Decentralized Cooperation to localize the SDGs in Latin America

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Introduction

UCLG and the pan-European coalition PLATFORMA have developed the Learning Module 4[1] on _Localizing the SDGs through Decentralized Cooperation_ in collaboration with UN-Habitat and UNDP. This regional paper was commissioned by UCLG Learning to complement the content of the Module from a Latin American perspective. Two main sources of information were used for its preparation. On the one hand, inputs from a set of interviews with key actors conducted by the UCLG Learning team. On the other hand, the documents and information obtained during the Training of Trainers workshop on Learning Module 4 for Latin America (LA), conducted by UCLG Learning in partnership with the MERCOCIUDADES network, October 20th, 21st and 22nd, 2021, in a virtual format[2].

This document begins by presenting LA's vision on decentralized cooperation (DC), followed by an inquiry into the DC mobilization process for localizing the SDGs in Latin America. It then reviews the main results of the reflections that emerged during the workshop, in relation to the next strategic steps to develop an action plan to help integrate the SDGs into the DC process in the region. Possible strategic steps were identified both for the UCLG regional section (learning strategies, alliances with training and knowledge generation centers, registration of practices, articulation between actors and DC partners in LA, etc.), and for UCLG itself (support to its regional sections for learning processes, training axes for LA to deepen, awareness-raising for political authorities, registration and visibility of DC practices in the region, development of environments that facilitate the opportunity offered by LA to share and inspire other regions, etc.).

[1]_For the complete Module with more references and examples, refer to_ **learning.uclg.org**

[2]_Available in_ **youtube.com**
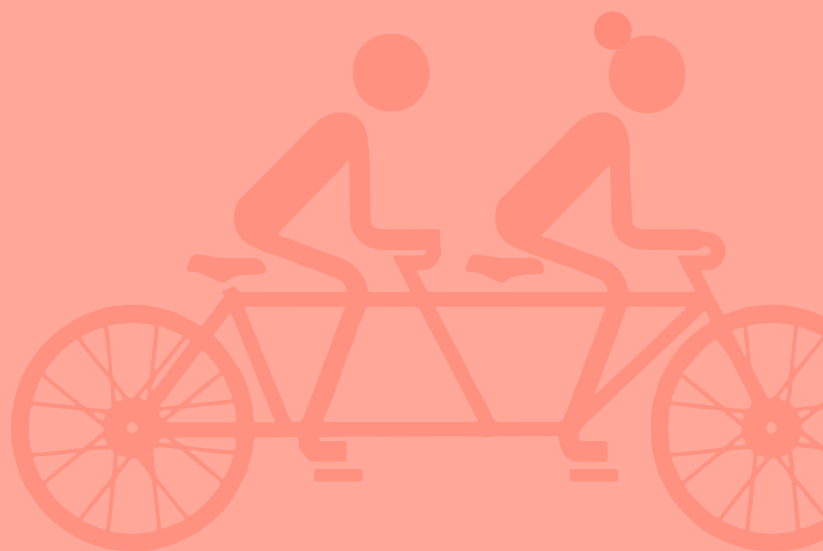
Decentralized cooperation from the Latin American perspective: realities, narratives and trends

Context: Origin and development of decentralized cooperation in Latin America

Initially, it should be noted that there is no single concept of DC in LA, neither at the level of central states, nor among local and regional governments (LRGs), nor in academia.

The origin of DC in LA is found in partnerships between cities in the region and cities in the North, especially in Europe. In practice, Twinning agreements were translated into actions of political solidarity (for example, with LRGs of Latin American countries undergoing revolutionary processes, such as Nicaragua, El Salvador and Cuba) or into cultural and friendship exchanges with territories with historical and cultural links with the region (Spain, Portugal, Italy).

However, it is since the late 1980s and early 1990s that DC has become dynamic in the region, with a different entity and logic to the classic Twinning arrangements. This meant the transition from links based on political solidarity and cultural exchanges to relations based on solidarity understood as "aid" or "assistance" (through the transfer of financial and technical resources to alleviate basic needs and contribute to development) from LRGs in the North to their peers in the South.

The context in which this first stage of DC developed in LA favored the logic of solidarity as "aid":

- The generalized deterioration of the quality of life in cities (unemployment, poverty and inequality, environmental pollution, road disorder, multiple housing deficits, multiplication of marginalized areas, lack of spaces for collective coexistence, security problems, informality) is the result of structural conditions and the chaotic urbanization of the preceding decades.

- The need to participate directly in the international economic competition to which the LRGs were exposed in the context of economic reforms (free trade and market liberalization).

- The increased dynamism and demands of civil society, within the framework of the democratization processes underway.

- The processes of decentralization of functions and competencies (in most cases incomplete) from central governments to subnational levels, which imposed new roles and functions on the LRGs.

These challenges found the LRGs in Latin America weakened, to a large extent, as a result of the centralized forms of historical organization of the State in the countries of the region. These were not only weaknesses in terms of economic and financial resources, but also deficits in their institutional, technical, competency and managerial capacities. This made it urgent for cities and territories to make efforts to obtain resources and strengthen their response capacities. Faced with difficulties in obtaining such support from the central governments, Latin American local authorities turned to DC (and to development coopera-

tion in general), perceiving it as a source of resources (financial and/or knowledge and experience, from the North to the South). To this end, since the 1990s, and more strongly since the establishment of the URBAL Program of the European Commission, many Latin American LRGs created institutional instances for the management of their international relations. In addition to technical cooperation and participation in regional and global networks of cities, attracting resources was one of the main purposes of these spaces[3].

This vision of DC as a source of resources (and its Northern correlate of "aid" or "assistance") gave rise to vertical, asymmetric and hierarchical relationships between donor and recipient LRGs.

As argued in the next section of this paper, the narrative of the DC as a source of resources began to be questioned over the years. However, even recognizing the validity of these questions, the importance of DC in the region during this period cannot be ignored. Beyond the solidarity initiatives (generally with scarce resources and limited impact) to assist vulnerable groups, it was of political importance: it made visible the challenges faced by Latin American territories; promoted the internationalization of LRGs; and contributed to the strengthening of local government structures and local power (including particularly the processes of democratization, decentralization and local governance).

Two other elements characterized this first stage of DC in LA. First, there was a strong presence of indirect DC (projects for the execution of which Northern LRGs partnered with civil society institutions in their territory), a feature that - as noted later in this document - gradually lost relevance in the face of the advance of direct DC. Second, the strong presence of Spanish partners (LRGs, cooperation funds, etc.) in Latin American DC, motivated both by cultural and historical ties, as well as by common language issues with most of the countries in the region.

Latin American visions and narratives on decentralized cooperation

Although the vision of DC as a "source of resources from the North to the South" is still present in the region, and practices continue to be developed under this logic, a new way of understanding DC has been taking shape in LA for some years now. It is a narrative based on common principles: reciprocity, shared interests, mutual benefits, horizontality, partnership between counterpart partners (no longer donors and recipients), exchange and mutual learning. The contributions and conclusions of the Training of Trainers workshop on *Learning Module 4 on Localizing SDGs through Decentralized Cooperation* clearly reflected this Latin American vision of DC. Although this narrative is also present in other regions around the world, there are three aspects that distinguish LA apart:

a. The valorization of "direct" cooperation between LRGs. The decentralization and deconcentration inherent to the processes of territorial democratization in LA, and the transition from a perspective that considered develop-

[3] *Several of these institutional spaces even created indicators to compare their budgets with resources obtained through international cooperation. In this way, elements were sought to justify internally (within the administration and the local legislature) and externally (the citizenry) the existence of institutional structures within the local government dedicated to the management of international relations. The case of the city of Guarulhos (Brazil) is an example of this dynamic. For more information, refer to* balancocri. wixsite.com

ment as something acquired exogenously (by central government policies) to others that understand it as something built endogenously (based on the capacities of the territory), has meant the empowerment of regional and local government bodies. In this context, the urgency to strengthen and generate their own territorial development strategies may help to understand the value that Latin American LRGs place on direct cooperation with their counterparts.

b. T*he commitment of the LRGs to involve and articulate the stakeholders operating in their territory.* Many LRGs in the region have a history of linkage with their stakeholders in their territory. For instance, by promoting participatory instances, generating multistakeholder governance mechanisms in certain public policies, and developing regular technical collaboration links with academia and scientific-technological systems in their territory. It is not surprising, therefore, to observe in the Latin American experience DC practices under multistakeholder and multilevel schemes, although this is not always an easy task with all the actors or in all contexts.

c. *The relevance given in the narrative to new DC formats (South-South, South/North, Triangular and networked).* Although there are experiences of all these formats in the region, the first one (often combined with the network modality) seems to be the most characteristic of the Latin American narrative and practices. Although there are no statistical records of South-South DC in the region, it has been gaining more prominence in recent years. Proof of this is the interest of the Ibero-American Program to Strengthen South-South Cooperation of SEGIB[4] in supporting its strengthening (it is one of the five lines of work of its Medium-Term Strategy 2020-2023). Many cities and regions in LA have made progress in various areas of local public policies, in their democratic governance processes, in the professionalization of their human resources and in the development of innovative experiences in public management[5], which become knowledge with great value for exchange and mutual learning. There is no single pattern of South-South DC in the region: in some cases, they are informal exchange initiatives; in others, they are part of specific collaboration agreements; sometimes they are part of specific programs (such as the MERCOCIUDADES South-South Cooperation Program[6]); and in a few cases they are institutionalized within the local cooperation policy (such as MedellinLab[7]).

But these advances coexist with old and new challenges of Latin American cities and regions that, in many cases, require DC. It is this context that explains the existence of cities and regions in LA with a dual character in DC (particularly, but not exclusively, with their peers in the South): <u>as both providers and receivers of cooperation.</u>

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[4] *For more information, refer to:* **www.segib.com** *(available in Spanish)*

[5] *Examples of widespread experiences in this regard include: the participatory budget in Porto Alegre; the city of care in Bogota; urban agriculture in Rosario; and the Lige os Pontos program in Sao Paulo.*

[6] *For more information, refer to* **sursurmercociudades.org** *(website available in Spanish & Portuguese)*

[7] *For more information, refer to:* **www.acimedellin.**

Why is decentralized cooperation important?

For this new narrative in LA, the importance of DC is no longer centered on the resources mobilized to finance projects (source of resources), but on its qualitative impacts on territorial policy and management. This is achieved by generating spaces for direct contact and exchange of experiences, knowledge and learning with other local political actors, with similar agendas, responsibilities, functions and challenges. In this framework, it could be argued that LRGs in LA participate in DC to:

a. **Improve the institutional quality of the LRGs.** As already mentioned, since the beginning of the democratization processes, substantive progress has been made in this regard (in many cases supported by DC). Unlike other regions, LRGs in LA do not depend on international cooperation to build institutional capacities, but it does constitute an important and necessary stimulus for the strengthening of such capacities to improve the design and execution of local public policies and services. This is where the exchange of experiences and mutual learning between cities becomes relevant for LA, particularly in areas, such as: gender, citizen safety, youth, public spaces and urban planning, urban and metropolitan governance, sustainable and inclusive mobility, migration, climate change, water management, renewable energy and natural resources, waste management, risk management, urban innovation, urban food policies, local economic development and social and solidarity economy. In addition to these sectoral priorities, the region needs to strengthen its capacities to enhance its role in the national competitive, economic and financial scenario, particularly with regard to decentralization processes, local autonomy and local financing. DC is a key tool for reflecting on these issues based on different experiences, as well as for developing advocacy processes.

b. **Strengthening local democratic governance capacities.** Although, there are innovative experiences in LA in the construction of local governance, this is not generalized throughout the territory or in all public policies. The interest of many LRGs in the region in strengthening the capacities of their territory and the instruments necessary for local governance (such as participatory strategic planning, participatory budgeting, the construction of multisectoral alliances, public-private consultation mechanisms, multilevel consultation, etc.) are presented in the region as growing motivations to act in DC.

c. **Projecting the territory internationally, economically, politically or culturally.** For many LRGs in LA (particularly the smaller ones), DC was the channel through which they established their first international contacts. For other territories with experience in the international arena, DC is often seen as one of the instruments of their internationalization, with expected impacts on local development. Some examples include practices that: bring the private sectors of partner LRGs into contact with each other, promote international recognition of the city/region as a reference point for a public issue/policy (particularly in South-South DC); or promote the art, culture, science and sports of the partner cities.
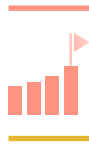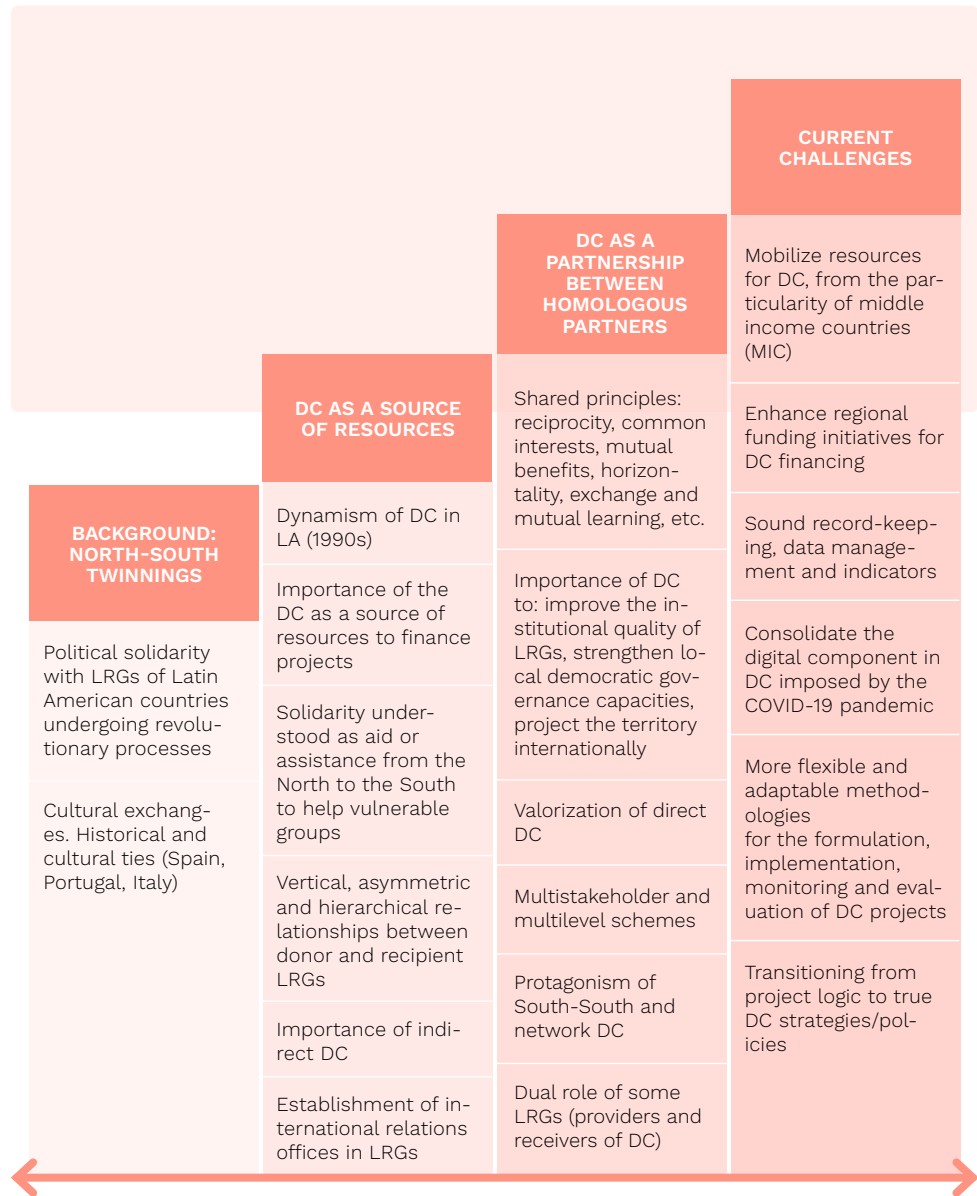
Figure 1

The evolution of decentralized cooperation in Latin America

BACKGROUND: NORTH-SOUTH TWINNINGS	DC AS A SOURCE OF RESOURCES	DC AS A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN HOMOLOGOUS PARTNERS	CURRENT CHALLENGES
Political solidarity with LRGs of Latin American countries undergoing revolutionary processes	Dynamism of DC in LA (1990s)	Shared principles: reciprocity, common interests, mutual benefits, horizontality, exchange and mutual learning, etc.	Mobilize resources for DC, from the particularity of middle income countries (MIC)
Cultural exchanges. Historical and cultural ties (Spain, Portugal, Italy)	Importance of the DC as a source of resources to finance projects	Importance of DC to: improve the institutional quality of LRGs, strengthen local democratic governance capacities, project the territory internationally	Enhance regional funding initiatives for DC financing
	Solidarity understood as aid or assistance from the North to the South to help vulnerable groups		Sound record-keeping, data management and indicators
		Valorization of direct DC	Consolidate the digital component in DC imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic
	Vertical, asymmetric and hierarchical relationships between donor and recipient LRGs	Multistakeholder and multilevel schemes	More flexible and adaptable methodologies for the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of DC projects
	Importance of indirect DC	Protagonism of South-South and network DC	Transitioning from project logic to true DC strategies/policies
	Establishment of international relations offices in LRGs	Dual role of some LRGs (providers and receivers of DC)	

The Latin American visions and narratives on DC described in this section are developed within the framework of an international development cooperation system that gives the region a unique place and role, as discussed in the following section.

Latin America in international development cooperation today and its impact on decentralized cooperation

For several years now, LA has been experiencing a "displacement effect"[8] in international development cooperation, that is, a progressive decrease in non-reimbursable financial and technical resources from official development assistance (ODA) to the region (see Figure 2).
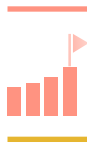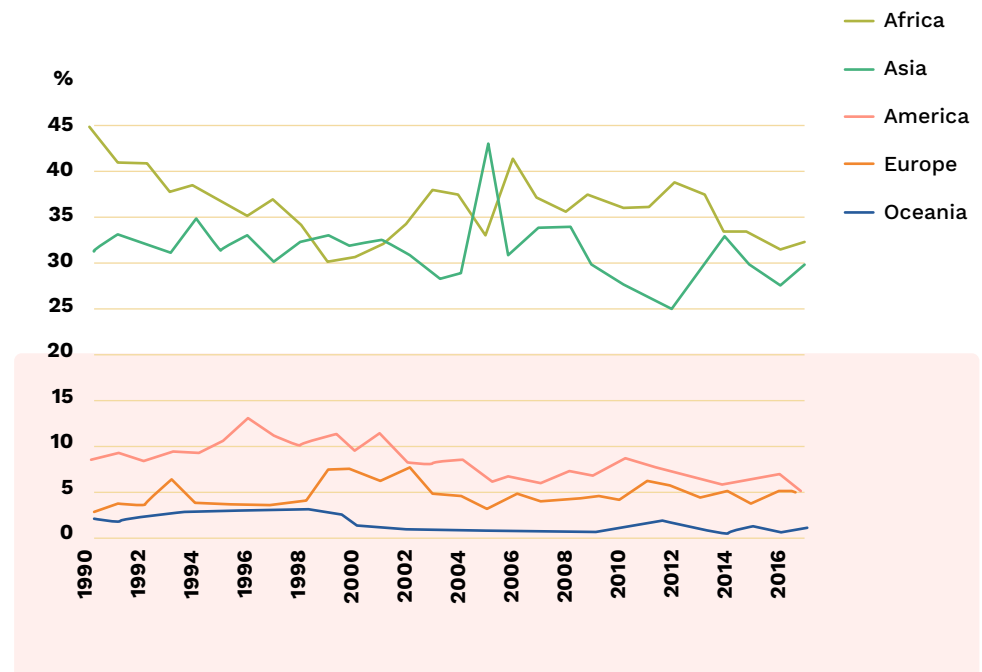
Figure 2

Regional share of total net ODA as a percentage of total ODA

Source: OCDE, "Development aid at a glance. Statistics by region", 2017

Although this trend began earlier, it became more acute with the global financial crisis of 2008. In addition, the incorporation of more and more Latin American countries into the category of Middle Income Countries (MIC) and even the "graduation"[9] in 2018 of two of them (Uruguay and Chile). This is a very specific situation in LA, which went through a process of economic growth for some years, but without altering many of its structural problems, such as socio-economic and territorial inequality and inequity. The criterion used by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to determine the categories does not fit this Latin American reality: higher levels of per capita income do not necessarily imply higher levels of development, lower levels of poverty or less inequality.

[8] AYLLÓN PINO, Bruno, "Latinoamérica en la cooperación internacional para el desarrollo. De la subordinación a los donantes a la autonomía de la cooperación Sur-Sur", en Sotillo, José Ángel y Ayllón Pino, Bruno (coords.), "Las transformaciones de América Latina: cambios políticos, socioeconómicos y protagonismo internacional", Instituto Universitario de Desarrollo y Cooperación (IUDC), Madrid, 2017.

[9] This presupposes that they have already achieved "developed" country status, and are therefore no longer eligible for ODA.
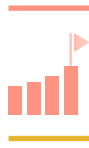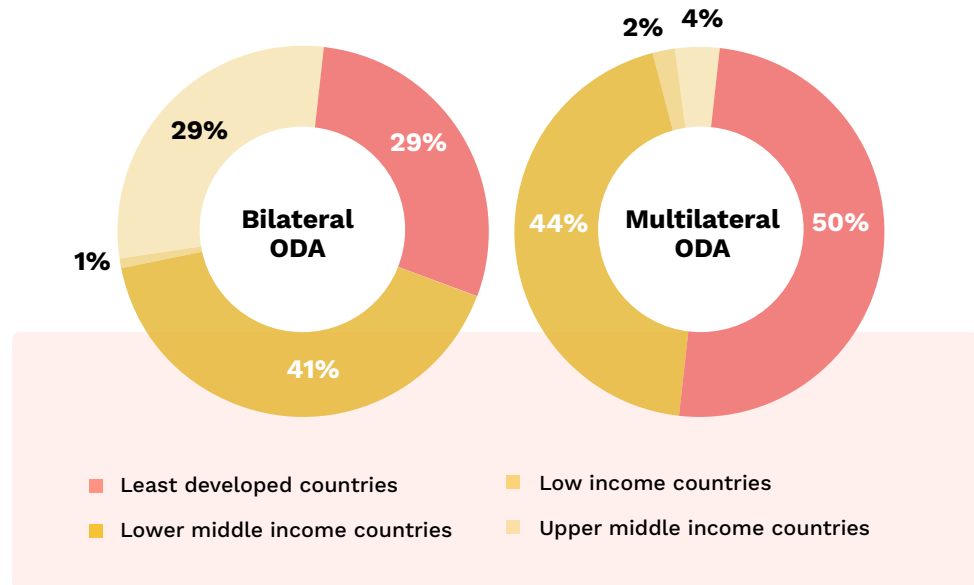
Figure 3

Percentage of ODA in support of cities and regions

Source: OCDE, "Decentralized development co-operation: Unlocking the potential of cities and regions", 2019

Bilateral ODA

- 29%
- 29%
- 1%
- 41%

Multilateral ODA

- 2%
- 4%
- 44%
- 50%

Legend:
- Least developed countries
- Low income countries
- Lower middle income countries
- Upper middle income countries

In those cases where DC has declined, this was due more to the financial crisis than to the MIC status of LA countries, as many donors do not consider DC as part of ODA and therefore do not follow DAC criteria.

Actors and models of decentralized cooperation management in LA

As already mentioned in this document, DC has been developing as a practice among Latin American **LRGs** since the early 1990s, but not uniformly in all territories, nor with the same modalities or results. For some LRGs it is a novel experience, while for others it is a common practice. In many cases, these practices are still sporadic and scattered in various areas of territorial administration. Comparatively, few cities have created their own institutions (for example, the cities of Belo Horizonte, Montevideo and Rosario have had international relations offices for more than 25 years).

A large majority of LRGs in the region still understand DC only from a "project" perspective (and even in some cases LRGs with **specific offices**). There are few cases in which these practices have been institutionalized - or are in the process of being institutionalized - in a public policy environment. An interesting case in this regard is the city of Cuenca, which has its own office and an internationalization strategy (which includes DC). Their priorities are established on the basis of the National Development Plan and the city's Land Use Plan. The strategy includes an important, although recent, South-South and triangular

cooperation component, and has been built from a participatory, multistakeholder and multilevel approach. The city is also working on an international cooperation ordinance.

Some LRGs in LA have gone a step further, creating specific cooperation **agencies**. A paradigmatic case in the region is the Agency for Cooperation and Investment of Medellin and the Metropolitan Area (ACI Medellin), Colombia. It is guided by the "Public Policy on International Cooperation for Development" (Agreement 026 of 2011 of the Medellin Council), which is part of the ACI's internationalization strategy. Its priorities are defined by the Medellin Development Plan, from which the thematic lines of its DC are derived. Although it manages ODA and multilateral assistance, ACI Medellin has a focus on decentralized South-South, North-South, networked and triangular cooperation, and plays a dual role in the DC. It is a public body - albeit independent - that approaches DC from spaces of co-creation and alliance with actors in the territory. A more recent experience is the Municipal Cooperation Agency of La Paz, Bolivia. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that, given La Paz's history of cooperation with other LRGs in the country, as well as certain restrictions of the national regulatory framework the city decided to go beyond the creation of an international relations office within its local government. It then institutionalized the Municipal Agency - which has a strategy based on the city's Development Plan - with the purpose of not only articulating and giving meaning to all the international cooperation developed by the city, but also to support other LRGs in the country in their international cooperation processes. The support was given at several levels: making experiences available, sharing good practices with their national counterparts, and channeling international cooperation to other Bolivian municipalities with little or no experience in these practices. The latter is made possible through a subnational cooperation program that the Agency has in place to facilitate that any initiative developed by La Paz includes the exchange of experiences with other municipalities in the country, thus maximizing the impacts and results of the practices.

Some **national associations of LRGs** in the region are themselves DC actors, while they have a political mandate to promote DC among their members and support their practices. For example, the National Union of Local Governments of Costa Rica (UNGL) has a project bank made up of initiatives presented by its member municipalities, in some cases supporting them in their formulation and accompanying them in the search for international partners. In other cases, it is the UNGL itself that manages and executes projects as such, for the benefit of all or some of its municipalities. They have had FLACMA and the Confederation of Associations of Municipalities of Central America and the Caribbean as project partners. Another example is the Chilean Association of Municipalities, which has an International Relations Unit and develops DC initiatives, particularly of a South-South nature. The Brazilian National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM) makes available to its members a battery of support mechanisms for internationalization in general and DC development in particular[10]. The CNM also implements DC projects, such as the recent "InovaJuntos - Cooperação Urbana Triangular para a Inovação e Sustentabilidade"[11] .

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[10] *Refer to* **www.cnm.org.br** *for more information*

[11] *Refer to*: **inovajuntos.cnm. org.br** *for more information (in Portuguese)*

However, in general, national associations of LRGs in the region do not have a comprehensive DC policy, nor a learning strategy for their partners in this area. They need to strengthen - and even build in some cases - their own and their members' capacities in the area of DC.

One characteristic of LA is that it has several regional associations of LRGs, each with a particular form and methodology of action in DC. UCLG has two Latin American regional sections with unique features: the **Latin American Federation of Cities, Municipalities and Local Government Associations (FLACMA) and MERCOCIUDADES**. Together, they involve all the municipalities of LA. FLACMA's members participate through national associations of local governments, which in particular include intermediate and small cities. MERCOCIUDADES, on the other hand, is directly integrated by local governments, initially from Mercosur countries, and since 2015 from all of South America. Both FLACMA and MERCOCIUDADES recognize themselves as allies and facilitators of DC in the region. In the first case, mainly through its role as a multiplier of the benefits, exchanges and learning by being a federation of associations. In the second, through the possibility of contact and the generation of direct city-city trust. However, none of these regional sections of UCLG has a comprehensive DC policy. A step forward in this direction is the MERCOCIUDADES South-South Cooperation Program, which has two components: training and project financing. This is a unique program in the region that, although having its own funding from membership fees, it also mobilizes external resources.

Both FLACMA and MERCOCIUDADES, while having different formats and trajectories, have partnership strategies with various actors in the territory, international organizations, cooperating partners and networks of LRGs.

It should be noted that there are also a number of LRG networks (e.g. ICLEI and UCCI) and platforms (such as ALLAS) in the region that also promote DC, mainly from a more technical perspective, different from the political mandate of FLACMA and MERCOCIUDADES.

The development of DC in LA is not only diverse in terms of actors and their models, but also in relation to the regulatory framework in which it, and international relations of LRGs in general, unfolds. Some countries have regulated it, either through their National Constitutions (such as Ecuador), sectoral norms regulating development cooperation (such as Colombia), or sectoral norms regulating the local regime (such as El Salvador). In other countries, there is no regulation in this regard, which has not prevented (although, in many cases, it has limited) the development of DC practices, as was reflected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mexico City is a paradigmatic case in the region: it introduced the theme of external action in its Constitution in 2017. In its Article 20 "Global City" it recognizes "the pacifist, supportive, hospitable and asylum vocation of the city, as well as the importance of strengthening its presence and participation in the global scenario through international cooperation and participation in networks of cities".

[12]*Refer to **territoriosursur. org/** for more information (in Spanish)*

Beyond the strictly normative aspect, some national governments in the region are more open to DC than others. Some have even generated their own support mechanisms (financial and/or technical) for their LRGs' DC (e.g. Chile, Mexico and Argentina; or SEGIB, in the Ibero-American space[12]).

The contextualization and characterization of DC from the LA perspective carried out so far would not be complete without a reference to the challenges of the DC agenda in the region, as discussed in the following section.

Challenges of decentralized cooperation in Latin America

At least six particular challenges of the DC agenda in LA could be identified:

Design strategies to mobilize resources for DC, based on the specific characteristics of the MIC status of the countries in the region.

Strengthen common initiatives of regional funds for financing DC, such as the MERCOCIUDADES South-South Cooperation Program.

To have solid DC records, data management and indicators, as well as effective accountability, monitoring and evaluation processes. While some Latin American actors are making progress in this regard (e.g. ICA Medellin), the challenge remains crucial for most cities, national and regional associations.

Move towards the consolidation of the digital component in DC imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, taking advantage of its benefits in terms of economic resources and time management, but avoiding that this generates inequalities in the possibilities of developing practices (e.g. for small LRGs).

Take advantage of the DC experience during the pandemic to move towards methodologies (such as the one proposed in Learning Module 4) for the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of DC projects that are more flexible and adaptable to changing contexts.

Strengthen the capacities (technical, institutional and political) of local administrations and their national and regional associations for DC, particularly to move from the project logic to real DC strategies or policies. The limitations to work transversally within the administration, the frequent rotation of technical teams and the discontinuity of experiences or links (in both cases, due to political changes), difficulties in translating the narrative into practice (for example, regarding the different visions of DC), and weaknesses in the strategies of the LRGs to communicate, both within their administration and to the citizenry, the results of DC on the improvement of local public policies and to make visible the effectiveness of DC in the territory, constitute only some aspects of this type of challenge.

Decentralized cooperation as enabler of the SDGs in Latin America

As recognized by the international community, LRGs are key actors for the implementation and fulfillment of the SDGs. It has already been reiterated in numerous documents[13] that a large part of the SDGs and the targets defined for their implementation address challenges that in most cases are the responsibility of local authorities and/or have a territorial impact. Given that cities and regions have different skills and capacities, in terms of both institutional and human resources, and limitations in terms of experience and finances to carry out the SDG localization processes, the DC acquires a potential as an enabling or facilitating instrument for such processes.

In LA, this appreciation of DC as an instrument for localizing the SDGs is shared - in some cases with greater emphasis than in others - by national governments, local authorities and their national and regional associations. However, in practice, the DC faces the challenge of becoming an effective tool for localizing the SDGs in the region. This will require working on a series of key conditions or factors, some of which are listed below.

The SDGs as a decentralized cooperation roadmap

In LA, although most LRGs discursively assume the narrative of the SDGs as a roadmap for their DC, the experience of incorporating the SDGs into their practices is very varied. In a large majority, this is done only through the identification of the SDG to which they contribute. In other cases, when there are no strategic plans for international relations or cooperation, the incorporation of the SDGs as a DC roadmap is established directly through their territorial plans aligned with the 2030 Agenda. In the few cities in the region that have international relations or cooperation planning, they have been adjusted to the 2030 Agenda. But even in these cases where the SDGs are specifically added to the objectives and priorities of the interventions, it is rare that they have DC strategies as a facilitator of SDG localization.

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[13] *Refer to* **global-taskforce.org**

Cross-cutting approach

The multidimensional, comprehensive and holistic nature of the SDGs is a challenge for the capacities of public administrations in general and for the teams that manage DC in particular. Working according to the silo logic - widespread in the region's LRGs - has been recognized as one of the most relevant issues to overcome for a SDG-linked DC. The cross-cutting approach remains an elusive challenge for the areas managing cooperation in Latin American LRGs. Perhaps this helps to explain why, although the SDGs are being integrated into the strategic actions or programming of the DC - in the terms mentioned above -, it has not been integrated into the SDG implementation or localization strategies in a large part of the Latin American territories. Despite this, several LRG cooperation areas in the region admit that the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have helped them to initiate coordination spaces with other areas and government departments.

The articulation of actors demanded by the SDGs

The LRGs have a fundamental role to play in achieving the SDGs, not only in the alignment of their plans, programs and government policies with these goals, but also because of their capacity to generate and lead multistakeholder partnerships. For this purpose, DC has the potential to become a useful tool. In general, and even before the establishment of the SDGs, both the municipalities themselves and their national and regional associations have been developing multistakeholder DC practices and have valued the role and contributions of territorial stakeholders (universities, private sector, civil society organizations) to generate synergies between DC and the SDGs due to their know-how and the mobilization of their financial and human resources.

However, there is still a long way to go, especially in the commitment to partnerships with the private sector with two actors very present in LA: small and medium-sized companies, and the social and solidarity economy.

In this sense, the exercise of carrying out Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) facilitates a space for the articulation of the LRGs with the actors in the territory, feeding and adjusting the information necessary for the application of indicators. In order to learn and make progress on these exercises in a multistakeholder manner, DC is an instrument that can be used by LRGs in LA and the Caribbean.

The multilevel approach required by the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda and its SDGs call for an innovative multilevel articulation that goes beyond the discursive and the mere appeal to participation and coordination between the different levels of government. It looks for an articulation that establishes responsibilities and capacities, that fully assimilates the crucial nature of territorial policies and LRGs for the implementation of the SDGs, and that recognizes the importance of local autonomy and financing. It should not be forgotten that the localization of the SDGs does not only refer

to the alignment of local plans, programs and policies to these goals. It also refers to the need for subnational governments to influence the definition of national strategies and guidelines for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, understanding these as articulated processes between the different levels of government and actors from civil society and the private sector.

This demand for an effective implementation of the SDGs is a challenge for the vast majority of countries in the region. In LA "it is still recognized that most of the national efforts for the articulation of actors in multilevel spaces continue to respond to a top-down logic"[14] .

Instruments

DC as an enabler of the SDGs requires revising the predominant DC instruments in LA, which are project-based, and move towards a partnership-based DC. The project methodology is closely linked to the view of cooperation by sectoral priorities, and is based on inflexible administrative criteria[15]. Therefore, it is not well suited to the integrality and multidimensionality of the SDGs. Overcoming this project logic and moving towards comprehensive DC policies, more in line with the SDGs, seems a difficult task to overcome in the region, at least in the short term.

Another important challenge for generating SDG-aligned DC in the region is to have instruments and methodologies for data collection, systematization and recording. Few LRGs in LA, as well as their national and regional associations, have such instruments for their cooperation interventions in general and DC in particular. This is probably due to the fact that there is little tradition of monitoring and evaluating local public policies and generating indicators for this purpose in the region.

It should be noted that, among Latin American LRGs, there are differential capacities to localize the SDGs and to manage DC, and consequently, to address the key factors mentioned above. Geographical and territorial scale criteria, and diverse economic, social and institutional realities, are combined to explain this heterogeneity in capacities.

Finally, for the DC to become an instrument for localizing the SDGs, the national associations of LRGs in LA should play a central role in supporting their members (providing information and methodologies, offering training, generating spaces for the exchange of good practices and joint learning on the subject) to face the challenges posed by the identified key factors. However, most of them do not have a strategy in this regard, and first need to strengthen their capacities to lead SDG-linked DC in order to be able to support their members. For their part, the two UCLG regional sections in LA -FLACMA and MERCOCIUDADES- recognize that their central role and responsibility is to create enabling environments for their members, whether national associations or LRGs, as the case may be, to mobilize SDG-oriented and aligned DC. To create such environments, they identify a number of possible interventions, from training, regional stakeholder mapping, drafting of protocols, guidelines and tools, to the generation of spaces for exchange of good prac-

[14] *MARTÍNEZ, I. y MARTÍNEZ OSES, P.J, "Cooperación descentralizada y Agenda 2030. La innovación en las políticas de desarrollo con miras a los ODS", (Colectivo La Mundial), CGLU-CIB, 2020, Pág.60 Disponible en*: **lamundial.org**

[15] *Ibidem*

tices among their partners and with other regional sections. Although both FLACMA and MERCOCIUDADES make concrete contributions in this regard and have incorporated the SDGs into their planning and actions, neither of them has a learning strategy on localizing the SDGs through the DC applicable to their members. This is why Learning Module 4 is very useful, both for their own teams and for replicating it among their members.
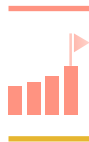
Figure 4

Opportunities of SDG localization and cooperation

SDG as a vehicle to shift DC from project to parthershio approach

- Improve coordation between actors
- Better use and motivation to collect data and relate impact
- Change the project focus logic
- Stronger LGA and networks to support knowledge and contact to partners
- National interest in the topics and SDGs

System based on approach

Evidence for SDG indicators

Partnership based

Multilateral effort

SDG is an agenda of Nations
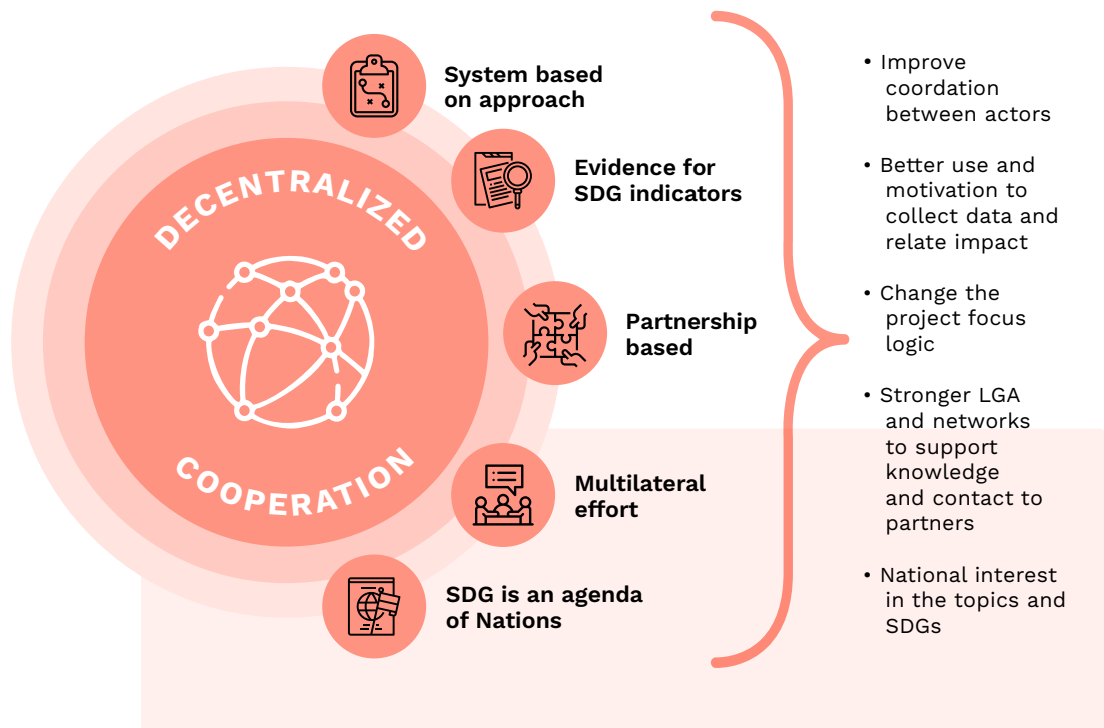
Building technical capacity to implement SDG-linked decentralized cooperation: Training of Trainers

Since 2017, UCLG's Learning agenda has included the implementation of several trainings on the localization of agendas, in particular aiming to promote cooperation between facilitators and active technical actors from UCLG[16]. For instance, the Training of Trainers conducted in 2018 in partnership with FLACMA, in Cochabamba, Bolivia. This led five associations to implement face-to-face learning activities on the SDGs and global agendas in 2018 and 2019, a process that was extended during the pandemic in virtual format.

In this regard, MERCOCIUDADES, recognizing the value of developing the capacities of LRG practitioners in the region, partnered with the UCLG Learning team to implement an online Training of Trainers workshop on *Learning Module 4*. With the objective of equipping potential trainers with the knowledge to conduct their own training sessions, an intensive three-day program was developed during October 2021, with support from Platforma, UNDP, UN-Habitat and the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments. The training used an interactive, hands-on learning methodology. Following an overview of the history of DC from a Latin American perspective and its relationship to the principles of the SDGs, participants reflected on the value of new possibilities for partnerships, resources and financing, and how to design DC projects and policies linked to the SDGs.

The experiential learning component focused on real-life case studies based on lessons from three South-South SDG-linked DC experiences in LA, demonstrating the relevance of this cooperation modality in the region. The case of the Food Surplus Network between Belo Horizonte (Brazil), Quito (Ecuador), Medellin (Colombia) and New Taipei (Taiwan), highlighted one of the priority issues for LA (food policy), and showed how a direct DC practice can be driven from a network of LRGs (Metropolis). Participants also reflected on the South-South technical DC experience of the Chilean Association of Municipalities with Amazonian communities in Peru in the field of renewable energy and water. The experience showed how LRGs in the region jointly address global agenda issues (such as climate change), and illustrated the synergies that can be established with other levels of government (the Chilean central government contributed to the financing of the initiative, through the Chile Fund). The third case presented allowed participants to learn and reflect on an unprecedented experience in the region: the MERCOCIUDADES South-South Cooperation Program. In order to exemplify the exchange experiences carried out within the framework of this Program, the cooperation between the cities of Santa Fe, Argentina, and Medellin, Colombia, in the field of entrepreneurship, showed the importance and usefulness of involving local stakeholders in CD practices. Lastly, upon learning about the experience of the city of Cuenca, Ecuador, in developing a DC policy, there was an interesting discussion on the key conditions or factors in LA for moving from the logic of projects to the construction of true local public DC policies. This was identified as a priority and the workshop offered basic steps for practitioners to begin drafting simple but effective DC policy guidelines.

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[16] *Refer to* **www.uclg.org**

The core components agreed upon during the workshop for the learning strategy roadmap in the region are summarized as follows:

1. Generate synergies for the implementation of the Module with technical (thematic units) and technical-political (vice-presidencies) instances of MERCOCIUDADES.

2. Develop the training of the Module within the framework of national associations of LRGs in LA, through FLACMA.

3. Promote among the partner LRGs the rollout of the Module for training the technical and political teams within the interested municipalities.

The examples mentioned will be further developed in the next section.

A focus on practice: Showcasing selected Latin American decentralized cooperation practices

Presented below are examples of DC practices in LA that illustrate different modalities and methodologies in the regional context.

Practice 1

South-south alliance between the Chilean Association of Municipalities and the regional government of Loreto (Peru) on climate change adaptation in Amazonian communities

Located in the Department of Loreto, the Tamshiyacu-Tahuayo Regional Conservation Area is a protected area in the Peruvian Amazon. The Amazonian communities in the area's buffer zone have identified among their main problems those related to access to clean water and energy. To help address these problems, the Chilean Association of Municipalities (ACHM) partnered with the regional government of Loreto (Peru) to develop the DC project: "Amazonian communities adapt to the impacts of climate change" (2017-2019).

The project, which included the participation of a local partner, the NGO Derecho, Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (DAR), from Peru, was introduced to the Chile Fund, which financially supported its implementation.

This DC practice aimed to work on renewable energy and water using simple quality solutions. These were adapted to the local Amazonian context to provide sustainable energy for the development of the productive activities of the communities in the area.

Specifically, the initiative proposed to:

1. Implement sustainable renewable energy technologies in four communities in the Tahuayo river basin. The technologies, which consisted of firewood efficient artifacts complemented with water thermal inertia cooking systems, were built by the villagers themselves with local materials, with the support and technical advice of ACHM and DAR.

2. Install technologies to improve access to quality water in three communities of the Tahuayo river basin. Again, the technologies, which in this case consisted of water reuse from filters, water quality improvement, storage, distribution and simple and cost efficient rainwater harvesting systems, were built by the villagers themselves with local materials, with the support and technical advice of ACHM and DAR.

3. Promote the exchange of activities and their results through a seminar to return the information to the local authorities with the active participation of the community.

The project enabled the regional government of Loreto to strengthen its Strategic Social and Environmental Development Plan, local Chilean and Peruvian entities to exchange methodologies and work together on renewable energy and access to water, five organized communities in the Tahuayo river basin to become empowered in environmental protection and the fight against climate change, and the implementation of 205 technological solutions to meet the needs of families in the Tahuayo River Basin in terms of access to quality water and clean energy.

Some of the lessons learned by the project's lead institution (ACHM) are interesting and useful for improving future interventions:

• The importance of developing a communication strategy for the project and having audiovisual records of its implementation.

• Promote follow-up instances not only during project implementation, but also after project closure, in order to analyze its sustainability and impacts in the medium term.

• Although the political will and support of the highest authorities for the project is recognized as fundamental, there is also a need for greater institutional involvement of the local public actors so that changes in authorities do not have a negative impact on the development of the DC practice, as for instance, the weakening of their leadership role in the initiative.

This is a South-South DC practice that contributes to SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

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[17] **www.fao.org**

[18] *Losses refer to the decrease in the available mass of food for human consumption in the production, post-harvest, storage and transportation phases. Food waste refers to losses resulting from the decision to discard food that still has value and is mainly associated with the behavior of wholesalers and retailers, food services and consumers.*

[19] **www.fao.org**

Practice 2

Surplus Food Network: A direct DC project between the cities of Belo Horizonte, Quito, Medellin and New Taipei

Food waste is one of the most pressing global development challenges. According to FAO estimates[17], between a quarter and a third of the food produced annually for human consumption in the world is lost or wasted[18]. This is equivalent to about 1.3 billion tons of food, which would be enough to feed 2 billion people. In LA and the Caribbean, it is estimated that around 15% of available food is lost and/or wasted each year, which is unacceptable in a region with high rates of extreme poverty, malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. As FAO states, "addressing this problem is fundamental to progress in the fight against hunger and must become a priority for the governments of Latin America and the Caribbean[19]. The LRGs have a central role to play in meeting this challenge, both in terms of food management and in promoting new values among citizens to limit food waste. This has been understood by the cities of Quito (Ecuador), Medellin (Colombia) and Belo Horizonte (Brazil), which have been implementing policies and strategies in this regard in their territories. For example, Belo Horizonte has experience in food bank management and an internationally recognized food security policy. It has a partnership with more than 36 non-profit organizations, in addition to public and private sector entities. Its food bank distributes approximately 20,000 kg of food and assists more than 6,000 inhabitants weekly by reducing food waste.

The interest and concern of the three LA cities, which are all signatories of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, in this issue led them to partner with New Taipei (Taiwan). Since 2016, New Taipei's local government has been implementing the Surplus Food Network, a network that promotes food waste reduction initiatives in partnership with schools, restaurants and markets. As part of a call for projects promoted by the Metropolis

[20]**www.metropolis.org**

[21]**www.metropolis.org/projects/surplus-food-network**

Network[20] in 2018, the four cities developed a direct DC project with the purpose of learning practical approaches to the redistribution of surplus food, through the exchange of experiences. The initiative also focused on citizens, education and awareness of the impacts of food waste and ways to reuse food.

This project not only enabled the partner cities to learn about other experiences in addressing the problem, but also to understand, incorporate or deepen in aspects not always considered when generating a policy to address food loss and waste, in particular:

a. The need to address the problem comprehensively at all stages: in agriculture, processing, storage, transportation, sale and food consumption.

b. The importance of formulating strategies to increase citizen participation in the fight against food loss and waste, including responsible consumption, since part of the waste derives from poorly planned purchases.

c. The usefulness of sharing methodologies for collaboration between the government, the private sector and farmers among partner cities to address the problem.

The project contributes to SDG 2 (Zero hunger, food security, improved nutrition and sustainable agriculture), SDG 11 Inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements), SDG 12 Sustainable consumption and production) and SDG 17 Partnerships for the goals.

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[22] **www.miramebien.org.ar**

[23] *It brings together about 100 patient associations. It is a non-governmental organization that works bringing together groups of patients with different pathologies and in pursuit of the rights of people with rare, prevalent, chronic and disabling diseases:* **alianzapacientes.org**

South-South DC between cities in Argentina, Bolivia and Uruguay to promote communicational accessibility for people with disabilities

Although communication and access to information is a right for all citizens, people with disabilities find barriers to such access due to the ways in which information is communicated, shared or given in the community. To face this problem, LRGs have much to contribute, starting by their own communication.

The cities of Montevideo (Uruguay), Villa Carlos Paz and Santa Fe (Argentina) and La Paz (Bolivia), which are all active members of the Disability and Inclusion Group of the MERCOCIUDADES, committed to promoting the right to communication and access to information for people with disabilities by joining forces to develop the direct DC project "Access to communication in the social paradigm of disability". To this end, they partnered with two civil society institutions involved in disability issues: Mirame Bien[22] and ALAPA (Alianza Argentina de Pacientes)[23].

On one hand, the project aimed to raise awareness on the discriminatory aspects in which communication is currently carried out. On the other hand, it also aimed to generate a space for joint learning among local governments and participating NGOs to design or improve methodological tools to facilitate access to information for people with disabilities from the municipalities under equal conditions. As a result of the project, a Communication Guide is being prepared as a tool to be applied by partner local governments and distributed among all local governments that are members of MERCOCIUDADES.

Although this project is currently in the last phase of its execution, it has already provided some lessons to be considered for the development of future DC initiatives:

- The need to have methodologies for the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of DC projects that are more flexible and adaptable to changing contexts. For example, in this case, COVID-19 forced some planned activities to be reoriented.

- The importance of having mechanisms that can guarantee the normal development of the project in the event of government changes in the partner entities. In the case of this project, this caused difficulties in some activities as well as delays in the execution.

- The relevance of considering from the beginning of the project the different administrative-accounting procedures and deadlines of all the actors involved and the funding agencies.

The practice illustrates several characteristic elements of DC in LA:

- The valorization of joint peer learning to improve local public policies.

- The role of city networks as promoters of DC in the region, as the project was developed within the framework of the MERCOCIUDADES South-South Cooperation Program.

- The generation of alliances between actors for the promotion of DC, since the call for proposals in which the practice was selected had the financial support of the Uruguayan Agency for International Cooperation.

- The articulation with stakeholders of the territory -in this case, NGOs- in the DC practices.

The project seeks to contribute to SDG 10, as it aims to promote the inclusion and full exercise of rights of people with disabilities by overcoming inequalities. Additionally, it contributes to SDG 5, which promotes gender equality and the empowerment of all women, and, in particular, to its targets 5.1 and 5.2.

Cooperation between the National Union of Local Governments of Costa Rica, the municipalist association of The Netherlands (VNG International) and Fomento San Sebastián to promote integrated urban development and sustainable mobility with equity

The project "Sustainable Mobility, Urbanism, Equipment, Valuation of Public Space, and Greening and Equity (mUEve)[24]", is a direct North-South DC practice. It is implemented by the National Union of Local Governments of Costa Rica, in consortium with the Municipalist Association of the Netherlands, VNG International, and Fomento San Sebastian, which is a public Spanish company of the Municipality of San Sebastián. Financed by the European Union, it aims to promote integrated urban development in line with the 2030 Agenda in the fifteen municipalities[25] within the metropolitan train's sphere of influence of the Greater Metropolitan Area of Costa Rica. It consists of a Sub-Regional Plan for Transport-Oriented Urban Development and 15 project plans within the area of influence of the metropolitan train, which include improvements at the cantonal level on issues of urban planning, equipment and infrastructure with a focus on urban development oriented towards sustainable, inclusive and resilient transport. It focuses on the surroundings of the train, that is sidewalks, public spaces, pedestrian walkways and bicycle infrastructure. The main modality of DC used is the financing of works and infrastructure, but it also includes technical cooperation, training, development of knowledge exchange platforms, community outreach and awareness-raising activities related to the promotion of active mobility and the appropriation of

[24]*For more information, refer to* eco-municipal.co.cr *(in Spanish)*

[25]*Municipalities involved: Alajuela, Heredia, Belén, Flores, San Pablo, Santo Domingo, Tibás, Goicoechea, San José, Montes de Oca, Curridabat, La Unión, Cartago, Oreamuno y Paraíso.*

public spaces (e.g. the replacement of private vehicles by clean means of transportation, such as walking or cycling).

Some particular aspects of this DC practice are worth highlighting:

1. It promotes the creation - of inter-municipal structures to strengthen public-private alliances with a view to boost the reactivation of the economy of a large part of the Metropolitan Area.

2. This is an initiative that brings together national associations of municipalities from different countries (Costa Rica and the Netherlands), a modality that is not very common in LA.

3. By involving 15 municipalities, it enhances the results, scope and impact of the project.

4. Demonstrates the viability and effectiveness of multilevel and intermunicipal DC governance models. It required the agreement of 15 municipal councils, has an Assembly of Representatives and a Steering Committee made up of the authorities of the beneficiary and partner municipalities. They are in charge of establishing the vision and priorities of the governance framework that articulates, both horizontally with local and intermunicipal planning, and vertically, with municipal initiatives and central government planning and sectors (public, private-financial, citizens) in a multilevel governance. It is also part of a Technical Roundtable where, in addition to technicians from the 15 municipalities, there is participation of national government entities linked to the subject.

The mUEve project, initiated in 2020 and due to be completed in 2025, also reflects the regulatory constraints that many Latin American LRGs face when implementing DC projects, particularly in terms of accounting and budget, and which frequently generate difficulties in the execution of resources.

This project is aligned with SDGs:

Strategic next steps for action

One of the important outcomes of the Training of Trainers workshop was the opportunity created for the leadership team of UCLG, MERCOCIUDADES and FLACMA to reflect on the approach and practice of DC in LA, enabling them to develop a strategic action plan to help integrate the SDGs into the DC process in the region.

In this regard, and based on the results of the training and the interviews, some strategic steps for action are outlined below.

For the regional sections (MERCOCIUDADES and FLACMA)

- Design and implement one (or two, one for each section, but articulated) learning strategy in the region, following the roadmap developed during the training (see section "Building technical capacity to link SDG-linked decentralized cooperation: Training of Trainers"). Such strategy(ies) should consider the heterogeneity of subnational governments and their national associations in LA, as well as the differences perceived in the links between the SDGs and DC (see section "Decentralized cooperation as enabler of the SDGs in Latin America"). In the face of very dissimilar realities and capacities, proposing a common learning strategy for all can generate distortions in terms of capacities. It is the regional sections, with the support of national associations, who are in the best position to identify these different realities and needs.

- Given that within the group of Latin American subnational governments there is a considerable number of small cities and regions that do not have knowledge of the SDGs, it is advisable to reinforce training in them by rolling out the Learning Modules 1, 2 and 3, with the support of UCLG.

- As suggested by the participants and by CORDIAL, a database of Training of Trainers is expected to be created to facilitate the training of professionals from both the national associations and the LRGs. This commitment was initially adopted by MERCOCIUDADES, and discussions will be held with the other regional section, FLACMA, on its creation.

- Recognizing the importance of generating strategic alliances with research and knowledge generation centers for the purpose of helping to integrate the SDGs into DC processes in the region, it could be useful to establish synergies with such institutions with a regional perspective. Some examples include the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, the Latin American Social Sciences Council and the Latin American Center for Development Administration. These institutions, for example, could collaborate with future trainings promoted by the regional sections, in partnership with UCLG.

- Raise awareness of DC experiences aligned with the SDGs. To this end, new instruments could be created, or use those already available to the regional sections, such as their websites, newsletters or repositories of good practices.

- Promote greater coordination and articulation among CORDIAL members (MERCOCIUDADES, FLACMA, ALLAS and UCCI), as well as with networks present in the region and DC partners in LA (e.g. Spanish cooperation funds).

For UCLG

- The first strategic step, undoubtedly, is to continue supporting its regional sections for an SDG-linked DC. This can be done through new Training of Trainers workshops, the generation of didactic material and the promotion of exchange spaces among LA DC actors, but also to strengthen links with other UCLG regional sections. In this sense, it is essential that the regional sections in LA, the national associations of cities and the trained members use and adapt the training tools for their own local trainings. Likewise, it is essential that they inform UCLG about the trainings they conduct and the new local trainers.

- During the training and in the interviews with key informants, two axes to be deepened in the UCLG training program were highlighted, as they were evidenced as weaknesses very present in the LRGs, their national associations and the LA regional sections. On one hand, the generation of tools for data collection and measurement, and for the monitoring and evaluation of DC practices and policies. On the other hand, the incorporation of the policy coherence approach in Latin American LRGs.

- While the participants of the training highlighted the importance of strengthening the capacities of LRGs' technicians or professionals, they also agreed on the need to design awareness-raising mechanisms on the importance of having SDG-linked DC aimed at political authorities of cities and regions, both from the executive and the legislative branches. UCLG can support its partners in this task.

- In LA there are no regional databases or systematization mechanisms of DC practices, and therefore, the knowledge and information about them is often difficult to access. The regional sections could collaborate with UCLG in the task of linking LA DC initiatives with international platforms for collecting practices, for example by adapting report formats or facilitating language translations. This would allow for greater visibility of regional experiences at the global level.

- Finally, a suggested future course of action for UCLG during the workshop was to develop environments that facilitate the opportunity offered by LA to share and inspire other regions in aspects that characterize the region, such as: its vision on DC, its commitment to South-South DC, or its experiences in building institutions to manage DC.
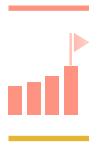
Figure 5

Next strategic steps for action

FOR REGIONAL SECTIONS (MERCOCIUDADES and FLACMA)

Greater coordination and articulation among them, and with key networks, platforms or partners in the region

Visibilization of SDG-linked DC experiences in LA

Strategic alliances with research and knowledge-generating centers

Training of trainers database

Differentiated learning strategies for small cities and regions

Development of learning strategies in the region

Development of learning strategies in the region

FOR UCLG

Creation of spaces for LA to share and inspire other regions based on its experience

Linking LA's DC initiatives with international platforms for recording practices

Design of awareness-raising mechanisms aimed at political authorities

Two axes to be further explored in the Training of Trainers program: tools for data collection and measurement, and the policy coherence approach

Support to its regional sections for a DC aligned with the SDGs