Decentralized Cooperation

Abstract Decentralized cooperation refers to a broad array of local governments’ international actions sharing the goal of fostering socio-economic development in one or more of the participant cities. Born in the aftermath of the Second World War as a purely value-based activity fueled by solidarity, this practice has evolved to generate added value and benefits for both “donor” and “recipient” cities. This chapter aims at presenting the core features and challenges of today’s decentralized cooperation activities. It will take into consideration the partnerships with the other actors of development cooperation, i.e., governments, international organizations, and NGOs. Finally, it will include a focus on the practice of co-development, consisting of the involvement of migrant communities in cooperation activities in their countries and cities of origin.

Keywords City diplomacy · Decentralized cooperation · Development aid · Transnational solidarity · Solidarity · Reciprocity · Co-development · COVID-19
When Solidarity Connects Cities Across the World

Through decentralized cooperation activities, cities are supported in their socioeconomic development by their peers. As highlighted in Chapter 2, such an approach emerged in bilateral frameworks since the end of the Second World War. It was an integral part of many of the first twinning agreements, through which cities deeply affected by the war received much-needed material support from their foreign peers. The fact that such an action connected cities in former enemy countries speaks of the high level of political commitment of many cities toward transnational solidarity, a key driver of city diplomacy itself.

This bilateral approach quickly expanded to connect cities in developed countries with those in developing ones. The process aimed at accompanying decolonization—e.g., French cities showed a particular commitment in supporting the independence process in Francophone Africa. This process slowly moved toward more pronounced reciprocity between “donor” and “recipient” cities and local partners’ involvement on both sides. Moreover, it received increased recognition from central governments, who generally support this kind of activity for its positive impact in terms of public diplomacy (see Chapter 2).

A Unique Approach

Cities’ action in development cooperation has often been compared to that of states and NGOs. Albeit cities frequently cooperate with these two actors, their approach stands out in terms of goals and methodology.

– Unlike states, cities with independent city diplomacy strategies can hardly be accused of having hidden agendas to influence or

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1 In France, the term “coopération décentralisée” (decentralized cooperation) has been used in the past to cover all international activities implemented by local governments. Today, the generally accepted term for city diplomacy is “action internationale des collectivités territoriales” (territorial collectivities’ international action) (ARRICOD 2018). Nevertheless, the initial term is still found in name of the main public body connecting national and city diplomacies, the Commission National de la Coopération Décentralisée (National Commission of Decentralized Cooperation). Since 2008, the European Union uses the term decentralized cooperation to indicate local governments’ development aid (European Commission 2008).
control foreign cities’ politics and economy. Moreover, states tend to concentrate on central administration support, leaving space for specific partnerships with local governments.

- Differently from NGOs, whose involvement in foreign cities tends to be framed by the temporal limits of their projects, cities aim at creating a stable, long-term relationship with the local partner. Nevertheless, this does not mean that fiscal distress might not impact the scale and temporality of cities’ actions.

**THE EVOLUTION OF DECENTRALIZED COOPERATION**

Over time, decentralized cooperation has faced a three-fold evolution in terms of its content, methodology, and geographic scope.

First, in terms of content, over the last few years, cities have realized they share a set of common, mostly unprecedented challenges, ranging from the rising temperatures to air pollution, from violent extremism to epidemics such as the COVID-19. As a result, decentralized cooperation has been evolving accordingly. Initially intended as a mere act of solidarity toward urban communities in need, decentralized cooperation represents today an opportunity to cooperate in realizing shared goals—even if costs and impact generally remain unbalanced, and solidarity still plays a relevant role in driving the practice. Such an approach has been widely adopted by cities and city networks, as shown by the increased use of the term “partnership” to qualify this kind of activities. Moreover, political alignment on shared goals has fostered increased technical cooperation between partner cities’ municipal services sharing similar tasks. Such practice, also known as “Officers without Borders,” allows for increased learning on both sides and presents limited costs for municipalities, making it available also for those experiencing budget cuts (Dragone 2020).

This evolution finds its main institutional supporter in the United Nations, whose development strategy has shifted from addressing the needs of the least developed countries (Millennium Development Goals) to a global partnership framework for achieving sustainable development in the whole world (Agenda 2030 with its Sustainable Development Goals—SDGs). This notably includes a specific accent on “making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” (SDG number 11).
Second, in terms of methodology, the practice evolved toward a more significant implication of the receiving administration, and of population and stakeholders on both sides. This horizontal and vertical participatory process received its first formal recognition in 2005 by OECD’s Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. It is nevertheless linked to a major trend in development cooperation emerged in the early 1990s and today embraced by the different actors in the field, such as national agencies, international development banks, and NGOs, who became progressively aware of the limits of “top-down,” ready-made approaches (Mansuri and Rao 2012).

On both sides of the partnership, the implemented activities involve empowering communities to contribute to the definition of shared goals, and allow for co-ownership of the achievements. As a result, projects feature a stronger adherence to local needs, values, and interests of both sides.

Moreover, the methodology has evolved to include enhanced monitoring and impact evaluation, traditionally weak points of decentralized cooperation, an evolution encouraged by donor institutions.

**Box 3.1: The Quelimane (Clean Quelimane) Limpa Project**

Located on Mozambique’s eastern seaboard, Quelimane is the capital of the Zambezia province. Like many other cities in Africa, it has been experiencing rapid urbanization. Its population increased from 193,300 in 2007 to around 350,000 in 2017, mainly due to the influx of migrants from the rural hinterland. The impact in terms of waste overwhelmed

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2 Even if the 2005 Paris Declaration in Aid Effectiveness was the result of a debate between national governments, with no local governments’ participation, the relevance of their involvement appears in the declaration. The central role of local governments was further stressed in OECD’s Accra Agenda for Action (2008), as well as in the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-Operation (2011), two instruments whose definition benefited from the contribution of cities and local governments (and of other non-state actors of development cooperation) (OECD 2005, 2008; ‘The Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-Operation’ 2011).

3 Today, most calls for projects to support decentralized cooperation issued by international organizations, central governments, development agencies, and NGOs demand qualitative and quantitative impact assessment procedures to be included in the application, with a part of the total budget explicitly allocated to that purpose.
the management capacities of the dedicated municipal agency, EMUSA, leading to environmental damage (mainly water contamination) and the spread of diseases. The existing relationship with Milan—enhanced by Quelimane participation in the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact—facilitated a concrete collaboration on such an issue. The two municipalities co-wrote the application to the European Union’s new generation of grants requiring the lead applicant to be a local authority from a developing country. The project was awarded a contribution of €338,530 by the EU and enjoyed additional funding from the Lombardy region, the City of Milan, Novamont, and the Peppino Vismara foundation. Activities took place between December 2016 and August 2019.

In line with its multi-stakeholder approach to city diplomacy, the city of Milan involved in the project a series of local actors, including its waste management agency, AMSA (A2A Group), which conducted training to EMUSA staff, offering advice on the evolution of their waste management strategy. As a result, new practices of waste collection and compost processing have been introduced. Moreover, both municipalities involved local and international NGOs (namely Celim ONLUS) to support the design, implementation, and monitoring of activities. On Quelimane’s side, the project outcomes included a quantified increase in waste management and the spread of composting, which translated into increased availability of locally produced fruits and vegetables in local markets. Through the project, the Municipality of Milan could improve its experience in co-creation and co-ownership of projects, as well as in knowledge transfer and local stakeholders’ mobilizations. Local partners from Milan could expand their expertise and visibility through such international project while exchanging knowledge with foreign partners. The successful implementation of the project led the two cities to start a new cooperation project on Quelimane’s water management (2018–2021). It features a similar capacity building and pilot project approach, this time implemented in cooperation with MM SpA, the City of Milan’s engineering company.

Sources (European Commission 2015), Halliday et al. (2019), and La Ferla and Commodaro (2020).

Third, in geographical terms, decentralized cooperation is a key component of the rising practice of South-South and triangular city cooperation mentioned in Chapter 2. Examples include Chinese cities’
initiatives in the frame of the “Belt and Road” initiative, as well as the activities of several city networks: Mercociudades, the regional network of Mercosur launched in 1995, finds in South-South cooperation its own raison d’être, just like United Cities and Local Governments of Africa, UCLG’s African section, funded in 2005 by merging three existing city network, namely the African Union of Local Authorities (AULA); the Union des Villes Africaines (UVA); and the Africa Chapter of the Uniao dos Ciudades y Capitaes Lusofono Africana, (UCCL AFRICA).

THE CHALLENGES OF DECENTRALIZED COOPERATION

The most common challenge in decentralized cooperation activities lies in institutional, political, socioeconomic, and cultural differences between partners. This implies that copy-paste activities are likely to meet obstacles if involved cities have not taken the time to familiarize with each other and establish tailor-made, common strategies based on both local specificities. In order to establish such fruitful collaboration, cities can leverage on existing connections, such as those created by migration (see Box 3.3 on co-development), NGOs, universities, and businesses. Additional support can come from embassies or consulates from both nations.

Another challenge consists in avoiding duplication. The Atlas of Decentralized Cooperation published by the European Committee of the Regions shows that most activities implemented by European local authorities concentrate on a limited number of cities of a limited number of countries, usually those connected with Europe by migration (Committee of the Regions 2020). These concentrations reduce the impact of cooperation initiatives and open to the risk of overlaps of projects. Instead of following the footsteps of their peers, cities interested in establishing new partnerships should consider the opportunities stemming from interacting with less connected cities, where they would enjoy the advantage of being the leading foreign partner.

Calls for projects by actors such as national governments, development agencies, and the European Union have also been reported to have a distortive impact, leading cities to design international activities based on

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4 In 2017 the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) launched the “South-South and Triangular Cooperation(SSTC)among Maritime-Continental Silk Road Cities for Sustainable Development Project”. The project involves around 50 cities in the Pacific Region, Eurasia, MENA countries and Africa (UNOSSC 2020).
the call rather than on concrete needs (Kihlgren Grandi 2020, 32–34). Luckily, the likelihood of such an issue seems to significantly diminish whenever cities are able to establish long-term partnerships featuring preparatory talks to identify potential topics of cooperation, and then apply for compatible grants as soon as their call for project is issued (La Ferla and Commodaro 2020).

The limited decentralization in most developing countries represents an important point to take into consideration. It usually entails the need to involve the central government in the process. This is, for example, a frequent scenario in the Sahel region in Africa, where local authorities are primarily perceived by governments as enablers of their policies (Mestre 2020). To avoid ambiguity, cities should consider making a preliminary assessment on which level of government is responsible for taking the needed decisions and for their implementation. Moreover, the process’s timeline might need to include extra time to allow the different levels of governance to interact.

Compared to the other dimensions of city diplomacy, solidarity-inspired initiatives frequently offer the local opposition—regardless of its political color—with the opportunity to attack the municipality’s action. This criticism generally goes along two lines, connected and often used simultaneously: the accusation of waste of money (sometimes coupled with a more or less explicit accusation of embezzlement based on the trope of personal tourism for the mayor and the involved municipal staff), and that, more political, of putting foreign relations before the wellbeing of citizens. Such allegations might find fertile ground in the mentioned widespread lack of evaluation and impact analysis in decentralized cooperation projects. By periodically assessing the impact of projects and sharing their results with residents and stakeholders, municipalities will have the tools to raise support for the continuation of ongoing projects and constant evolution toward more effective and efficient initiatives. Municipalities should take the opportunity of decentralized operation projects for sharing the overall international strategy of the city, and how it is implemented through the project in question. The communication should include a pedagogical component informing the population about the project and the partners’ situation. As illustrated in the first chapter, a focus on the activity’s impact on the involved partners, including storytelling techniques, could help share the understanding of the tangible impact of the partnership. Finally, public information should include a solid final report of the impact of the project in the short, mid, and long
term, providing figures such as the value of the economic participation of local companies, the number of volunteers and young people involved in the project, the jobs created if any, as well as the financial support received by public and private donors. Hence, such a report would testify the capacity of the cities investment to mobilize the financial participation of other actors (financial leverage). Needless to say, a specific communication should be put in place if the project was awarded prestigious grants and awards by actors such as international organizations and NGOs.

**Local Corruption**

Corruption, in its different forms, is a well-known obstacle to development cooperation. Across the world, corruption can be found in both centralized and decentralized countries, and has shown to have a positive correlation with poverty and inequality (Mansuri and Rao 2012).

Moreover, poverty and lack of public information on municipal activities are perceived as factors limiting local monitoring and sanctioning of corruption. Therefore, complementing the decentralized cooperation project with a strong strategy to empower the local population in the perspective of co-creation and co-responsibility—if possible combined with an external and independent audit—is likely to contribute to fighting local corruption (ibidem).

**Ongoing and Future Evolution**

A core component of city diplomacy since the 1950s, development cooperation has shown its capacity to evolve toward the mutually benefiting and participatory approaches described in this chapter, thus unlocking its full potential for local community empowerment, tailor-made actions, shared agency, and pride.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented health and economic challenges in most cities globally. Moreover, the crisis quickly highlighted cities’ inequalities and unsolved challenges, with a harsher impact on the most fragile population, for whom social distancing and sometimes even basic hygiene precautions were not an option. In such a situation, municipalities across the world have reacted by putting in place a series of unprecedented measures to limit the spread of the disease and support those in need, while taking precautions to protect their agents.
Besides these compelling planning and budgetary efforts, cities found themselves in need of disruptive social, economic, and technological innovations to cope with the increasing fragility of both individuals and communities. City diplomacy rapidly rose as a key component in providing cities with the know-how, and sometimes even the resources, to cope with the crisis.

First, most city networks created online platforms and hosted virtual meetings to allow member cities exchange their best practices on the topic—an action particularly useful given the progressive spread of the disease across the globe, allowing cities not yet hit by the virus to benefit from the many lessons learned by their peers.

Moreover, networks started cooperating with each other, in contrast with the competition they sometimes showed in the past. Examples of such cooperation include Metropolis and AL-LAs joining forces in creating “Cities for Global Health”, a platform for spreading best practices from cities across the world.

This trend also includes cooperation in designing strategies for economic recovery: the C40 has created a dedicated working group, chaired by the Mayor of Milan Giuseppe Sala, whose works produced a strategy made available to other cities in the world (C40 2020, 40; Sala et al. 2020).

In terms of concrete solidarity, a number of cities in the Global North, including those deeply affected by the virus, reinforced their support to cities in developing countries. Examples include the €400,000 call for projects by the Municipality of Barcelona (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2020) or the €200,000 emergency fund by the city of Paris to NGOs working in cities in developing countries (Sparacino 2020).

Given both the global, yet unequal nature of the pandemic, hitting at diverse intensity cities and states both in the Global North and Global South, the direction of city-to-city solidarity was sometimes different, with expressions of North-North solidarity, such as that between Frankfurt and its sister city Milan (Eurocities 2020), or the cities in Europe and North America (USC Center on Public Diplomacy 2020) in Latin America (Alvarez 2020) and Africa (Xinhua 2020) receiving help from their Chinese twin cities.

In multilateral terms, city diplomacy measures included the almost €2 million fund created by AIMF to assists its members in developing countries cope with the crisis (see Box 3.2), and the fund for African municipalities created by Cités Unies France. Smaller cities also
showed their solidarity, as happened within the Cittaslow network, whose members exchanged best practices and donated masks and medical equipment to most affected cities in Italy, France, and Poland (Kihlgren Grandi and Sottilotta 2020).

Due to the harsh impact of the COVID-19 crisis on municipal finances across the world, the chances are that cities’ reduced funding availability will mark the immediate future of decentralized cooperation. Nevertheless, digital technology—and in particular the spread of videoconferencing tools—will allow for at least a part of this cooperation to shift over the Internet, in particular for training and sharing of best practices.

**Box 3.2: City networks based on shared history: the International Association of Francophone Mayors (AIMF) and the International Union of Iberoamerican Capitals (UCCI)**

The *Association Internationale des Maires Francophones* (AIMF) was created in 1979, at the initiative of the then mayors of Paris and Quebec, Jacques Chirac and Jean Pelletier, in order to foster solidarity and cooperation between French-speaking cities around the world. In March 2020, the AIMF features 307 member cities in 52 countries (23 in France), and four permanent commissions (Cities and sustainable development; Training of territorial executives and issues related to gender; Innovative cities—Social and solidarity economy; Living together). By means of its funds and partnerships with donors such as the European Union and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the AIMF supports several initiatives in its member cities in developing countries. Through its activities and publications, the AIMF has raised awareness of the impact of city diplomacy on the quality of life of residents, in line with its objective of improving municipal management and strengthening local democracy. A vocal advocate of decentralization, the AIMF contributed to highlighting the role of mayors in implementing local solutions to transnational challenges, such as sustainable development, social cohesion, and the integration of digital technologies in public policies. The *Unión de Ciudades Capitales Iberoamericanas* (UCCI) was created in 1982 in Madrid to bring together the Iberian and Latin American capitals and is also based on linguistic and cultural ties. Like the AIMF, the Union focuses its activities on cooperation and solidarity between member cities. It is notably at the origin of two cultural celebrations inspired by the European Capital of Culture: the *Capital Iberoamericana de la Cultura*
(launched in 1991) and the *Plaza Mayor de la Cultura Iberoamericana* (1994).

With a membership policy limited to capitals and major cities, the UCCI has 25 full members and 4 associated cities in 24 countries in March 2020.

Both networks supported cooperation and knowledge sharing in the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic and are currently fostering an internal debate on urban recovery policies, with the contribution of external experts. Moreover, AIMF put in place an extraordinary fund of almost €2 M to support the response to COVID-19 in around 20 of its member cities.

*Sources* AIMF (2016, 2020), Baillet (2020), and UCCI (2018, 2020).

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**Box 3.3: Co-development**

Co-development is one of the most tangible examples of how city diplomacy provides municipalities with the opportunity of matching moral values and local interests both locally and abroad. The enabler of such dynamic lies in migration.

Sometimes referred to as “migration for development” (Alvarez Tinarjero and Sinatti 2012), the term co-development was coined in 1997 by French scholar Sami Naïr in a report for the French Government to define the opportunity of “going beyond cooperation in order to establish common objectives. The shared interest of France and the countries of origin is to make migration a vector of development - because it means stabilizing migratory flows in the country of origin and guaranteeing integration into France itself” (Naïr 1997, 3). For municipalities, this approach implies local migrant communities’ involvement in decentralized cooperation activities aimed at their city or country of origin. This allows for the empowerment of migrants—with positive impacts in terms of integration—and has the potential of strengthening the project with the know-how, the personal connections, and the generally high commitment shown by migrants involved in such actions.

Alongside countries and regions, cities have been implementing a broad set of co-development activities (Joint Migration and Development Initiative 2013). As the destination of ample and sustained migration flow
from African countries, French cities have implemented many initiatives featuring a co-development approach, as reported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs *Atlas de la Coopération Décentralisée*.

An example is represented by the Montreuil–Cercle de Yélimané partnership.

Located in Paris’ metropolitan area, the city of Montreuil has been involved in cooperation activities with Cercle de Yélimané, Mali, since the signing of their twinning agreement in 1985. Cercle de Yélimané, a grouping of 13 municipalities, is the birthplace to a fair part of the vast Malian community residing in Montreuil, informally known in France as the “little Bamako.” Several local migrant associations participate in city diplomacy activities, including the Association of Malian Women in Montreuil (*Association des Femmes Malienne de Montreuil*) and the Association for the Development of Yélimané in France (*Association pour le Développement du Cercle de Yélimané en France – ADCYF*). One of the outcomes of this framework is the creation of a women center in Yélimané, inspired on the one in Montreuil and implemented with the support of the Malian diaspora and associations.

*Sources* (Naïr 1997), Alvarez Tinajero and Sinatti (2012), Sembene (2016), and Ville de Montreuil (2020).

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