the necessary transformation. Platforms such as the Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation EU-LA have played this role for years, developing training and research, analysing trends, capitalising on good practices and providing information and data. We must commit to strengthening their capacities and providing them with the necessary resources to continue carrying out this work.



Decentralised cooperation can contribute to having an impact on the improvement of the regulatory and institutional environment in which local and regional governments operate, at the national, regional and even international levels. Significant efforts have been made to ensure that certain countries make progress in the processes of decentralisation, fiscal and tax reform, and the consolidation of fundamental principles such as local self-government or subsidiarity. However, despite the fact that, in some cases, the issue has been placed on the political agenda, the results in terms of legislative reforms and advocacy in the review of the state model have been rather limited. Furthermore, as has been pointed out, the global health crisis that we are experiencing may strengthen drivers of the recentralisation and decline of local democracy in some countries in both regions.

On an international level, decentralised cooperation has served to strengthen the capacities of local and regional governments to influence global agendas related to sustainable development. In this context, city networks have played a fundamental role, especially in the process of defining the 2030 Agenda and in the processes of the localisation of the SDGs; and in the negotiation of the New Urban Agenda, adopted in Quito within the framework of Habitat III and in which the cities of the region, their European partners and the networks that represent them, played a very dynamic role.

## Recommendation 4

Decentralised cooperation can and should be a very important tool for strengthening the capacities of local and regional governments to improve the regulatory and institutional environment in which they operate, influencing national, regional and international agendas. It is worth focusing on the political dimension of decentralised cooperation and not limiting it to actions of a technical or sectoral nature. Within the context of the pandemic and in the management of the crisis it will provoke, recentralisation processes may take place that will set local democracy back several years. As a result, it will be necessary to be very vigilant and report and deactivate these processes if they occur.

Technical cooperation is currently the core element of the most advanced and consolidated decentralised cooperation relationships. It allows for joint work to be done in the design of more efficient public policies and in the implementation of organisational models that are better adjusted to the needs of the territory. Technical cooperation involves technical and political personnel from local and regional governments and has the potential to incorporate other actors in the territory.

Along with technical cooperation, other forms have been developed for the transfer of knowledge and the exchange of experiences, such as the various forms linked to learning (face-to-face and online training, peer learning, collaboration with universities and research centres, etc.). More and more international organisations and transnational institutions are supporting mechanisms for the transfer of knowledge and the exchange of experienced aimed at local and regional governments.

## Recommendation 5

Technical cooperation contributes significant added value to decentralised cooperation insofar as it reinforces partnership relationships, generates ownership and is efficiently geared towards strengthening the institutional and operational capacities of local governments. However, it is a type of cooperation subject to strong resistance and limitations at the local level (usually tied to a lack of vision and a shortage of resources). In this sense, it is essential to strengthen the tools aimed at consolidating this type of cooperation, mitigating the resistance it encounters and capitalising on good practices, promoting leadership and strengthening capacities.

As we have seen throughout the study, the territorial approach points out the importance of the territory's actors in sustainable development processes and the relevance of incorporating the territory into decentralised cooperation partnerships. They provide their knowledge, skills, experience, resources, technology and the capacity for innovation; as well as, in most cases, a strong will to contribute to the common good. Decentralised cooperation can draw up very favourable frameworks for multi-actor cooperation in which the local or regional government, the private sector, academia and civil society work together to co-create sustainable development and promote structural changes.

Civil society is highly likely to be the actor with the longest history in doing so. NGDOs have been collaborating with their local governments for decades in the development of specific initiatives, although in excessively bureaucratic contexts with little connection to direct cooperation relationships. On the other hand, other civil society institutions can provide significant added value to decentralised cooperation partnerships. In this regard, linking the social movement, the third sector of social action, to environmental, cultural or sports entities, to give just a few examples, can provide the partnerships with significant resources, while also contributing to the appropriation of the initiatives that are developed and facilitating new relationships.

## Recommendation 6

Designing strategies to diversify the involvement of civil society can add value to decentralised cooperation and guide it towards more efficient and inclusive practices that better respond to the needs of citizens and territories. NGDOs can contribute to this diversification by sharing their agenda, experience and resources.

Together with civil society, the alliance with the knowledge sector is strongly consolidated and has a long history. The knowledge sector can, in turn, provide knowledge, data and analytical skills; promote research whose conclusions can improve public policies developed by local and regional governments; and offer training resources that should be key to strengthening the capacities of decentralised cooperation actors, orienting them towards more coherent and efficient logics. However, on the other hand, decentralised cooperation offers academic and research centres a privileged setting in which they can highlight the importance of their activity, as well as relevant sources of information. It is thus an alliance that generates mutual benefit.

Finally, the private sector, whose potential is beyond doubt, has yet to find its place in decentralised cooperation, and the existing red lines that limit its participation continue to be significant. The emergence of philanthropic entities supporting urban platforms, and the important track record of the Social and Solidarity Economy, can reshape the panorama.

## Recommendation 7

Opening up and developing the debate on the participation of the private sector within the framework of decentralised cooperation is now more necessary than ever. If local and regional governments are unable to lead such a debate, it will be driven by other actors, in particular philanthropic entities. It must overcome the red lines and figure out how to take advantage of the resources and knowledge it can contribute. In this sense, focusing on local business and professional networks, especially SMEs, and on the sector of the social, solidarity and collaborative economy, can generate consensus and help make progress.

## Recommendation 8

Beyond having a clear understanding of the potential of all these actors, the key lies in defining collaborative governance mechanisms that enable and enhance their participation in decentralised cooperation partnerships and allow progress to be made in a logic of co-creation and co-responsibility in the design and development of public policies. It is necessary to capitalise on existing mechanisms and foster processes aimed at generating new collaborative governance frameworks. In this regard, the alliance with the knowledge sector may be crucial.

Within a context of distrust towards the public and deep social discontent, transparency and accountability become even more important, if possible. If we assume that accountability facilitates social control, it then becomes a practice with deep ties to efforts aimed at designing and implementing more efficient public policies that intend on achieving measurable results in terms of sustainable development. Accountability requires regulatory frameworks that ensure transparency and, if properly implemented, lead to an increase in the credibility and legitimacy of the governments participating in decentralised cooperation initiatives.

Furthermore, as the study has shown, accountability also requires progress to be made in communication strategies defined from a strategic perspective and that contribute to regaining trust and connection with citizens. Communication is a key tool for decentralised cooperation, and it needs do much more than simply disseminate activities and initiatives. Viewing communication from a strategic perspective with a results-oriented approach will turn it into an essential tool for promoting efficient and transformative public policies. It is still, however, an ongoing challenge.

## Recommendation 9

Implementing accountability in decentralised cooperation partnerships requires political will, leadership and vision. It also requires an improved strategy to communicate “for results” and not “about results”. In other words, a comprehensive, multi-actor, cross-sectoral communication strategy that is present in all the cycles of the decentralised, proactive cooperation policy with a medium and long-term vision and with the necessary human and financial resources. Therefore, it is necessary to promote mechanisms aimed at strengthening the capacities of local and regional governments in the areas of accountability and communication for results, capitalising on good practices, defining operational tools and developing training processes.

On the other hand, defining measurable results requires in-depth knowledge of the needs and interests that are to be addressed, as well as the participation of citizens and actors in the territory. It also requires leadership to define priorities and plan implementation processes, mobilising and allocating resources. However, strongly bureaucratic methodologies continue to prevail, that is, processes largely defined by the funding entity in which the territorial actors have little or no participation.

In a logic of advanced public policies, monitoring and evaluation are processes that should be inescapable in the field of decentralised cooperation. The classic evaluation criteria have evolved and today, in addition to the criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact, those of coherence, coverage, innovation and learning have been added, which are especially relevant for decentralised cooperation. In addition to the DAC methodologies, recently progress has been made in more relevant approaches and methodologies for the evaluation of decentralised cooperation, such as that which is oriented towards organisational learning, the mapping of achievements or communities of practice.

An in-depth analysis of the map of decentralised cooperation indicates that both monitoring and evaluation are underdeveloped practices and that when they are promoted, especially evaluation processes, it is at the request of external funding entities. The information derived from the evaluation processes also serves to obtain learning aimed at improving the processes of developing and implementing public policies for decentralised cooperation. In this sense, it is important to move towards logics of collective learning, which requires efforts to be made to systematise and capitalise on experiences in order to share them.

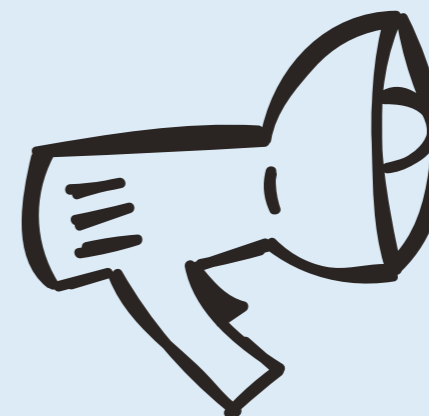
### Recommendation 10

Consolidating monitoring and evaluation processes requires capacities and tools that local and regional governments generally do not have. In this sense, it is essential for the institutions that give their support to decentralised cooperation to develop support instruments aimed at strengthening their capacities and deploying information and data generation systems, without which the promotion of monitoring, evaluation and accountability processes is not feasible.

Based on all of the above, and as a result of the debates and exchanges generated at the conference held in Montevideo and the contributions made by some of the experts consulted, we can say that decentralised cooperation practices have indeed evolved, although more so in theory than in practice. Nevertheless, the territorial approach and the global agendas, in particular the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda, offer a frame of reference with strong potential to drive it towards much more efficient, coherent and inclusive logics that are better adapted to the real needs of citizens and territories. Platforms such as the Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation EU-LA, which over the years has shown vision and leadership, must persevere in the pledge to ground, socialise and generalise the most advanced models that even today are the patrimony of only a few local and regional governments endowed with greater resources and capacities.

AGUSTÍ FERNÁNDEZ DE LOSADA PASSOLS

LA COOPERACIÓN DESCENTRALIZADA COMO MECANISMO PARA ABORDAR LAS DESIGUALDADES Y FORTALECER LA DEMOCRACIA EN LOS TERRITORIOS





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