



Diputació
Barcelona



observatorio
Cooperación descentralizada

Study: “Rethinking Decentralised Cooperation in a context of uncertainties and multiple transitions”



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1. Conclusions and recommendations

As is evident throughout this study, like their peers in other parts of the world, European and Latin American local governments face the dilemma of dealing with a highly uncertain and complex scenario. This is defined on the one hand, by the effects of various global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the geopolitical tensions arising from the war in Ukraine; and on the other, the transformative and disruptive potential of the climate and digital transitions. These crises and transitions have merely aggravated the structural shortcomings of a model of production, consumption and coexistence that is socially and environmentally unsustainable, and which has enhanced vulnerabilities, inequalities and injustices and endangered the social contract. This is all taking place against a backdrop of rising nationalism, populism and authoritarianism in which the existence of democracy is at stake.

There is a strong consensus on how local governments are dealing with this scenario involving multiple crises and transitions. Local governments' commitment to people and their environment is leading them to create responses and solutions that are heavily adapted to local situations; as well as responding to the needs, interests and aspirations of the citizens and actors in their territories. However, there is also consensus concerning the limitations and barriers they face when defining those responses and solutions; the obstacles are imposed by inadequate regulatory and institutional frameworks, and the lack of resources and authority with which they work in many countries.

In this context, decentralised cooperation has a key role to play in reinforcing the ability of European and Latin American local governments and institutions to address the complexity of the challenges they face. This will enable them to unlock the transformative potential of the transitions and mitigate the impacts of the crises and threats that are endangering the social contract and democracy; to contribute to shaping socio-economic models that curb unlimited growth and inequalities, which are sustainable and which place the agenda of rights and democracy at the centre of their actions.

By way of conclusion, we propose a series of recommendations that arose from the collective debate that took place during the VIII Annual Conference, which proposed a re-thinking of decentralised cooperation in a context of multiple transitions.

Recommendation 1. A fair and transformative political agenda

Promote horizontal political dialogue between European and Latin American local governments **in order to define a new political agenda for decentralised cooperation** that addresses the transitions and transformations required by the context of multiple crises in a fair, responsible and socially committed manner. This agenda must be comprehensive and inclusive, and aimed at addressing the challenges shared by local governments in the two regions and strengthening public policies with the greatest transformative potential.

Recommendation 2. An agenda for rights and a feminist perspective

Transcend the welfare-based approach, and **make the rights agenda a cornerstone of decentralised cooperation strategies to combat inequalities and poverty**. Local government policies should not only help the most vulnerable groups, but must also be focused on generating structural changes in key areas including housing, the integration of immigrants, gender equality, employment and the care economy. A **feminist perspective** must be adopted that comprehensively addresses the inequalities and gaps created by an unjust and unsustainable socio-economic model.

Recommendation 3. Climate justice

Place **climate justice** at the centre of decentralised cooperation strategies with a special focus on the **new forms of inequality and exclusion created by the green transition**. There is an urgent need to reduce CO₂ emissions, decarbonise the economy, adapt societies to climate change and mitigate its effects by means of policies in areas such as urban mobility, renewable energies, access to water and sanitation, and food security. However, these policies must aim to prevent and mitigate the negative impacts of the climate transition, and create mechanisms to repair the irreversible damage and losses caused by climate change.

Recommendation 4. Ethical digital transition

Contribute to European and Latin American local governments' placing ethics and the rights agenda at the heart of their digitisation strategies through decentralised cooperation. They must define how to combat the inequalities and gaps that are created, and how to protect rights in a heavily deregulated sector. Strengthening the powers of local governments in this area is crucial, as is reinforcing the existing platforms for political advocacy and knowledge transfer.

Although on the one hand technology and the digital transition can help cities to provide better services, on the other they create complex challenges such as the digital divide and algorithmic inequalities, which have the potential to create distortions in key areas such as housing, mobility and local commerce, threatening employment and personal (privacy) rights. Meanwhile, the impact of digitalisation on climate is a challenge with dimensions that are yet to be determined.

Recommendation 5. A different economy for different development

Help local governments to **deploy the full potential of fairer, more ethical and sustainable economic models**. The prevailing economic model, based primarily on speculation, has proven itself to be unjust and unsustainable, and has a strong impact on local conditions. New forms of production are emerging to address this issue, such as the social and solidarity economy, which are heavily inclusive of the societies in which they operate, oriented towards the most vulnerable groups, and unambiguously contribute to social cohesion.

However, despite the major role that they should play in the future, there are barriers to these forms of production, especially in the regulatory framework, which limit their potential. For this reason, decentralised cooperation must promote political advocacy processes aimed at bringing about changes in regulatory systems, especially in the area of public procurement, by supporting social clauses and the protection of human rights and the environment.

Recommendation 6. Decentralisation and local autonomy

Restore the agenda of decentralisation and local autonomy by orienting decentralised cooperation towards **care for democracy** by empowering local governments and actors, from three main perspectives: a) giving local governments the resources and authority to address citizens' needs, interests and aspirations; b) promoting the **"right to territory"** and encouraging political advocacy strategies that foster regulatory frameworks which guarantee clarity of powers, sufficient resources and adequate collaboration between different levels of government, and between them and the actors working on the ground and the public; c) supporting accountability as an essential cornerstone of democracy addressing issues of corruption. This is a key factor in restoring citizens' trust in the local public sphere, strengthening democracy, caring for it, and counteracting the spread of populist and authoritarian narratives and formulas.

Recommendation 7. Incorporate a broader framework of coherence

Address the multiple challenges facing the territories based on **a framework of coherence** that seeks means of administration based on the **logic of complementarity**,

horizontality and trust, incorporating the **principle of transparency and collaborative logic, co-creation, co-responsibility and accountability** of all the actors involved. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an essential roadmap due to its holistic and integral perspective on development, as are other approaches such as rights and the promotion of democracy, policy coherence for sustainable development and global justice, and the territorial approach to sustainable development. All of these constitute the essential foundations of the political agenda for decentralised cooperation.

Recommendation 8. Bridge the gap between discourse and practice: assessment of types of decentralised cooperation

Decentralised cooperation is currently expressed in a wide-ranging, diverse and complex series of formats and types of intervention that fall within approaches that are not always harmonious. Despite the remarkable evolution and transition from the classic, vertically structured welfare-based models to horizontal models based on the logic of building partnerships between peers, there is a consensus that this evolution has taken place more in narrative than in practice, in academic constructs and in models drawn from knowledge, than in the real situation of local and regional governments. The **assessment of types of cooperation from a transformative perspective** must avoid the imposition of bureaucratic and functional logics on policies, and reinforce more effective decentralised cooperation strategies that give the agenda of rights, democracy and local governance a central role.

Recommendation 9. Support horizontal cooperation

Support horizontal types of direct cooperation and those with the most transformative potential. Promote processes for the capitalisation of good practices, knowledge transfer mechanisms and training instruments. Promote technical cooperation, especially within the framework of South-South cooperation, as well as multilateral action mechanisms, highlighting the work done within the framework of the ephemeral networks and coalitions. Take advantage of the opportunities offered by some multilateral organisations and philanthropic organisations based on the political agendas defined at the territorial level.

Recommendation 10. Commitment to Education for Global Justice (EGJ)

Emphasise **education for global justice as a practice within decentralised cooperation aimed at making citizens, social movements and civil society** in Europe and Latin America part of a critical reflection on the major challenges and transformations that the planet requires. Unleash the full potential of culture, science and technology as

accelerators of social change and transformation, and enhance the links and feedback between decentralised cooperation and the various types of cultural, scientific and technological cooperation.

Recommendation 11. Strengthen the legal, financial and technical framework for decentralised cooperation

Apart from sub-national governments, which are the central figures in decentralised cooperation, other spheres of government have a considerable impact on relations between territories. **Partnership with national governments must be encouraged to promote legislative processes aimed at expanding the regulatory frameworks** that legitimise decentralised cooperation and regulate its practices, and foster the implementation of national financial and technical instruments that strengthen decentralised cooperation.

Recommendation 12. Call for EU support for EU-LA Decentralised Cooperation

Call for support for decentralised cooperation within the framework of political dialogue between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean, and especially to achieve greater support from the European Union, which has been a benchmark in the promotion of decentralised cooperation between the two regions. However, there is now evidence that this support is fading. It is therefore necessary to foster a fresh impetus for systems supporting cooperation between local governments in the two regions, both bilaterally and in networks, within the framework of the regional programmes defined during the implementation of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).

Recommendation 13. Support a multi-stakeholder vision for inclusive decentralised cooperation

Rethink the relationships between decentralised cooperation and civil society, promoting the link with the partnerships that are defined between territories on the basis of **collaborative formulas and co-responsibility**. The added value of civil society must go far beyond carrying out specific projects in partner countries, and be geared towards enhancing the partnerships that are established within and between territories. Promote the participation of the third sector, as well as the social and climate activism movements that are today the conduits for a large proportion of citizens' concerns in both Latin America and Europe.

Recommendation 14. Enhanced partnerships with the knowledge sector

Foster the relationship between decentralised cooperation and the knowledge sector by linking it to the partnerships that are built between territories. Its contribution is crucial for training professionals in the international development cooperation sector and for educating citizens who are aware of the challenges facing the planet and the injustices taking place in it. However, this relationship is not limited to training and education. It is also vital for improving the quality of local government policies. The full potential of this partnership should be deployed to promote strategies that are more informed and tailored to the local situations in which they are implemented.

Recommendation 15. Establish ethical limits to private sector partnership

The link between decentralised cooperation and the private sector leads to disagreements, and the need to **establish clear boundaries on its vocation for profit and to place environmental and labour demands outside the extractive approach of the market**. The work being done by philanthropic organisations, which are very active in the urban environment, must be analysed and understood from a critical perspective. This is in addition to moving towards increased **collaboration with the social and solidarity economy sector** in implementing the necessary relationship between decentralised cooperation and local productive sectors.

2. Recommendations for the Observatory

Some recommendations specifically addressed to the Observatory were also expressed during the VIII Conference. We have included these in our work objectives, and will progressively endeavour to respond to them in the planning of activities.

- Contribute to the systematisation and collection of data on decentralised cooperation, as no initiative or institution has done so since the Observatory stopped doing so after its time as a European project.
- Support the culture of assessment and measurement of the impact of existing types of cooperation and their instruments.
- Epistemological reflection on the types of cooperation, since it is not the types that are important, but the emancipatory nature of cooperation.
- Rethink the types of cooperation because we are constrained by regulatory frameworks, and the current instruments are limited. Create creative models and new formats.
- Support training in decentralised cooperation for elected officials.
- Support education for global justice as a core aspect of cooperation policy.
- If the Observatory adopts the agenda proposed in the discussion workshops, it should examine forms of shared work, with multi-level articulation, co-governance and the establishment of bioregions.



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