

Decentralized international cooperation: a new role for local governments who think globally and act locally

1. Introduction

The realm of international relations was until very recently the sole preserve of national governments.

Local and regional authorities focused on issues to do with the basic services provided to residents and with urban and regional management, which were regarded as strictly local matters largely untouched by dynamics at an international level.

The phenomenon of globalisation and the state-nation crisis in the late 20th century altered this situation and created the conditions for the emergence of cities and regions as key players in international relations.

The awareness that the international situation has a direct impact on economic and social growth at a local level, plus an increased pressure from citizens now force local authorities to act on the international stage. In other words, international cooperation between sub-state authorities is now emerging as a dynamic and complex phenomenon that is transforming the practice of local stakeholders and at the same time offers the world of cooperation new perspectives and innovative approaches. Post independence strategies that saw the state as the leading actor in managing development have been therefore increasingly challenged. In the following paragraphs there is an attempt to conceptualised “decentralised cooperation” backed up with empirical evidence from the Piedmont Region.

2. The concept of decentralised cooperation: a brief review of the existing literature

There is plenty of evidence that whereas a large number of local governments worldwide are involved in international cooperation, Municipal International Cooperation can be seen as a fairly phenomenon. Shuman has stated that “Municipal International cooperation was the best-kept secret in international relations” (Shuman 1994, quoted in Van Tongeren 1997).

Since 1994 several publications have come out on the subject. However, empirical research at a European level is still scarce.

The most valuable publications, related to this topic, focus on the process of knowledge and (mutual) learning and on North-South partnerships published recently (Johnson and Wilson 2006, Wilson and Johnson 2007). Another publication builds on empirical results based on case studies, mainly focusing on links between Canadian municipalities and municipalities in Latin America (Hewitt 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2007) and on a city link between a Japanese and Malaysian city (Tjandradewi et al. 2006).

A small number of articles have been published focusing on the international relations of local authorities in general (like Hobbs, 1994). There have also been a number of studies on Municipal International Cooperation written by practitioners working on MIC (Schep et al, 1995, UNDP, 2000, UN Habitat 2003, Green Game&Delay 2005).

The motivations for municipalities to be engaged in international cooperation was firstly mentioned in 1995 which highlighted the “presence of ethnic minorities” being a major factor in this type of cooperation. In this publication are presented examples of city links including the city of Sao Vincente (Brazil) linked to Naha (Japan) through the Japanese community in Sao Vincente, and the partnership between Marseille and Dakar, which dates back to 1968.

Both links were inspired by the fact that each city hosts a sizeable minority originating from the other city.

Therefore, it seems that an increasing number of municipalities challenged with a growing number of migrants (refugees and workers) and the local reaction to them had to face issues that could related to the sphere of the “international affairs”.

However, in Piedmont, it appears that certain Italian municipalities only started international cooperation from the year 2000 onwards (with the only exception of the capital of the region, Turin that started to be engaged in decentralised cooperation programmes since 1980s)

What's in a name? A review of the terminology used

Hafteck presents an overview of existing definitions and terminology set out by various support programmes and local government associations to cover the international relations between municipalities worldwide.

Terms include; Municipal International Cooperation (Schep et al, 1995), International Municipal Cooperation (Hewitt 1999/2000), linking (UNDP, 2000), city-to-city cooperation (used by UN-Habitat and the organization

United Cities and Local Governments – UCLG) and decentralized cooperation (Hafteck, 2003) (See also Bontenbal 2005).

It may be considered that these terms may not be a precise definition of what exactly happens in the cooperation process.

City to city cooperation has become an umbrella term ‘to cover all possible forms of relationships between local authorities at any level in two or more countries which are collaborating together on matters of mutual interest leading to sustainable urban development’ (Bontenbal, 2005).

Hafteck proposed the following definition; ‘city to city’ consist in substantial collaborative, relationships between sub-national governments from different countries, aiming at sustainable local development, implying some form of exchange or support carried out by these institutions or other locally based actors’ (Hafteck, 2003). It should be noted that the term ‘aiming at sustainable local development’ can be confusing as it can refer to ‘long lasting’ developments but as well to ‘environmental’ sustainability.

An alternative term could be ‘aimed to serve public interests’.

Hafteck, however notes that the term City-to-city cooperation might also lead to misunderstandings as the term ‘city’ does not reflect the entire range of sub-national governments that are involved in such partnerships (Hafteck, 2003). The term “decentralised cooperation” can also lead to confusion as it is not limited to local government bodies only. In general the term “twinning” is avoided for the same reasons. Twinning is widely used in development practice and refers to cooperation efforts between institutions, universities, hospitals and other public services (Jones and Blunt, 1999 and Avskik, 1999).

The term Municipal International Cooperation (or International Municipal Cooperation) might only be conceived as cooperation between local government bodies (like de Villiers does in a conference paper, de Villiers 2006), but the word ‘municipal’ might also refer to inclusion of other organizations within the municipal borders.

From an historical point of view, in Europe, the term decentralised cooperation has been introduced with the Lomè IV Convention of the European Union during 1990s.

It entails a rethinking of what development is as it challenge the traditional though that the main actor in managing development is the state as a leading actor. In fact it allows a wide variety of partners outside the central government to use Lomè resources.

New concepts were introduced: institutional pluralism, participatory development and decentralisation.

This new approach to aid delivery has great potential.

Direct support to civil society actors may bring development closer to the people, enhance local ownership and accountability.

Actively involving local actors is often seen, according to EU documents, to be the best investment in “capacity development”.

In Italy the term widely used is “cooperazione decentrata”, decentralised cooperation. In Piedmont, it is regulated by a regional law of 1987 and has many similarities to the European legislation.

3. A new challenge for local governments

Worldwide many national governments support the process of decentralisation. The process of decentralisation and democratisation are important factors which have led to an expansion of Municipal International Cooperation(MIC).

MIC generally focuses on the cooperation between two local governments and aims at strengthening local governments functions. A precondition for useful international exchange between local government bodies is therefore that each local government involved should have a certain degree of autonomy and control over their own budget.

Governments are no, therefore, the only actors determining what happens in urban areas. Due to decentralization, but also due to foreign investments and migration, actors and development are more and more interlinked with each other. Also donor agencies and international organizations have given shape to what can be termed the interface between local and ‘global governance’. In sum, urban governance, referring to the question of how governments work together with other actors in governing their localities, has become more and more important (Baud & de Wit 2008, Pierre and Peters 2000, Stroker 2000).

Local governance and decentralization

As a result of widespread decentralisation processes (Baud and de Wit, 2008: Pierre 2000, Pierre & Peters 2000, Baud, 2004; UNDP, 2003; Helmsing, 2000) the role of local government have become increasingly more important.

Reforms have therefore brought new powers and duties to local governments and they also stimulated local authorities to move beyond their traditional roles.

Local governments are becoming one type of actor among many in the process of governance. In general it is fair to say that ‘political institutions no longer exercise a monopoly of the orchestration of governance’ (Pierre, 2000: 4), but have to work with civil society organizations and the private sector in coordinating processes of local development.

Peters, 2000).

(Local) governments and private organizations are working together in ‘public-private partnerships’ which can take different forms (Batley et al., 1996). It was believed when this shift started taking place that private organizations would be able to work more efficiently as providers, due to the competition they would face as several providers would compete to receive contracts from local governments. The question whether or not privatization and public private partnerships leads to better service deliver and more efficiency is however highly debated. Awortwi has shown that when the local government is not a strong ‘principal agent’, the power to enable and control the private sector providers is quite limited (Awortwi 2004).

There are numerous forms and degrees of decentralisation identified. The main forms or types of decentralization are political, administrative and fiscal decentralization. The four major forms of decentralization include devolution, delegation, de-concentration and divestment (Work, 2002: 6). In the case of deconcentration only administrative tasks are delegated, while power and control of funds remain on national level. Divestment refers to the process whereby only financial resources are delegated to the local level. Devolution or democratic decentralization is the most ambitious form of decentralization where power, tasks and responsibilities and funds are devolved from higher to lower levels of government (Robinson, Hewitt, Harris, 2000). Devolution implies far reaching nationwide reforms, with national ministries and institutions transferring some of their financial and policy making powers to local government (including provincial and district) bodies. Democratic decentralization is ‘about the establishment of new systems of local representation and election’ (Baud & de Wit, 2008).

The importance of urbanization

As stated above decentralization leads to new challenges for local governments. The process of urbanization leads to even more challenges both with regard to the pace and the magnitude of urban growth. At the moment 30% of the world's poor people live in urban areas.

This figure is expected to grow to 40% in 2020 and to 50% by 2035 (UNDP, 2007; RAWOO, 2005).

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) concludes that within one generation, in 2030, the number of inhabitants of cities in Africa and Asia will have doubled. All these new urban dwellers either migrated from outside or born within the city borders require space to live, housing, access to public services, etc. According to the UN Population report, the pace and magnitude of urban growth make it difficult to provide land, infrastructure, housing, services to enterprises and the population at the necessary scale (UN Population Report 2007).

The link between governance and urban development is clearly put forward in the theoretical debate.

The quality of urban governance is considered the most important factor for the eradication of urban poverty and for making cities more prosperous (RAWOO, UN Habitat, Helmsing 2001). One important area in which governments can help to reduce poverty is by improving living conditions (Baud, 2004).

Local governments coordinate many resources and control access to land, housing, and basic services, like water and sanitation (Baud, 2004). As discussed above, in fulfilling their new role most local governments in developing countries face several constraints, such as lack of technical and managerial capacity, and financial resources (Baud, 2004). Capacity building of local governments can thus have a positive impact on development and poverty reduction. In general municipalities in the North seek to contribute to the development of local government bodies in order to improve their capacities to fulfil their tasks, while municipalities in the South hope to learn from experiences in the North. Through capacity building they hope governments will be able to improve service delivery and by doing so also to contribute to poverty reduction.

4. Working beyond geographical borders

There is an ongoing debate about the question whether or not municipalities should be involved in international cooperation. (Local) politicians who argue that international cooperation should only be dealt with at a national level use the argument that municipalities should only focus on issues within their municipal borders. (Local) politicians who support international engagements by municipalities argue that the world doesn't stop at the municipal borders and that issues are interlinked. This debate cannot be seen in isolation from wider debates on globalization, migration and trans-nationalism.

Next, an attempt of tackle those controversial issues is presented.

Globalization

Central to the globalization discourse, is the often explicit assumption of the growing insignificance of national borders, boundaries and identities. Globalization and the nation-state are treated as mutually exclusive. In contrast, the trans-national discourse insists on the continuing significance of borders, state policies, and national identities even as they are often transgressed by trans-national communication circuits and social practices. Within this debate globalization and the nation state are seen as mutually constitutive (Smith, 2001). Pries distinguishes two main globalization approaches; globalization as the spatial widening of social relations and globalizations, as the annihilation of space.

The first approach could be conceptualized as the spatial expansion of social spaces (Giddens 1990, Albrow 1996, Urry 2000 cited in Pries, 2001: 13-14). The second approach focuses on the shrinking or disappearance of spatial dimensions with respect to social relations (Robertson 1992, Harvey 1989, Castells and Allbrow, 1996; cited in Pries 2001: 13-14). In both approaches, geographic space is reduced in importance in the structuring of social relations and interactions.

On a national level, Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc use the words 'de-territorialized nation states' to refer to the expanded activities and intensified links between immigrants, home-country politics and politicians (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc, 1994 in Vertovec, 1999). Mazzucato argues that "The ability of the state to govern who is a member of a nation and who is not, and what the rules are for living within that nation are increasingly put to the test. As a result of cross-border flows, new social, economic, political and cultural spaces are being created that cannot be superimposed on the geographical space of the nation"

(Mazzucato, 2001). On a local level governments can also face this kind of new challenges.

Trans-nationalism

More and more developments are thus highly correlated to each other due to globalization and migration. Trans-nationalism offers a way to conceptualize and understand “disjointed spaces (Mazzucato, 2001).

Theories on trans-nationalism try to capture the relations and connections between individuals and organizations in different international areas. A distinction should be made between *international* and *trans-national* relations. With regard to international relations different actors or occasions do not necessarily have to be linked to each other. For instance if a municipality in Italy starts working together with a municipality in Ethiopia because of the stable conditions and the use of the Italian language the municipality will establish international relations, not trans-national ones.

‘Localizing the global’

Globalization does not cover all, and does not connect all places with each other. The experience of globalization and its impact on places and institutions is rather partial. “It installs itself in very specific structures. And it is this specificity that we need to study along with macro-structures, and for which we need to develop particular categories of analysis” (Sassen, 2001).

So, trans-national flows often have important geographical characteristics. This applies for city-to-city cooperation as well. An example is the fact that the majority of migrants in the Piedmont Region originating from Senegal , were born in rural areas in the Louga region.

It becomes therefore evident how immigrant communities and city councillors not only use locally specific trans-national social capital to do so, but also how they direct their activities to specific localities..

In general it can be concluded that due to globalization, migration and an increased diversity local governments face new challenges that are, more than before, often connected to development outside the municipal borders.

4..Decentralised cooperation in practice

However despite the great potential, progress in the implementation of decentralised cooperation has been very limited in Italy.

Strong political, bureaucratic and cultural resistances go against the implementation of this alternative view to international development. Also the term “decentralised cooperation” coined in the 1980’ is still sometimes interpreted differently by various organisations involved in development cooperation.

However, there are points of convergence among these interpretations that suggest a common definition involving:

- a. the lead actors (local governments)
- b. an overarching objective (sustainable local development)
- c. the nature of activities carried out (exchanges and support)

Basic feature of decentralised cooperation programmes are:

1. different political approach: Decentralised cooperation is not so much a new instrument as a different political approach to development cooperation. There are clear links between the idea of “participatory development” and the promotion of democracy and human rights, in this view of the development cooperation has pivotal important the participation of non-state actors in the policy-making process. The involvement of a wide variety of associations may help to promote the formation of interest groups which can challenge monopolistic tendencies and poor state performance
2. it applies the principle of subsidiarity: decentralised cooperation aims at reducing the number of “intermediaries” in fact the responsibility for programme identification and implementation is delegated to the lowest possible level. The cornerstone of decentralised cooperation is the transfer of financial responsibilities to the local actors. This represents a major innovation because the central government is no longer be able to interfere in the day-to-day management of decentralised operation. For those who are sceptical about the “added value” of this type of cooperation, decentralised cooperation is an “elegant” way to devolve or spread corruption evenly.
3. it enhances capacity development: the programmes of decentralised cooperation enable local actors to assume new roles. For instance involving local actors means starting a process of “learning by doing”. This is the best investment in capacity development. Furthermore this helps to strengthen the capacity of civil society to formulate their own development priorities
4. it is complementary to national development policies: the purpose of decentralised cooperation is not to shift support away from central

governments to a myriad of local NGOs and municipalities. Decentralised cooperation under the Lomè Convention of the European Union attempt to avoid those pitfalls. The emphasis is put on “cooperation” rather than antagonism between central government and local actors.

6. Decentralised cooperation: the case of Piedmont Region

The Piedmont Region is a leading actor in activities related to decentralised cooperation. (see table 1)

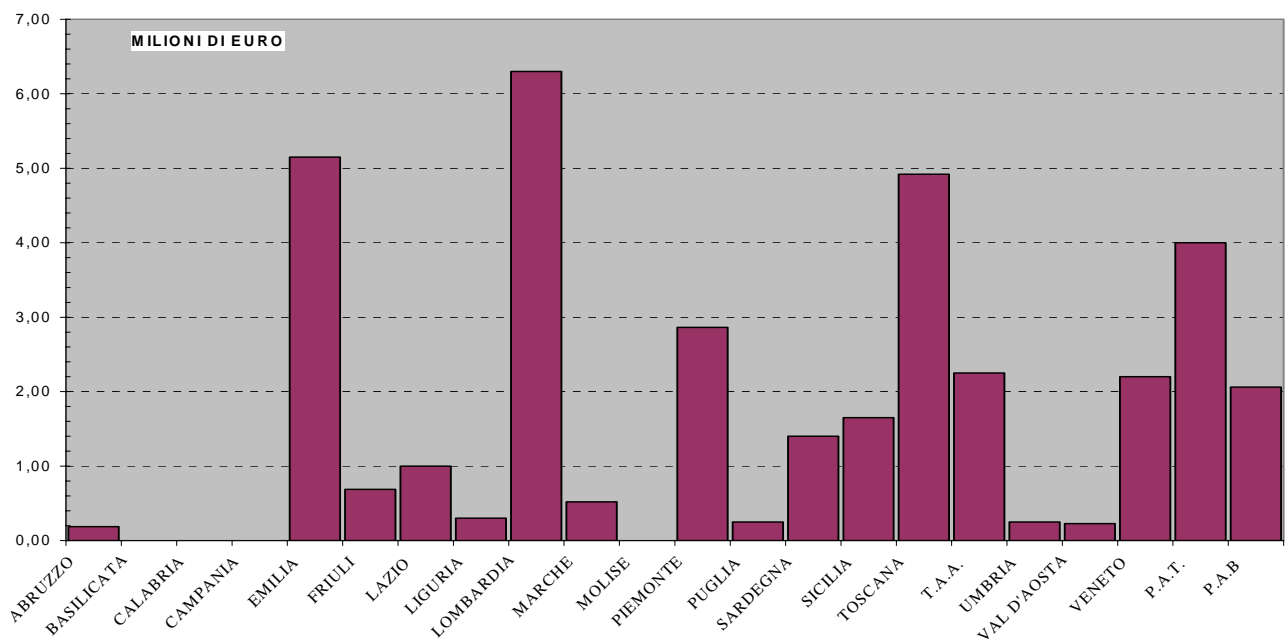


Table 1. Millions of Euros used in Decentralised Cooperation in Italian Regions

In the Piedmont region there are 1206 municipal entities, we have taken into consideration the communes with 5000 inhabitants.

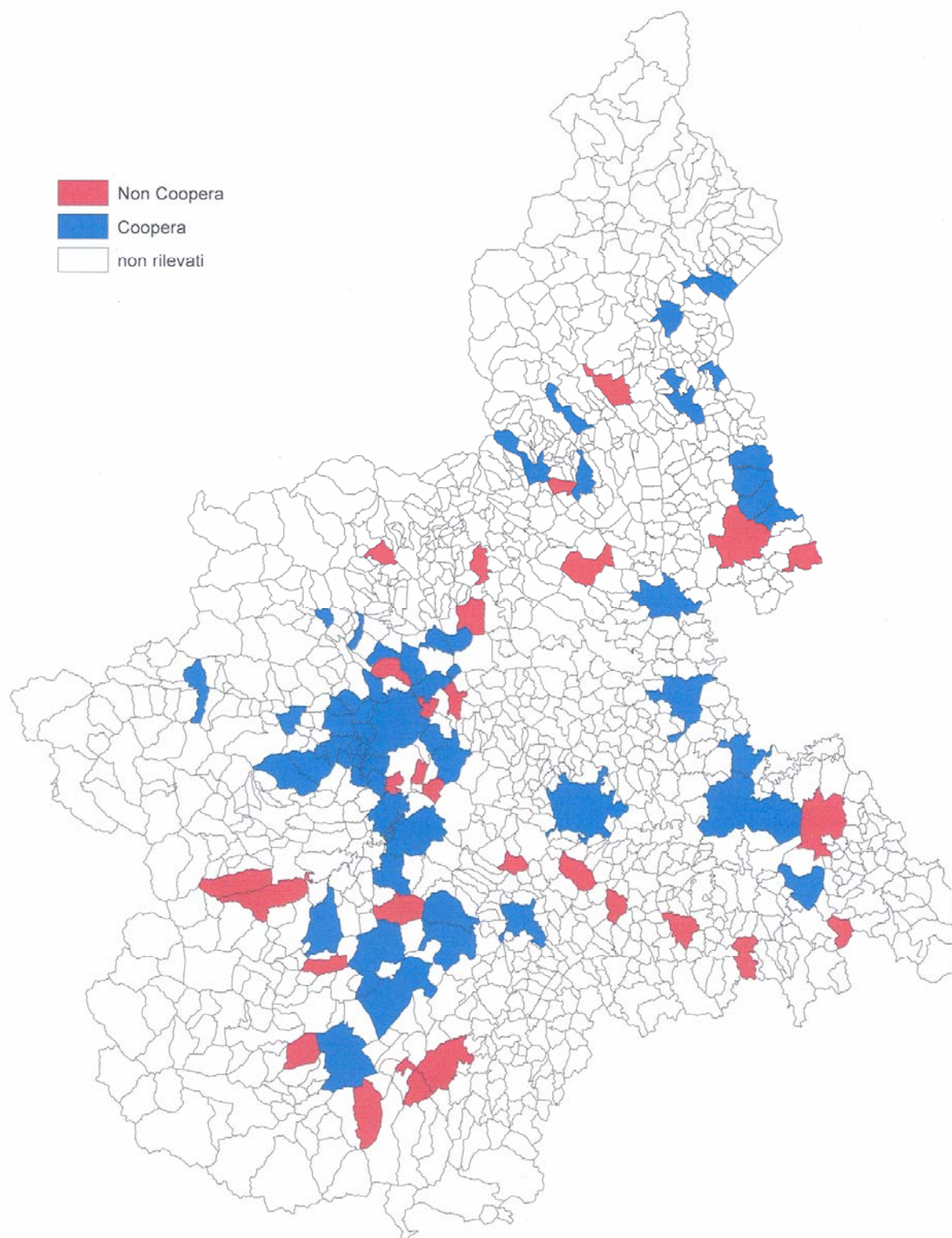
According to this first investigation, around 65% of municipalities with more than 5000 inhabitants are involved in municipal international cooperation.

The largest municipalities are engaged in more than one city link. Economic development and promotion of health are the themes most frequently mentioned within the programmes for cooperation. Other popular themes for cooperation include programmes of empowerment, promotion of fair trade initiatives and education.

The vast majority of initiatives relating to decentralised cooperation are initiated directly from the municipalities. From the replies to the questionnaires compiled for this research support this statement.

From the map above it is evident that the majority of municipalities engaged in decentralised cooperation have, during the years, established links in order to share knowledge, expertise and projects.

Cooperazione nei Comuni superiori a 5.000 abitanti



Apart from strengthening local governance in the partner municipality, Italian municipalities try to contribute positively towards the integration of migrant groups within the municipality.

They try to do so by:

1. stimulating the involvement of migrants in international cooperation with a municipality in their home country
2. gaining knowledge of migrant groups living in their municipalities, in order to reach these groups or adjust policies and
3. creating a positive feeling among migrant groups, in order to facilitate communication and involvement of migrant groups in policies related to integration.

In this way, the cooperation can function as a bridge between the municipal government and migrant groups.

Apart from stimulating integration, there are some other important opportunities for mutual exchange.

Economical benefits can be an objective within the twinning relationship.

For instance, municipalities in migrant countries generally also want to stimulate business. Another possibility for reciprocity is related to the trans-national movements of citizens.

There is also a shift towards a growing interest by Italian municipalities to be engaged in cooperation with new and candidate member states of the European Union.

While the number of migrants has increased significantly after the extension of the EU with ten countries of Easter Europe in 2004, the primary reason to seek collaboration is not much related to integration of migrants but to economic development.

7..Improving the implementation of decentralised cooperation

Despite its importance and wide-ranging nature, there has been still little study done on the phenomenon of decentralised cooperation. On the one hand, the scarce available information and the fact that it is widely dispersed makes it necessary to do considerable fieldwork. On the other, the diversity of practices acts as an invitation for analysis and research in order to produce in-depth insights into decentralised cooperation.

A better understanding of the relationships in decentralised cooperation would help to highlight the added value of these actions, which generally take an approach to decentralised cooperation characterised by mutual exchanges. This way of understanding cooperation is unquestionably an alternative to the relations founded on aid that prevail in North-South cooperation.

Decentralized cooperation differs from the action of NGOs, central governments and multilateral donors:

- ▶ The action of local and regional authorities is long-term: in most cases, a strong relationship between two communities gives rise to a framework cooperation agreement intended to establish a lasting partnership between the two decentralised authorities and their communities.
- ▶ Action focuses primarily on exchange and know-how, institutional support and training. The aim is not to decentralise conventional cooperation, but for two local authorities to develop a specific type of cooperation aimed at sharing experience of local management and local development.
- ▶ Decentralized cooperation programmes are the result of discussion between the two local authorities. In that sense, decentralised cooperation is cooperation “on request”, since the starting point is the expression of needs by a local authority in the South. On the basis of that request, which is then negotiated, the French local authority examines what it can offer in response to the request, according to its know-how and financial capacity.
- ▶ Decentralized cooperation is also specific in its capacity to mobilise and support local actors. Through the relationship between two communities and two local areas, ties or twinnings can be developed between various local partners, including those that do not come under the direct authority of the local or regional government, such as hospitals, universities, chambers of commerce, businesses and associations.

Strengths and weaknesses of decentralised cooperation programmes

Several publications highlight the strengths and weaknesses of decentralised cooperation.

Most issues are more or less similar to the wider body of knowledge on North- South partnerships. Strengths which are mentioned include, MIC generally implies long-term relationships including friendship, there is a

direct approach from colleague-to-colleague, MIC implies working at local level on concrete issues, there is often a direct community impact, generally enthusiastic and motivated people are involved, several organizations within municipalities involved (city wide approach), potential for efficiency (....).

Critical issues raised include questions such as:

- Is C2C cooperation demand-driven?

(Does it take into account existing capacities and needs? Who sets the agenda?);

- Are C2C partnerships genuine?

(Is there mutuality of efforts, benefits and a learning reality? Do partnerships include equity, 'friendship' and 'trust' and benefits for both sides?);

- Are local governments' professional agents for development?

(There is specific municipal expertise but in most cases limited knowledge and experience of N-S relations and the local governance context in the South; in which ways does this influence the partnerships and the outcomes of projects for cooperation? C2C is voluntary and there is a need for public and political support. This can make C2C partnerships vulnerable and might be a threat for its sustainability);

- To what extent is C2C shaped by limited financial means and restricting policies?

(Municipalities have often limited financial means, there is a dependency on external funding and subsidy criteria may undermine demand-driven cooperation, municipalities need to perform and deliver which leaves little room for different way of working);

- There is a danger of politicisation Municipal cooperation is inherently political (Politicisation of partner organisations, Politicisation of partnerships);

- To what extent is cooperation focused beyond personal exchange? Does organisational learning take place?

(Twinning has potential for organisational learning. Organisational learning is important for the sustainability of projects for cooperation. According to several studies this potential is insufficiently tapped.); and

- Monitoring and evaluation occurs sporadic and not systematic.

(Overview used in presentation International symposium on city-to-city partnerships in achieving the Millennium Development Goals in Africa by Bontenbal, M. & E. van Ewijk, Stellenbosch, South Africa,

15-17 February 2008).

8. Think globally act locally

Decentralised cooperation, as seen from the above paragraphs is a relatively new theme in the research debate. In fact the body of the knowledge is still very limited.

Yet worldwide many municipalities are involved in international exchange.

Through knowledge exchange they seek to learn from experiences elsewhere. A recent phenomena is the cooperation between Piedmont municipalities and municipalities in migrant countries which were mainly initiated by the Italian municipalities with the objective to contribute positively towards the integration of migrants in Italian society.

Municipalities in the North generally have different objectives to be engaged in municipal international cooperation then municipalities in the south.

Objectives of municipalities in the South are generally linked to decentralization processes and urbanization.

Objectives of municipalities in the North are linked to globalization, migration and an increased diversity.

Municipalities are confronted with new challenges that are, more then before, often connected to development outside the municipal borders.

This can pose them for new questions which might require new knowledge, new policies and new partnerships.

Cooperation with other municipalities in the countries migrants originate from might be a useful tool for municipalities to learn from.

To conclude few concepts deserved be stressed:

Despite it could be classified as a new phenomenon, decentralized Cooperation is on the increase. The main factors that come out from the research of the Piedmont region are mainly three :

The increasing decentralized authority from central to local governments, solidarity of migrant workers with communities of origin and Civil society's growing awareness of development problems.

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