

# The Municipalities' Decentralized Cooperation: The Case of the Basque Country

Koldo Unceta, Unai Villena, Irati Labaien\*

Hegoa Institute, University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Bilbao, Spain

## Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the development cooperation driven by local authorities of the Basque Country. The study's starting point is the increase of the decentralized cooperation observed in recent decades in Europe, and the role played by municipalities in cooperation in different countries. The debates on the advantages and limitations of local cooperation existing in the literature are taken into account, as well as the need to compare them with reality. Given all this, the case study - focused on the Basque Country - aims to examine such cooperation in practice and the full extent of its compliance with the assumptions made by the theory. A sample of 31 Basque municipalities was selected in basis of their geographical location, size, social and economic structure. On the one hand, interviews to technical staff and political representatives were the main source of information, and on the other hand, strategic plans and doctrinal documents published by these local entities were also analyzed. Basque municipalities, in general terms, are committed financially to development cooperation issues, which reflects the consciousness of solidarity of the society. However, there is a lack of reflection about the role that the municipalities can play, especially in two of the main potential sector, such as the strengthening of local institutions and awareness raising and development education.

## Keywords

Development, Development Cooperation, Decentralized Cooperation, Local Cooperation, Municipal Cooperation

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## 1. Introduction

Cooperation driven by local authorities is a phenomenon which already has a large tradition in Europe. This is an issue that has been studied within the broader context of what has been termed as decentralized cooperation, i.e., cooperation driven by public institutions that have a lower level than state governments. Nevertheless, decentralized cooperation and, more specifically, local cooperation, are controversial and widely debated issues. Moreover, the existing experiences on this issue in different countries show different approaches and points of view on it.

Some of the discussions on local cooperation deal with the identity, the specific contribution, the added value of this type of cooperation. The advantages and limitations of local

cooperation are an issue widely discussed in the literature. However, when considering this discussion, it is usually done from a generic view of decentralized cooperation, and showing little practical evidence. Certain advantages have been attributed to local or decentralized cooperation, but its actual contribution, based on the experiences carried out to the present, has been hardly analyzed.

Our point view is based on the assumption that the specific contribution of local cooperation depends largely on contexts that are different from each other, and how the drivers of such cooperation are able to identify and develop its potential, avoiding indulging in mimicry from the central or bilateral cooperation, either in immediacy or improvisation.

Starting from these concerns, the main objective of this paper is to analyze the experience of the municipalities of the

\* Corresponding author

E-mail address: [koldo.unceta@ehu.es](mailto:koldo.unceta@ehu.es) (K. Unceta), [unai.villena@ehu.es](mailto:unai.villena@ehu.es) (U. Villena), [irati.labaien@ehu.es](mailto:irati.labaien@ehu.es) (I. Labaien)

Basque Country, taking as a reference a significant sample of them, in order to try to shed light on the contributions and limitations of the participation of local authorities in development cooperation. Together with this central objective, we would also like to note other specific objectives, such as:

- Give theoretical proposals that can guide the definition of cooperation priorities for municipalities.
- Identify local resources that may be potentially useful for municipal cooperation.
- Identification of instruments and new ways of cooperation at the local level that can give a new meaning of the object of analysis.

In order to do this, we start with a brief summary of the different realities of local and decentralized cooperation in Europe, then we present the main features of the debate on its advantages and limitations. In third, the context of local cooperation in the Basque Country is presented, and then the main results of the research carried out. Finally, some conclusions from the above arise<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Local and Decentralized Cooperation in Europe: General Approach

The analysis of local development cooperation tends to be framed -and sometimes to fade - in larger approaches to the phenomenon known as *decentralized cooperation*. There is some consensus on the geographical areas from which this type of cooperation is carried out, which considers sub-national or sub-state spaces i.e. spaces below the nation-state, but beyond this agreement, there is no clear definition of the phenomenon. Indeed, taking into account the different existing definitions on this issue, it is clear that the geographical area may take various forms, thus making decentralized cooperation a difficult concept to define or delimit spatially. Actually, the *decentralized* may take the form of a region, province, municipality, or other; and all activities, projects, policies, programs, and initiatives concerning development cooperation and promoted from any of these areas tend to be often considered as part of decentralized cooperation.

However, it is known that the territorial organization is different both in terms of *donor* countries and *recipient* countries. Within the DAC itself, at the top of the scale of the *decentralized* significant differences are observed between

the Länder of Germany and Austria, the regions of Belgium, France, Greece, Italy and Portugal, the Swiss cantons, or the autonomous communities of the Spanish State, reflecting the difficulty to compare and unify elements that make up this type of development cooperation. The level of autonomy of the territories, as well as the size and characteristics of each country, make each of them have different characteristics. The notion of *region* lacks precision in its definition in the European Charter of Regional Autonomy.

At a second level within what is decentralized, there is the provincial level. As is the case with regions, the provincial level does not always have the same characteristics in all countries<sup>2</sup>. In many cases, information about activities related to decentralized cooperation at this level is added in some cases to the information relating to the regions, and in other cases to the information relating to municipalities. It is therefore relatively difficult to find studies that specifically focus on the provincial level. It is also necessary to note that, in addition to the provinces, there can be found sometimes spaces that are located in a lower scale than them, but in a higher scale than the municipalities: it happens for instance in France, where there are the so called *Cantons de rattachement* and the *Arrondissements*. In Spain, the provincial governments - territorial governments in the case of the Basque Country - have sometimes come to play a significant role in the decentralized cooperation.

Finally, much of the decentralized cooperation takes shape at the municipal level, in terms of the actions driven by local governments (*collectivités territoriales* in French). Among the levels of the decentralized, the municipal is also the one closest to the citizenry space. Studies like the one by Johnson and Wilson (2006) analyze the cooperation between municipalities in the North and the South, stressing and emphasizing the specificities that characterize its potential. The idea of *municipal cooperation* can be also found in the concepts *city2city* (Van Ewijk, 2008) or *linking* (UNDP, 2000). Certainly, the actors that work at the municipal level have a significant position in development cooperation, and the specificity of this cooperation modality has been object to various studies<sup>3</sup>.

It is important to note that municipalities are the most widespread territorial administrative unit and can be found in all the countries, therefore, many of the studies and analysis of decentralized cooperation have focused on this area of activity. In addition, as Bontenbal (2009) highlights, more

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a study conducted by the Research Group on Analysis and Evaluation of Development Cooperation Public Policies, from the Hegoa Institute (University of the Basque Country), which the authors are part of.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, as stated in the EC 1059/2003 regulation, there are "*arrondissements in Belgium, Amtskommuner in Denmark, kreise/kreisfreie Städte in Germany, nomoi in Greece, provinces in Spain, departements in France, regional authority regions in Ireland, provinces in Italy, lan in Sweden, and maakunnat/landskapen in Finland*".

<sup>3</sup> Hafteck (2003), Badia i Dalmases (2006), Ruiz (2008) or Unceta et al. (2011, 2013) among others.

than 70% of the world's cities are in cooperation with cities in other countries, which opens up many possibilities for cooperation, beyond issues concerning development.

From these considerations it is difficult to limit the spatial extent of decentralized cooperation, a term which, as can be seen, affects different types of territorial and/or administrative realities. A study on development cooperation held in twelve countries<sup>4</sup>, published by the DAC in 2005, showed the existence of actions promoted by different levels of sub-national governments: municipalities - cities, towns, districts or neighbourhoods -, provinces, and regions - including federal states - (OECD, 2005). However, the truth is that beyond the definitions, not all countries are formed with these three levels of local governments, and likewise, each level does not have the same level of autonomy in every country. In some cases, the term decentralized cooperation is simply used to determine the activities carried out by provinces and municipalities, leaving out the regions or federal states. In addition, there is a clear difference in the size and characteristics of the territories within each country, which in turn hampers the comparative work that can be done in this regard.

In this framework, we consider necessary to delve into the different expressions of decentralized cooperation, as not all of them have the same projection and the same meaning. And in this area, local cooperation promoted by municipalities, is sufficiently important to deserve a detailed analysis. Moreover, there are some contexts, such as the Basque Country - in which our work focuses on - where municipalities have a special meaning in public life, representing a very significant institutional level. Therefore, our work has focused specifically on this area: the municipal cooperation.

### 3. The Debate About the Potentials and Limitations of Local Cooperation

As mentioned in the introduction, much of the literature on local cooperation focuses on the analysis of its potential advantages and limitations compared to cooperation driven by other administrative areas or levels. It is otherwise a fairly shared diagnosis, and extended mostly to the set of decentralized cooperation, which contrasts with the different perception and definition of this phenomenon in different countries.

However, the prolific discussion about the potentials of local and/or decentralized cooperation contrasts with the limited

work carried out in the assessment area, i.e. in relation to the analysis of how the practice of local cooperation has matched the expectations.

#### 3.1. Theoretical Approaches

In regard to the advantages of local cooperation, the literature tends to emphasize, among others, the following:

- The idea that local cooperation operates without political, diplomatic, commercial, or geostrategic conditioning that commonly affect much of the development cooperation, or at least is less influenced by them (González, 2008; Tjandradewi *et al.*, 2006; Ruiz Seisdedos, 2008; Gómez, 2008). Nevertheless some authors suggest the tendency of some sub-state governments -especially the ones with the higher administrative level- to use sometimes development cooperation as an instrument for their external projection (Martinez and Sanahuja, 2012).
- The potential of decentralized areas -whether municipalities, regions, or other - to establish less vertical relationship mechanisms with the territories they cooperate with. From this perspective, it can help overcome the donor-recipient logic and its replacement by a more horizontal and reciprocal association type (Male, 2009; Ianni, 2011), which also represents a feature that could contribute to further differentiate it from the traditional cooperation (Unceta *et al.*, 2011).
- The ability of local authorities to favour -given its closer proximity- the participation of citizens, being able to reflect more easily the different social concerns into decentralized cooperation policies (Martinez *et al.*, 2009; Euskal Fundazioa, 2007; Ruiz Seisdedos, 2006, 2008; Del Huerto, 2005). Authors like Ianni (2011) also link the incorporation of an increasing number of actors of the local society with the possibility of moving to other more horizontal type of relationships in development cooperation.
- Another issue repeatedly pointed when underlining the potential of decentralized cooperation, has to do with the use of technical and human capacities existing in the territory, and the largest existing knowledge at this level about the issues of concern to citizens that are linked to local development strategies. For Martinez and Sanahuja (2012) there are areas of a specific value that no other actor can play with the same efficiency.
- The possibility of supporting decentralization and strengthening local institutions more effectively is also commonly mentioned as an advantage of local cooperation over other types of cooperation; some countries can share their own experience in these issues through development cooperation programs (Del Huerto, 2005; Gomez, 2008; Martinez *et al.*, 2009; Ianni, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Although they were initially 22, the study ultimately involved 12 countries.

- Finally, there is the issue related to the strengthening of awareness raising and development education, and the importance that these issues have on the local level. This stems from the greater proximity decentralized cooperation has to citizenship, and the possibilities it opens up in this area as compared, for example, with the cooperation driven by the state level authorities of a country (Euskal Fundoa, 2007; Unceta et al., 2011).

Even if the literature on decentralized cooperation tends to emphasize these aspects as potential advantages over other types of cooperation, in the same we can find some comments that point out the existing limitations, which may become weaknesses. Some of these limitations are the multiplicity of actors and the abundance of activities generated in the field of decentralized cooperation, most of which are small in scale, resulting in significant fragmentation and a certain degree of lack of coordination (Gómez, 2008; Ruiz Seisdedos, 2006; Martínez et al., 2009); the difficulty in some local areas to have effective management structures for cooperation, and therefore, less professional technical staff responsible for these tasks (Ruiz Seisdedos, 2008); the possible clientelism generated around some local governments and the priority given to the amounts paid -especially with regard to the 0.7% of the budget- compared to the debate on the specific objectives to be achieved, and the most appropriate means to advance their compliance (Ruiz Seisdedos, 2006; Unceta et al., 2012); the suspicions, confrontations and tensions between different government levels, and the need for greater coordination between them (Badia i Dalmases, 2009) and, in the case of Spain, the excessive dependence on NGOs when managing funds for cooperation, at the expense of other institutions and local associations, as well as the local authorities themselves (Unceta et al., 2011; Martínez and Sanahuja, 2012).

### 3.2. Analysis of the Practice of Local Cooperation

These advantages and limitations posed in theory may or may not be present in the practice of local development cooperation. In this regard, it is important to note the existence of several factors that can influence the above items. Thus, the reality of each territory, the actors involved, or the provision of local governments in terms of policy orientation, etc., are important factors to determine if the potential benefits of the local cooperation are more significant than its limitations or vice versa.

This raises the need to compare these theoretical analyses with reality, which requires a frame of reference from which to evaluate the latter. In our study, we have used the methodology for the analysis of decentralized cooperation proposed by Unceta et al. (2011), and the adaptation of it on

the specific case of municipal cooperation (Unceta et al. 2013). This methodology is based on the consideration of those issues that are specific to the local cooperation and therefore constitute the core of its added value, and also those other issues which, although common to other government levels, should be present in the local cooperation to ensure its quality. Considering both kind of issues, the framework used includes the following aspects:

a) In relation to the definition of the objectives of local cooperation:

- The existence of clearly stated objectives when implementing actions
- The priority given to two specific issues considered particularly relevant at the local level: strengthening local institutions and development education
- Consideration of mainstreaming actions particularly in relation to gender and environment
- Dedication and possible dispersion of efforts towards general topics in which local cooperation is less efficient
- The consistency of other municipal policies regarding the actions on cooperation

b) In relation to the resources used and the actors involved:

- The importance given to the fact that the municipality itself and its social partners are the ones which drive most of the cooperation actions
- The consideration and use of local government's resources
- The focus on the involvement of agents and resources of the local society, beyond NGOs
- The existence and functioning of organs to promote the participation of civil society

c) In connection with the cooperation and partnership instruments and mechanisms deployed:

- The continuity of the development cooperation activities carried out
- The ability to create spaces for encounter and reciprocal relations within the framework of horizontal collaboration

d) In relation to the means arranged to carry out the policy:

- The existence of reflection papers and/or strategic planning
- The cooperation management bodies and their ability to run the cooperation policy
- Economic and budgetary resources and their predictability
- The evaluation of the promoted and undertaken activities
- Coordination with other institutions and areas of administration

- Information systems and dissemination of information about cooperation activities

All these topics have been taken into account in the study of the development cooperation carried out by the Basque municipalities, subject to which we refer in the following section.

## 4. Approach to Local Cooperation in the Basque Country

In this section we present the general framework of the case study conducted with the Basque municipalities. To do this, firstly we will target some aspects of the reality and importance of local cooperation in this context, and secondly, we will point out some methodological aspects of our approximation.

### 4.1. Context: Emergence, Evolution and Relevance of Basque Municipal Cooperation

Municipal development cooperation has been a key part of the Basque cooperation since its inception in the 1980s. In fact, Vitoria-Gasteiz, one of its most emblematic municipalities, was the first in Spain to determine the contribution of 0.7 % of its budget for development cooperation. Otherwise, in 1996 was established the Association of Basque Local Cooperating Authorities - *Euskal Fondona*, which initially was formed by some dozens of municipalities and currently has 101 partner municipalities, representing a powerful work platform whose contribution to Basque development cooperation has been very significant, both in qualitative and quantitative terms<sup>5</sup>. Precisely because of the formation of this association of municipalities, Basque mayors issued a manifesto in support of development cooperation, stating that municipalities should engage in the *"transformation of our society into a more just and equalizing one, both locally and globally"*, echoing the *"collective sense of solidarity of our citizens"* and an appeal was made to local entities to play the *"role of active agents"* of decentralized cooperation with budgetary contributions and the implementation of supportive relationships. It should be noted that all this is part of a large municipal tradition as the Basque local authorities have historically developed a very important role not only in promoting the development of the territory itself, but also in the whole political life of the Basque Country.

<sup>5</sup> The overall financial contribution of the Basque municipalities to the development cooperation has not been recorded, but it can be estimated at an amount of about 100 million euros between 1990 and 2012.

Back in the nineties, the city councils of the main Basque towns began to develop documents to guide and regulate their participation in development cooperation, establishing objectives and regulatory basis of the items provided for that purpose. Since then, dozens of Basque municipalities have followed a similar process, proposing various databases and tools for managing cooperation. In this context, during the last three decades thousands of charitable initiatives have been launched, promoted by municipalities and managed by many different types of organizations and institutions.

Moreover, the importance of development cooperation promoted by Basque municipalities strictly exceeds the municipal level, as some of them, especially the larger ones, have played an important role in the debate on development cooperation in the Basque Country. The creation of technical bodies and the decision to develop strategic plans set the stage for discussion, beyond the quantitative, give guidance to municipal cooperation and the role that municipalities could play in the whole of the Basque development cooperation.

All this gives the Basque municipal reality some pretty unique features in the overview of development cooperation, so we believe that their study can be of great interest to examine the practice carried out in this area and to what extent it corresponds to expectations raised in the literature on the role of local institutions in development cooperation.

### 4.2. Methodology of the Study

When analyzing a fact as wide as the aforementioned, our study had to focus on a representative sample of it, given the impossibility of examining the cooperation driven by all the Basque municipalities. For this, the study began with the construction of an initial database in which data corresponding to all the municipalities of the Basque Country were collected, for each of which the available information on the following aspects was included: a) types and number of instruments used to promote and manage cooperation, b) both financial and human resources devoted to cooperation, c) experience and work done in the field of cooperation and d) expertise, best practices, and innovation in certain areas of cooperation.

From this database, when drawing up the representative sample various aspects such as geographical location, size, social and economic structure, and other characteristics of the various municipalities were taken into account. According to these criteria, we worked with a sample of 31 municipalities<sup>6</sup>: the three provincial capitals, 15 municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants and 13 municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.

<sup>6</sup> 22 of these 31 municipalities are among the 101 that are part of *Euskal Fondona*.

As regards the sources of information used in the research, they were of two types: direct and indirect. The direct sources were based on in-depth interviews to selected representatives of the various municipalities, both technical staff and political representatives. And the indirect sources were basically of four types: Plans and doctrinal documents developed by the local entities themselves or *Euskal Fondona*; ordinances, regulations and legal provisions on cooperation developed by the municipalities; published memories on the cooperation held; and web pages of the municipalities and *Euskal Fondona*.

## 5. Results of the Study on the Municipal Cooperation in the Basque Country

While it is not possible to present here the whole set of the research results, in this paper we will try to point out what we consider most significant from the point of view of the above mentioned objectives. To do this, we will follow the above scheme aimed to explain the framework from which we started.

a) In relation to the definition of the objectives of local cooperation

The results of the analysis carried out show that, in general, there is little definition of the specific objectives in the field of municipal development cooperation. Only 5 of the 31 municipalities studied have explicit objectives outlined in documents prepared for the purpose. Three of them correspond to the provincial capitals, while only one medium and one small town have a reflection in this field expressed in some kind of document.

Regarding the objective of strengthening of local institutions, 14 of the 31 municipalities give any priority or focus specifically on this aspect. The three provincial capitals and most medium-sized municipalities (9 of 15 cases studied) considered somehow this as a priority, unlike what happens in small towns, where it is only referred to in 2 cases.

Respecting awareness raising and development education - the other issue considered in the framework as particularly relevant to the work in the local field- it can be said that it is a more rooted topic in the work of the various municipalities studied since all they contemplate it as an objective. The difference lies in this case in the way of tackling the work in this field. While larger municipalities, in addition to subsidizing and promoting actions of other agents, promote their own ones, smaller municipalities often tend to do only the first.

Another aspect studied, the one that considers the

mainstreaming of actions carried out, yields mixed results. The need to take into account environment and gender in proceedings conducted appears issued at times, especially when it comes to activities funded by local councils but carried out by NGOs. However, when it comes to activities promoted by the municipal authorities themselves, these considerations virtually disappear. In addition to gender and environment, other aspects referred to as transversal in various cases are related to culture and human rights.

The next issue discussed in this section is the promotion of interventions on scales and fields of action in which the efficiency of local authorities is usually questioned, as the case of emergency assistance. The research results suggest that the three capital cities, 85% of medium-sized, and 50% of small municipalities fund such activities, which according to interviews has more to do with the citizen's sensitivity to those issues than with a strong reflection on the actual capacity of local cooperation to intervene -except in a few cases - in such situations.

Finally, as to the consistency of other municipal policies regarding the actions in cooperation, results show little concern in this area, although in some cases there have been identified proposals to promote a purchasing policy including fair trade or responsible consumption guidelines. Also in the field of awareness raising and development education have arisen interventions in line with policy coherence but, except in the case of the three capitals, there are hardly any references to the subject in the cooperation guidance documents of the Basque local authorities.

To summarize the above, we can say that the Basque municipalities have gradually been incorporating more concern for efficiency, and for the specific space that they may or may not wish to cover in the field of development cooperation. Nevertheless two trends persist that hamper progress towards a more specific definition of its objectives and operating procedures. In the case of larger municipalities, there is sometimes a mimicry regarding planning guidelines and intervention logic of other higher governmental levels. And with regard to smaller municipalities, they tend to prioritize the immediacy and spontaneity of interventions, putting aside a deeper reflection on the real possibilities to act more efficiently and medium term oriented.

b) In relation to the resources mobilized and the actors involved

The results of the research carried out show that the Basque municipalities consider important that the development cooperation they promote should be linked to the local actors, whether the administration itself or other actors of the local society. In this regard, 100% of the studied municipalities give priority to the local society and its own institutions to be

the actors of the cooperation they promote, which certainly encourages and strengthens the identity and specificity of it.

A matter directly related to the above is the question of the provision of the cooperation resources – both human and technical - by the municipal administration. In this regard, it should be noted that both in the three capital cities, 85% of medium-sized and 90 % of small municipalities this issue is considered important. The difference lies in how these resources come into play in each one of them. Thus, direct cooperation -actions undertaken by local government in other countries with their own counterparts- is driven by the three capital cities, but only by 33% of medium-sized and 23% of small municipalities do promote such kind of cooperation. More usual than the direct cooperation is the technical participation of other municipal departments in identifying and counselling cooperation projects, which happens in the three capital cities, and also in 40% of medium-sized and 38% of small municipalities.

The issue of agents and local resources mobilized is also in relation to the ability municipalities show to involve in their cooperation organizations that are not specialized in the field of development cooperation, as is the case of the NGOs, allowing these groups and agents provide their expertise and knowledge in this field. Here, the results show a high potential in this regard because, while most of the cooperation is managed through NGOs, most municipalities (both the three capital cities and 80% of the medium and small) contemplate the possibility of including in their cooperation civilian organizations and institutions not specialized in development cooperation. This participation takes place through various mechanisms such as municipal grants or agreements established between the local administration and the various agents.

In connection with the foregoing, it is finally interesting to note the existence of bodies for participation where the civil society can raise and discuss local strategies for development cooperation. Obviously, the presence of such bodies is more established in the larger municipalities (the three capital cities do have bodies for participation, whilst only 55% of the medium-sized and 23% of the small municipalities do so). The difference also affects the type of mechanisms used to promote the participation; the three capital cities, 33% of the medium-sized and 15% of the small municipalities do have a specific cooperation council. By contrast, in small municipalities prevail broader participation bodies in which, in addition to development cooperation, other issues related to local politics are discussed.

It could definitively be said that, considering the concern to turn development cooperation into an entrenched policy in the local social fabric, the practice shows municipalities are

working well in that direction and that there have been important steps towards it, confirming the broad possibilities for local cooperation from this point of view.

c) In connection with the instruments and mechanisms of cooperation and partnership deployed

In this section we have studied the potential of local authorities to promote cooperation actions sustained over time and that can generate more stable relationships and broader solidarity with counterparts. We have analyzed the capacity shown by the municipalities for building strategies and working tools that aim in that direction.

The results of this are rather modest, since much of the funding for development cooperation programs and projects is managed through calls for grants, which prioritize the demands of the moment against the medium-term strategies. In some cases, as two of the three capital cities and a medium-size municipality, those calls for grants allow multi-year interventions, facilitating greater stability of the relationship with the counterparts. However, this stability is more easily maintained when interventions arise in the context of direct cooperation - cooperation led or self managed by the local administration it self - through agreements, which occurs in 11 of the 31 cases studied.

The study has also set specifically in the instrument of twinning between municipalities, considering that it represents a possibility to establish stable and productive relationship over time, offering development cooperation strategies stability, depth and reciprocity. In this regard, we have detected a significant number of signed twinning arrangements between municipalities in the Basque Country and other municipalities in developing countries<sup>7</sup>. However, only a small number of them have been designed to enhance development cooperation, since for the most of them the twinning has not gone beyond a mere declaration of intent.

However, in recent years a clear concern is seen to advance in this direction, overcoming the timeliness of interventions, as has been detected through the analysis of the deployed strategies and also interviews with municipal officials.

d) In relation to the means arranged to carry out the policy

Finally, in the fourth section we have studied the means Basque local authorities have arranged to carry out their development cooperation activities, in order to examine their relationship to the objectives and their adequacy to the local reality.

The results show that there are significant differences in this case depending on the size of the municipalities analyzed.

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<sup>7</sup> 41 twinning arrangements, representing an average of 1.3 twinning by each of the municipalities in the sample.

This applies primarily to the degree of development of the cooperation policy; while larger municipalities have some kind of doctrinal endorsement or planning document, the policy of the rest is mainly based on regulations governing the funding provided for this purpose.

It also manifests itself in the existence of management bodies and/or specialized technical personnel to carry out the cooperation policy or strategy of the municipality. In this sense, only the three capital cities and four medium-size municipalities have management bodies or specialized technical personnel. In the rest, the cooperation strategy is often part of the broader field of social policy.

However, the size of municipalities is not directly related to the budget and amounts for these purposes measured in relative terms, i.e. in Euros per capita. In this regard, it should be noted that some small municipalities make financial contributions (in Euro/inhabitant) higher than the larger ones. Nevertheless, it is clear the importance, in absolute terms, of the economic contributions of the three capital cities, which in turn raises higher requirements in regard to the management of their cooperation.

Other aspects studied have been the assessment and policy coordination with other institutions. In both cases we have detected little concern about them. In regards to the assessment, there is hardly any evaluative practice, which has been restricted to some interventions financed by the larger municipalities, i.e. capitals. The same applies to the coordination of cooperation with holding other government levels, as is the case of the autonomous Basque government or the provincial administrative bodies. However, both in one and the other aspect, is important to highlight the importance of *Euskal Fonda* - the Association of Basque Local Cooperating Authorities -, since it plays an important role in the coordination and collaboration between municipalities, which also extends to the field of management of some joint interventions, including monitoring and evaluating them.

## 6. Conclusions

The study of Basque municipalities has allowed us to test in practice some of the difficulties in realizing the potential identified in the literature regarding local cooperation. Some of the conclusions are the following:

Firstly, it should be noted the absence of strategic thinking, specifically about the role that municipalities should play in the development cooperation. This has been reflected yet in different ways depending on the type of municipality. In larger - and especially in the three capitals- it has resulted in the search for a model of cooperation with "integral" character, embodied in more or less ambitious master plans,

and aiming to reproduce the planning logic other higher level governments use in their cooperation, in terms of targets, agents or instruments. This has sometimes resulted in some mimicry respect to such logics and models. Meanwhile in smaller municipalities, the absence of reflection has resulted in a commitment to cooperation stuck to local demands, but a general lack of a diagnosis of the existing own potential. As a result of this, the progress in planning conducted are not generally geared to finding their own space and be able to exploit the potential of local cooperation. But when these progress have occurred - especially in the larger municipalities - they have led to mimicry with logic and intervention models of the development cooperation of other government levels.

Nevertheless, it should be noted, secondly, that there is a clear and growing concern on providing development cooperation a social base in the municipalities. This concern is manifested in some cases involving municipal administration in cooperation activities, and in other cases involving various local organizations. All this gives local cooperation a participatory nature that agrees with what has been noted by some of the theoretical approaches mentioned at the beginning of this work. However, the study weighed out also shows that, with few exceptions, there are difficulties to incorporate to development cooperation local entities and groups not traditionally associated with this task but which hoard important knowledge and capabilities to contribute to.

Thirdly it is necessary to refer to the continuity and depth of municipal cooperation, which generally remain low. This has to do largely with logic models derived from traditional cooperation, very focused on calls for project proposals and the role of NGOs; models that tend to reproduce a scheme based on changing demands and donor-recipient logic. From the analysis, it appears to exist a greater concern for these issues in some larger municipalities that have made reflections or strategic plans, and also some practical interest in small municipalities in which some more stable collaboration relationships and ties have been built. One aspect to highlight in this vein is the one that has to do with twinning, which in principle should be the expression of a desire for long-range mutual cooperation, and could affect not only the municipalities themselves, but also other entities and agents within the municipality. In fact, the local level is especially suitable for the establishment of such relations. However, most of development cooperation twinning signed by the Basque municipalities have had little projection and, with some notable exceptions, have not bothered to include institutions of local society.

Fourth it is necessary to highlight the importance of financial commitment made by the Basque municipalities as regards



development cooperation which certainly is a good example of the existing public conscience in the citizenry they represent. Moreover, this commitment is particularly relevant in some cases, when the contributions in terms of euro per capita are considered. In the study conducted, the size of municipalities has resulted not to be a relevant variable when considering this aspect. However, the amounts of funds provided for development cooperation activities by the Basque municipalities has not always been related to the ability they have shown to bring into play the resources existing within their own municipalities, to carry out a cooperation policy sufficiently rooted in the local society. This issue is especially relevant now due to the reduction of available funds happened in recent years as a result of the financial crisis, requiring to promote other forms of local solidarity less dependent of the municipal budget, and more related to the technical and human resources, existing both within and outside the administration.

Finally, we should mention aspects of interagency coordination and the role played by municipalities in this area. From the information gathered and the analysis conducted, should be noted that the Basque municipalities have deployed their own cooperation strategies outside the guidelines and master plans prepared by other local or regional institutions, which has resulted in a lower generation of synergies and complementarities, and in the existence of duplications. The exception to this is *Euskal Fondoa*, whose role has been particularly important for promoting local cooperation in the Basque Country and to alleviate some of the problems identified.

In summary, it can be said that the trajectory of Basque municipalities shows a gradual trend towards finding a more efficient logic of intervention that could be able to tap their own potential. But it is also clear that some problems that limit the scope of their work remain. All this shows that although in theory a specific field of great interest for this type of cooperation can be identified, there are several difficulties when materializing it which should be analyzed and taken into account. In the case of the Basque Country, the specificity of this type of cooperation has had more to do with local actors involved and the participation of them, than with the definition of a strategy directly linked to the skills and expertise of each local territory.

In any case, the study shows the importance of the size of the different municipalities when analyzing local cooperation, since neither the experience nor the possibilities are the same when it comes to cities of a certain size, or when considering small towns. In the latter case, the factors related to mutual cooperation and exchange of experiences between different municipalities are critical as shows, in the case of the Basque Country, the work done by the association *Euskal Fondoa*.

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