

# DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AND ITS EVOLUTION IN EUROPE



# Development Cooperation and its Evolution in Europe

## a) What is decentralised cooperation and why it is important to enhance European development policies

In recent years, local and regional authorities - or more broadly “communities” - became themselves actors of cooperation, initiators and implementers of development policies. The local dimension is not considered any longer the final part of a top down long chain of processes bringing democracy and wealth but rather an essential and founding part of it. The local and regional authorities may even represent the most important piece of a more global approach to development. Indeed, Local authorities gained relevance in the EU policies as well as in the more global ones. They have a special place in the programmes supported by the European Commission and are actors and beneficiaries of the main supporters for Development policies around the globe. The new Sustainable Development Goals identify a strengthened role for local authorities and for the *localisation* of Development. This renewed approach is necessary and certainly bring efficiency and sustainability to processes of development. But many issues remain unsolved and weaken this potentiality. In particular, Local authorities as such do not have – alone - all the elements for development and democracy consolidation. Around them, certain conditions need to exist. To be real actors of change they need to have real powers and autonomy – that could generate development processes – and also a vivid and strong civil society, actively engaged in local democratic process. Decentralised organs of the State (as it could happen when local elections are not existing or representing a simulation of local democracy), essentially nationally controlled, can hardly be considered as true elements of democracy and often represent only another and articulated form of control of the territory and do not develop the full potentiality of local governance.

In brief, decentralised cooperation is the one that gives to local and regional authorities (elected and in a framework of local democracy) and their communities a full role in development policies and international cooperation.

The decentralised approach proposes a complementary tool to international cooperation which implies the action of stakeholders like governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development agencies, multilateral organisations, which support development policies or emergency initiatives and programmes in another State. It is usually responding to national guidelines or international multilateral commitments and framework. The guidelines and priorities are usually set the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (or a part of Ministry of Economy or Foreign Trade, etc.). Cooperation can be bilateral (between similar stakeholders or between two States). This represents the most common way to develop cooperation programmes. Indeed, the widest part of Diplomacy or Foreign Affairs used to be bilateral through the network of the Embassies. The multilateralism, like it is the case – for example - of the United Nations, the European Union programmes and institutions and the Council of Europe – is however growing considering the need to respond collectively to global issues. In that case, the single State operates in a general concept for an agreed global goal. Policies for development – again in their general assumption - are the

one addressed to support basic needs in the so-called Cooperation Countries (food, sanitation, infrastructure, education, water etc). The list of *Cooperation Countries* are often decided at the governmental level and correspond to a certain political target, while they include some and exclude others<sup>1</sup>. Decentralised cooperation introduces in all of this new actors. Local authorities and local communities have a full role to play in development policies and local governance support.

The topics of cooperation have also essential changed from a development perspective to a more “governance” approach. And this process has even consolidated the importance to work with local communities and their authorities.

The last 30 years are particularly interesting as for the changes that underwent in the field of international cooperation. The end of the XXth century corresponded to a period of redesigning of the systems of democracies with the end of the bilateral confrontation between East and West. The area included in the former USSR and then CIS<sup>2</sup> went through a long transition period, where democracy and rules of society were strongly at stake. The process is still undergoing.

In this framework are addressed issues like support to public administration, institutional building, policies for management at the public and private level. The “transitional countries” needed (and still do) a lot of support from a political, social and economic point of view. The democratic transitional period paved the way to new forms of cooperation focusing on systemic and long-term changes. Decentralised cooperation, based on the involvement of local actors offered advantages because more adapted to new players, possibilities and themes of actions, which are perfectly correspondent to these new requests.

We also had other specific and more “localized” factors that brought and created new possibilities to decentralised cooperation and action for local and regional authorities in Europe. As the war in Former Yugoslavia, which engendered many grass root exchanges and contacts from both side of the Adriatic Sea. This process regarded not only the countries bordering with the Adriatic Sea but the whole Europe, in particular in these last decade where the process of accession of South Eastern Europe to the EU has been further developed<sup>3</sup>. During the war in the Balkans and shortly after, the governments of former Yugoslav States were blocked – entangled in post war and ethnic issues - while the NGOs and the local authorities were more dynamic and could bring relief, help and support, which were all the basis for a long lasting decentralised cooperation. All of these were also a first platform where methodologies were acquired for future activities.

Let’s consider, at this point, one of the most recurrent question: why a local authority should engage in international cooperation? How the community, the citizens of that municipality, could benefit from this engagement and secure a beneficial reciprocity. How can we make sure that the money of the tax payers are well spent? Even if we all have in mind that so simple questions are hard to find an answer, they have a fully legitimate and they need be addressed.

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<sup>1</sup> A possible reference is the list of the Cooperation Countries of Italy  
[http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Politica\\_Estera/Aree\\_Geografiche/](http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Politica_Estera/Aree_Geografiche/)

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists\\_of\\_former\\_Soviet\\_Republics\\_by\\_GDP\\_\(PPP\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_former_Soviet_Republics_by_GDP_(PPP))

<sup>3</sup> See the European Summit in Thessaloniki (2003), launching the idea of the Balkans in European Union

International decentralised cooperation globally enhances public policies, which give the opportunity to local institutions and their community to improve the quality of the services provided to citizens and the general well-being in the community, both in countries from where the cooperation is initiated and in the areas considered “beneficiaries”. The term “beneficiary” – as a matter of fact - is not appropriate and corresponds more to a flow of financial resources (financially often generated by EU or Westerners in general). In decentralised cooperation all the parts are “beneficiaries” of the process. Decentralised cooperation approach to development implies reciprocity, understanding, relationship, accountability and long-term perspective, which so much correspond to the qualities requested by policy makers. The approach tends to modify systems and cultures – and initiate processes - rather than having a one spot initiative for a project.

## b) Features of decentralised cooperation

Decentralised cooperation is based on reciprocity and multilateral approach. It is developed on the interest and comprehension of the others’ situation and needs. It implies a wish and methods to go *towards* the partners in the cooperation. It cannot be a unilateral approach where we are “teaching how things must go”. Dialogue and active listening are an excellent exercise also for the actors at the political and technical level that would implement this method also in their own community.

Another fundamental hint of this exercise of public governance is the cooperation between local authorities and civil society (association and composed groups of citizens). It is evident and proved that there is a direct relationship between a strong civil society sector and the level of democracy in a country. Thanks to civil society, it is possible to establish a direct contact with the community. They also represent clear “watch dog” of the democratic process a delivering of outcome from public institutions. By involving citizens, it is also easy to identify feasible and implementable solution where they will be fully engaged. Both of these stakeholders (local authorities and civil society) are actors of decentralised cooperation and can act at the international level and bring experiences, knowledge and concepts.

Activities of decentralised cooperation can be described by some elements, which characterized the initiatives:

- The activity should be based and shared by a multiplicity of stakeholders (associations and NGOs, civil society and community, local authorities, economic actors, etc.) of the community. They all must/could be engaged in a broad and participatory process of consultation, from the need assessment to drafting, implementing and monitoring;
- Decentralised Cooperation is based on a thematic approach on institution building and community development through a bottom approach;
- The resources are considered both human and financial. It gives strength to local resources and know how;
- The actions focuses on reciprocity between actors of the cooperation in a long term perspective of common growth;
- Decentralised cooperation should and could operate mostly in areas and countries where institutions exist (it is difficult to work in countries where there are very limited possibilities of democratic rules or non-elected local authorities or pure emergency situation).

### c) Actors of decentralised cooperation

As mentioned earlier, in these last decades, the role of local authorities has been recognised as fundamental for the support of a sustainable and fair development of a community. This is the public authority which is closer to citizens and have a better understanding of the local needs and processes, and is the closest responsible for results and mistakes! Local authorities also need to identify – quicker than others - solutions for immediate problems and situations like security, movement of populations, emergency situation, infrastructures, etc. The Mayor and the local government cannot escape from their responsibility and or find excuses in lengthy legislative processes and parliamentary commissions in the capital city! The same way, civil society organisations are considered as a strong element, which needs to be taken into consideration within the democratic processes, especially at the local level. This new season reminds us all that the expression of citizens cannot be neglected for ever. Bottom up processes of citizens have raised their voices in many countries, in Europe and in the rest of the world.

Both these stakeholders – civil society and local authorities working together at the local level – are more and more perceived as a key to peace, stability and development.

### d) Role of EU policies to support decentralised cooperation

Another form of strong and visible impetus to decentralised cooperation comes from the policies of the European Union, which gave a major role to local authorities in these last decades in policies and programmes. Just to mention shortly here (will be studied carefully in another section of the book), the Territorial Cooperation Programmes, the Enlargement and Neighbourhood programmes and the Non State Actors Programmes (local authorities, NGOs, associations, etc.). The programmes of the European Commission gave strength and structure to decentralised cooperation in general and we could hardly conceive today European NGOs and local authorities active in international cooperation without the support of the EU programmes.

### e) The challenges of the decentralized cooperation in the European and worldwide context

Local Authorities have been in these last years recognized as valuable and fully-fledged actors of international cooperation. This assumption goes together with the fact that – within their own States – Local authorities are also considered engine and generators of development and social and political stability and strength.

The role of LAs is now well established in the EU discourse for development and also at the worldwide level. A milestone has been recently adopted with the Communication of the European Commission on the role of Local Authorities in Development which highlighted the importance of giving them a specific role and therefore being also stakeholders of European Union programs and

policies as well beneficiaries of resources. This role has been also recognized by others major worldwide actors working and supporting local governance.

In such a dynamic and promising context, some challenges are however putting shadows on this methodological approach. It seems important to underline these difficulties in order to address them in the best way and unlock the full potentiality of the international decentralized cooperation in the global context of development.

## The crisis is hitting hard the EU local authorities, in particular when it comes to their engagement in international cooperation

The global crisis is snaking all around us. It regards our economic standards of life and it addresses the capacities of all the public stakeholders to engage in cooperation and development. The common approach of public bodies is now devoted to “refocus” on the essential elements of their mandate: delivery of local services, management of public utilities, address very local needs. In Europe, States have cut heavily the transfers to local authorities while it has delegated to them even more responsibilities and task. Globally speaking, any expenses which is not really *essential* and *mandatory* is carefully evaluated and often just cut. This approach represents an absolute challenge for international decentralized cooperation, which considers – for obvious reasons – some financial resources of public authorities being invested in projects and activities that – at the end of the process – could be paid back for the community but, on a first instance, seems less relevant than the emergencies.

Some information on the issue is easily understandable. For instance, the Veneto Region (Italy) has been going through a constant reduction of its financial commitment for supporting local stakeholders (CSOs and local authorities). The decreasing trend is visible since 2011 (€ 2.059.400 - 90% from the previous year), 2012 (€ 1.245.000 -84%), 2013 (€ 1.125.000 -82%) e 2014 (€ 830.000 - 76%). In 2015 the allocation was 200.000 Euro. Figures are self-explanatory.

## Localized visions

Not less dangerous than the financial reduction of resources is the “very localized” vision that many local politicians are not inclined to adopt, at the European Union level. Communities involved in a process of globalization are often responding with fears and blockades. Many politicians, even at the local level, are not inclined – for electoral purposes – to engage in international cooperation fearing to lose possible citizens’ support. The raise of nationalist movement in Europe accompanies naturally a process where the LAs are less engaged in international matters. It needs a lot of strengthen and a consolidated political position to be able to continue in international cooperation and defy the call for “getting back to the local”.

## Open conflicts

On the other side of the cooperation, many actions are not taking place in open conflicts or even in instable context, where the structure of the state is at stake. It regards now areas such are Ukraine, Libya or Egypt as well as many African and Middle East areas. In such a situation, decentralized cooperation and the engagement of local authorities could be hardly implementable in a process of institution building and cities diplomacy. In open conflict with security issues, the relevance of the States is taking over together with the humanitarian approaches.

## Trends towards centralization

In Europe, for many decades, the trend was towards decentralization and local authorities have gained on autonomy and strengthen. As a matter of fact, the European Union construction was based rather on the consolidation of regions that also were aggregated on areas (for example the programs for Trans-border cooperation) that were operational over the border. A process of recentralization of policies is now on going either openly or less visibly. Some important territorial reorganization is operational in some European states, where this trend is clearly understood. As it is highlighted in a recent publication of the CCCR/CEMR taking stock on decentralization in Europe, the process are various and present huge differences but are mainly aiming at regionalization and metropolisation around big aggregates and reductions of intermediary tiers (like in Italy with the reduction or transformation of the Provinces).

For all these reasons decentralized cooperation as a tool for development is at risk and it is a real problem because of it is great potentiality and impact in the countries where it is operational.