

Participation of Cities in Development Cooperation

Cities are beginning to play an essential role in global affairs, engaging in activities traditionally reserved for nation-states. From combating climate change to fostering international partnerships, cities shape international relations. One area where they've been underappreciated is providing development aid – typically associated with national governments or international organisations. Yet, cities are uniquely positioned to make a difference, often acting faster and more directly in response to local and global challenges. Despite their growing involvement, little is known about how cities operate in the complex web of multi-level governance.

This project explores the untapped potential of cities for decentralised development cooperation (DDC), aiming to fill important knowledge gaps on their role as providers of development assistance. The project aims to examine how cities participate in DDC, revealing patterns, drivers, and challenges in this regard. Key research questions focus on understanding how cities engage in decentralised development cooperation, exploring the scope and patterns of their activities, and why cities decide to participate in DDC, considering factors such as their size, mayoral leadership, national policies, and external crises. The project will also look at how cities interact with other levels of governance, both vertically with national and international bodies and horizontally with other cities, to identify their goals, benefits, and challenges.

The research will be implemented in three phases. First, the team will map initiatives by cities in 32 donor countries (DAC members) within the framework of decentralised development cooperation. Next, the project will explore what makes cities unique as development actors – examining their strategies, challenges, and the factors that drive or hinder their participation in providing development assistance. Finally, a comparative analysis will provide a deeper understanding of how cities differ from each other and other players in this field.

The project will employ a mixed-methods approach to explore the complexities of cities' engagement with DDC. Quantitative analysis will focus on survey data from cities in the 32 DAC member countries, providing insight into patterns and trends in DDC activities. Complementing this, qualitative methods will include desk research, case studies, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with cities officials involved in the DDC. Comparative analysis will further contextualise findings across different cities.

The project will result in a monograph that will significantly develop academic knowledge about the role of cities in decentralised development cooperation. By this, the project will contribute to two academic fields at the same time. It will address gaps in understanding the multi-level nature of development aid, thus contributing to development studies. It will also strengthen research on paradiplomacy and city diplomacy by mapping the roles of city donors and analysing key determinants, providing a comprehensive framework for studying their unique contribution to international cooperation.