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## BUILDING A EURO-MEDITERRANEAN PARTNERSHIP WITH, NOT FOR, CITIES

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*How can more support for decentralised cooperation revive and improve the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)? This Policy Brief reports and reflects on the international seminar “Towards a Revised Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Making decentralised cooperation and collaborative governance a priority”, organised by and held at CIDOB on 22 November 2019. In preparation for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the EMP, the seminar sought to provoke new thinking on how a revised EMP that is aligned with the United Nation’s 2030 Agenda could and should further promote decentralised cooperation and collaborative governance at local level. It brought together around 25 representatives from Barcelona City Council, the Government of Catalonia, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM), the OECD, Ford Foundation and the Lebanese Cities Technical Office, as well as other regional experts, academics, civil society representatives, and practitioners.*



### Urban challenges in the Mediterranean and policy responses

Almost 60% of the Mediterranean population now lives in urban areas. The South Mediterranean has one of the fastest urbanisation rates worldwide and this is one of the most pressing challenges the region faces. By 2030, the urban population is expected to increase by an additional 22.5 million due to the persistence of rural-urban migrations and endogenous urban growth that will generate a strong demand for housing, facilities and urban services and put severe pressure on existing non-resilient infrastructure as well as natural resources. The Mediterranean region and its cities are also highly vulnerable to climate change, increasingly manifest in water scarcity, droughts, heatwaves, forest fires and coastal erosion. Urban areas have a central role to play both in **climate change adaptation** and mitigation, as well as the transition to sustainable energy economies. Finally, the region faces significant socio-economic challenges in the form of high youth unemployment, radicalisation, and regular (“brain drain”) and irregular migration (see the Mediterranean Strategy of the Government of Catalonia, **MedCat 2030**). An important factor in this context is the emergence of platform economies, which have arguably led to more inequality in the labour market, as well as the challenges brought about by the digital transition.

Seminar participants agreed that policy responses have not been adequate to meet these challenges. Fundamentally, the 2030 Agenda as implemented in the region is mainly framed as being about reducing poverty, rather than inequality, as this avoids the thorny issue of redistributive policies. Similarly, as the MedCat 2030 strategy points out, the focus is on “stabilisation and securitisation policies, to the detriment of democratisation and human development priorities”. This trend – in tandem with the rise of populist and/or right-wing governments – is evident not just in EU foreign policy, but also in most southern Mediterranean countries, where civil society is increasingly criminalised by central governments.

In response to the region’s urban challenges, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) adopted its first **Urban Agenda** in May 2017. The Agenda strives to establish a more integrated and coordinated approach in Mediterranean countries with regard to policies, legislation and investments with a potential impact on urban areas and hereby contribute to regional and social cohesion. It reserves – at least on paper – a large role for local authorities (see also UfM’s January 2017 **Roadmap for Action**), including ARLEM, in the design and implementation of policies, and generally aims to enable municipal authorities to work in a more systematic and coherent manner.

The UfM's Urban Agenda also sets out to contribute towards achieving the urban dimension of the 2030 Agenda, which is reflected in both the Urban Goal (SDG 11) and the more general concern with a multi-level governance approach to the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. Indeed, **according to the OECD**, almost 60% of SDG targets can only be achieved by subnational governments providing essential public services in health, education, emergency preparedness, water, energy, housing, etc. However, subnational governments are facing a significant lack of financing and expertise. To emphasise this problem, the UfM's Urban Agenda refers to the UN's **New Urban Agenda**, which was adopted at Habitat III in 2016 and sets a new global standard for sustainable urban development, including municipal finance; as well as the UN's 2015 **Addis Ababa Action Agenda**, adopted at the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. In particular, the latter raises the urgency to address growing financing and capacity needs at sub-national levels of government in developing countries.

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Decentralised development co-operation (DDC), which is generally defined as development co-operation delivered by subnational governments in one country to subnational governments in another<sup>1</sup>, has recently been identified as an untapped potential to close these gaps in funding and expertise (OECD, 2019). According to the **Durban Political Declaration** (approved during the 2019 UCLG World Summit), DDC can play a crucial role in renewing the social contract. In particular, as the **EU's experience** has shown, it can drive reforms in areas such as housing, climate change, urban planning strategies, and tourism, both within countries on the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean as well as between the North and South (see Chmielewska et al., 2019).

Globally, DDC has increased from USD 1.9 billion in 2015 to USD 2.3 billion in 2017 (OECD 2019). Preliminary estimates indicate a 25% increase in DDC with the Mediterranean region over the same period. However, only 13 of the 30 OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members report data on DDC. The available data indicates that half of the flows originate in Germany and are largely allocated to student exchanges; although this information is probably not reflective of actual DDC flows. Moreover, the Mediterranean region is not formally rec-

ognised in the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS) database which presents challenges when calculating regional trends. To address the coverage and quality of data on DDC, the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) is advancing efforts to raise awareness and provide capacity building and technical assistance to OECD cities and regions for better reporting on DDC and its contribution to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.<sup>2</sup> Data issues aside, seminar participants agreed that the value of decentralised cooperation cannot be adequately captured in financial flows, as it is fundamentally about sharing knowledge. Such 'soft' cooperation projects (e.g. by **MedCities**) require very little money but have great impact.

### Decentralised cooperation under the EMP and UfM

The creation of the EMP in 1995 forged a partnership between the then fifteen EU member states and twelve southern Mediterranean states, across a comprehensive range of economic, social, cultural, political and secu-

rity issues. The intervening 25 years have witnessed a gradual if undramatic solidification of the Partnership, although the increase in membership on both sides also makes coordination more challenging.

The EMP was re-launched with the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008 in order to make relations both more concrete and visible through the reinforcement of regional and sub-regional initiatives. These have included measures against the de-pollution of the Mediterranean Sea; the establishment of connecting maritime and land highways; the prevention, preparation and response to natural and man-made disasters; a Mediterranean solar energy plan; and support to small businesses operating in the region.

However, the early UfM failed to address the lack of a local development dimension in the EMP and the request of local and regional authorities for a greater role in defining its priorities and implementation. In 2010, this request led to the founding of **ARLEM** by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) together with territorial associations. Through ARLEM elected representatives of local and regional authorities from the

1. Broader definitions include many different types of decentralised cooperation, see Fernández de Losada (2017)

2. A good example of a more comprehensive dataset of decentralised cooperation that includes a match-making facility is provided by the **French government**.

three shores of the Mediterranean can engage in political dialogue with the EU and UfM, among others, and promote interregional cooperation.

But seminar participants agreed that in practice local governments in the Mediterranean are not well represented vis-à-vis the EU, nor are they well federated in other forums and platforms. For example, UCGL does not have an official Mediterranean working group. This matters when it comes to the yearly *Towards the Localization of the SDGs* report, which UCLG (together with the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments) has been submitting to the UN High-level Political Forum (UN HLPF) since 2017, and which is structured around UCLG's regional working groups. Further, South-South cooperation between cities is largely limited to informal collaborations. While the Arab Towns Organisation (ATO) has been identified as having great potential to become a vehicle for promoting urban resilience in the region (Chmielewska et al., 2019: 22; Fontanals, 2015: 18ff.), seminar participants were less pos-

Regardless of the terminology used, the UfM's main dilemma is that all its decision-making mechanisms are tied to central governments. In order to be more effective at city level, the UfM needs to link its action plan with both the plans of central and local governments. Although this has proven difficult in practice, the growing interest of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) in cities as promising entry points for transformation through cooperation will increasingly require policy coordination. At present the main problem is that only a small number of municipalities with strong leaders and sufficient competencies (e.g. proposal writing and implementation of projects) manage to attract substantial funds. These funds are disbursed as part of relatively short-term programmes or projects, which some seminar participants found problematic. Instead, they argued it would be much more sustainable to strengthen municipal management processes and resources structurally and over a longer time-frame. In any case, the actual or perceived weak capacity of local governments in the region often serves as an excuse for the EU and other funders to only consult the national governments of partner countries,

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itive about its contribution. Similarly, they argued that the Arab League does not have a strong vision on the topic.

The UfM has recently tried to overcome its earlier neglect of the local development dimension. It is currently exploring means of urban convergence and capacity development in the context of policy planning and the consolidation of democratic governance in the Mediterranean. However, the seminar revealed the UfM's rather technocratic vision of regional convergence, as well as dilemmas related to its inter-governmental setup. The union's technocratic vision is illustrated in the terminology used in UfM discourse and documents, including "polycentricity", "territorial meta-governance", "joining up different sectors and scales", "results-based programming", "monitoring and evaluation", and "institutional learning". Many of these buzzwords lack clear (or at least shared) definitions and may not mean much to local authorities on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. For example, polycentricity or polycentric governance, commonly referring to a "complex form of governance with multiple centers of semiautonomous decision making" (Carlisle and Gruby, 2019), can in practice mean that no authority takes responsibility for service provision vis-à-vis the citizen, and is therefore not necessarily something that the UfM and other stakeholders should promote. The use of such technocratic vocabulary arguably also contributes to a de-politicisation of decentralised cooperation, and obfuscates the very political nature of decentralisation and cooperation processes.

rather than also engage committees, associations and federations of mayors. Seminar participants identified such development cooperation "for cities but not with cities" as a major pitfall, especially in combination with the fact that most municipalities in the region do not have access to financial credit and markets.

More inclusive solutions have been provided by cities for cities. Organisations like MedCities or the work of Barcelona City Council in the area of **Global Justice & International Cooperation** create opportunities in which cities can share knowledge and practices in a contextualised way, working on concrete issues such as participatory city planning, integrating immigrants, disabled accessibility issues, and create friendships and networks of trust through exchange visits. Other positive examples that are led by regional governments and national development agencies include a collaboration between the Lebanese Cities Technical Office and the Government of Catalonia on neighbourhood policing, which proved very beneficial for both sides, and the GIZ CoMun Network, which managed to successfully put in place a bottom-up approach to decentralised cooperation between Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

### The potential of decentralisation reforms and collaborative governance

Decentralisation reforms in the South Mediterranean region have generally been weak and failed to sufficiently empower local actors. They are mostly driven by polit-

ical motives (ranging from an inherent *esprit centralisateur* to a more explicit and intentional “divide-to-conquer” logic) and tend to keep in place powerful central governments. Even if legal frameworks are in place to devolve power to local governments, in reality, we often find a deconcentrated rather than decentralised governance system, “unfunded” mandates and/or weak fiscal capacity, and a high dependence on transfers from central governments. In a **recent CIDOB publication**, Noha El-Mikawy explains this tendency towards weak decentralisation reforms in the region as inherently linked to a widespread and often unfounded conception of decentralisation as a risk to national unity, stability and peace. A case in point is Lebanon, a country with a history of sectarian divisions. As one seminar participant from Lebanon put it, “we need to explain to the government that municipal authorities repairing water services will not divide the country”.

However, with the COVID-19 crisis of 2020, there is bound to be a reverse of decentralisation reforms in the region. With the states of emergency and rule by decree

strong tendency among local governments in the region to be mistrustful of their citizens’ knowledge and motivations, which frequently leads them to create policies based on external expertise provided by consultants. As a result, citizens often feel co-opted into non-transparent participatory exercises or excluded from policy-making processes.

Due to the lack of trust in the available participatory channels (including political parties, which were curiously not mentioned during the seminar), the civil society groups – especially young people - have articulated alternative strategies of social participation, which generally take the form of social contestation. They include mass protests, sit-ins, and artistic expressions that engage with politics and give visibility to urban social issues. Referring to these new participation strategies, some seminar participants pointed to the need to frame cities not only as containers of problems but also as laboratories of innovation in which civil society actors formulate solutions to contemporary urban challenges.

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that have been declared in response to the health crisis in many southern Mediterranean countries, power has been re-centralised, away from local authorities. It remains to be seen to what extent city governments and citizens can reassert themselves and reclaim their public space once the threat of the virus has ebbed away.

Local governments in the region generally do not enjoy much legitimacy with citizens. Much of the seminar discussion thus centred on the local governance arrangements needed to engage citizens and other urban stakeholders. A definition of “collaborative governance” was provided based on the seminal 2007 article by Chris Ansell and Alison Gash (2007: 544): “A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets”. One important criterion according to Ansell and Gash is that “participants engage directly in decision-making and are not merely ‘consulted’ by public agencies”. When this definition is applied to the Mediterranean region, it is clear that while there are a plethora of youth councils and other “participatory” infrastructures, many channels for social participation are in fact “cosmetic”. They are based on non-binding consultation tools that do not allow for social actors to participate in decision-making processes based on clear rules about the majority needed for a decision. There is also a

### Policy recommendations

Seminar participants made a number of (implicit) recommendations on how to revise the EMP to be more aligned with the 2030 Agenda and better promote collaborative governance at local level. The first is to acknowledge the political nature of decentralisation, rather than just seeing it as a technical fix. As in the rest of the world, decentralisation reforms in the Mediterranean are largely driven by motivations of political survival and power consolidation, rather than by the objective of “bringing the state closer to its citizens.” Thus, the lobbying and advocacy capacity of local governments to demand greater responsibilities and taxation powers from central governments needs to be strengthened and better coordinated vis-à-vis EU member states, the UfM and IFIs. Stronger national and trans-national networks of local authorities are also key here; this includes the strengthening the UCGL- Middle East and West Asia and UCGL-Maghreb sections, and closer collaborations between the two.

Second, the EU should be realistic about what it can achieve in terms of funding and influence, given its geo-political standing in the region – both compared to other powers such as the Gulf countries, Russia and Turkey, but also other donors that provide large grants and loans to strengthen local governance in the region, including USAID, the World Bank, SIDA and GIZ. A revised EMP should capitalise on the informal knowledge sharing that takes place in “soft”



cooperation projects. Related to this, partner countries should be encouraged to report decentralised cooperation flows to complete the data in the OECD's and other databases, and to use the **Localised Indicator Framework** to report on SDG progress. Further, involvement of local and regional governments in the preparation of SDG Voluntary National Reviews to the UN HLPF should be strengthened.

Third, local governments need credible and strong civil society organisations to engage in collaborative governance. Given the shrinking space for civil society in the region, the EMP should allocate more funds to support independent think tanks, local media, investigative journalism and artistic expression. Their outputs can serve as the basis for more informed and inclusive decision-making by local governments. Here, the **European Endowment for Democracy's** work in the region is noteworthy and should be scaled up. Fundamentally, decentralised cooperation and collaborative governance are about active citizenship in the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policy.

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