

# Why decentralised cooperation matters

City-to-city partnerships delivering on Europe's ambitions in external action.

Decentralised cooperation, or peer-to-peer exchanges between cities across the world, has a long history, particularly in Europe. These horizontal and reciprocal partnerships have yielded major benefits, yet the tool is poorly known in wider circles or used in EU external action. Local/regional governments (LRGs) believe it is time to revalue this cooperation approach. In today's volatile and competitive world, it can be a strategic asset for Europe in tackling global challenges, localising Global Gateway and defending its own interests and values, as explained in the narrative below.

The text was elaborated by cities involved in the EU-funded program 'Partnerships for Sustainable Cities' (with the help of a technical assistance facility).

## The achievement of Europe's global ambitions depends on delivery and concrete results improving people's lives



- Geopolitical Union
- For global prosperity and security
- Global Gateway



### Key success factors:

- Investments plus enabling environment (360 degrees)
- International Partnerships
- Positive impact on citizens



### Risk of falling short:

- Disillusion, instability, irregular migration

## Cities are where Europe's strategies come to life and LRGs help to turn ambitions into results



Integrated territorial development



Local democracy



First responders in fragility



International Solidarity

## City-to-city cooperation is an enabler and a multiplier



Scaling up local innovations



Enabling cities to engage with EU and Global Gateway



Leveraging actors and private sector funds



Influencing global norms through local diplomacy

## Unlocking the potential of decentralised cooperation through

The EU/MS developing a political partnership with cities, facilitating direct access to finance and integrating DC in the external action toolbox



Pro-active cities and networks, delivering results and helping to achieve the EU's ambition as geopolitical/global player

# Frontline alliance for sustainable prosperity and security

## City-to-city cooperation delivering on Europe's global ambitions

**Cities and local/regional governments from Europe and partner countries want to engage as active protagonists and strategic partners in EU external action and in the Global Gateway.**

To this end, they propose a mutually beneficial frontline alliance to tackle global challenges and defend Europe's own interests, values and standards. Decentralised cooperation -partnerships between cities and regions across borders- is a vital instrument to make this work. It can bring great added value -as an enabler and a multiplier- to locally owned development and to a geopolitical, interest-driven EU external action. This, in turn, calls for the full-fledged integration of decentralised cooperation as a strategic instrument in the EU toolbox.

### Europe's Global Ambitions at Stake

EU external action is undergoing a major transition in response to an increasingly volatile, competitive world. Europe seeks to position itself as a trusted geopolitical actor: driving the green and digital transitions, creating wealth and sustainable infrastructure, strengthening social cohesion, and defending democracy worldwide. The Global Gateway strategy reflects this new paradigm.



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**Global  
Gateway**

The Global Gateway is the EU's major investment scheme and strategic offer to partner countries. It is based on core values and seeks to create an enabling environment for investments benefitting local communities through a 360 degree approach.

These ambitions are not abstract aspirations but the foundations of Europe's security and prosperity. Yet they will only succeed if they deliver visible results for people. Investments without jobs, services, or local ownership risk creating instability, disillusion, and irregular migration. If Europe falls short, its credibility and influence as a global partner are at risk.



**Decentralised cooperation reinforces the European integration process from its roots.**

## Why cities and local/regional governments matter

Cities and local or regional governments represent communities and territories where European goals become tangible. They generate most economic growth and new jobs, translate climate commitments into renewable energy and sustainable transport, and ensure that infrastructure is maintained and accessible. They are the places where newcomers find schools and communities, where democracy is lived daily, and where pluralism and rights are upheld even when national governments retreat. Cities are also first responders in times of crisis and fragility. By mobilising civil society, academia, and business, they ensure development is inclusive, coherent, and locally owned. Without their involvement -as catalysts of local democracy and territorial development- Europe's international objectives will struggle to take root.

## Decentralised cooperation as enabler and multiplier

Cities and local/regional governments want to strategically engage in the EU's new paradigm for external action and in the Global Gateway.

To this end, decentralised cooperation is a vital instrument for turning local action into global achievement. City-to-city partnerships create horizontal, reciprocal exchanges that generate innovative solutions to global challenges. They act as a laboratory in which successful approaches can be tested, replicated, and scaled. It can be an enabler for citizen participation, territorial alliances and meaningful engagement with EU institutions. It can help leveraging private sector investment, build pipelines of viable projects, and anchor major initiatives such as Global Gateway in real communities. In fragile contexts, decentralised cooperation allows dialogue and trust-building to continue even where political relations are strained. Peer-to-peer cooperation facilitates local diplomacy grounded in solidarity, citizen participation and sustainability. This amplifies the voice of local actors in international debates on climate, digital transitions, peace, migration and democracy.

## A frontline alliance for Europe and its partners

Decentralised cooperation reinforces the European integration process from its roots. Cities embody the EU's presence in citizens' daily lives, and their cross-border partnerships create direct links between political Europe and real Europe. Investing in this form of cooperation builds a frontline alliance where cities and regions become natural allies of the EU. Together, they can tackle the core global challenges of our time while standing firmly for European values, interests, and standards. This alliance is essential to achieving sustainable prosperity and security in both Europe and the Global South.

## What Europe could do

For this alliance to succeed, the EU and its Member States could:

- ✓ **Reconfirm decentralised cooperation as a strategic approach** for achieving core EU external action and especially in the roll-out of the GG strategy and its 360 degree approach.
- ✓ Facilitate **direct access** to EU aid resources, technical assistance, blended finance, and investment facilities for cities and LRGs.
- ✓ **Integrate cities and LRGs more systematically** into programming cycles, policy dialogues, and evaluations to anchor cooperation in real territories and community needs.
- ✓ **Consider the value of the decentralised cooperation** approach in the next financial framework, ensuring stable and predictable resourcing to LRGs. This implies preserving and updating programmes such as the 'Partnerships for Sustainable Cities' within the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework .
- ✓ **Reinforce structured engagement** with city networks so that European strategies benefit from practical knowledge, innovation, and accountability.



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## What cities and regions can and will do



**Continue to invest** in international solidarity and mutually beneficial city-to-city partnerships.



**Demonstrate results** by showing how local delivery advances shared global priorities.



**Use decentralized cooperation** as a leverage to crowd in different actors -particularly the private sector.



**Use city-to-city / metropolitan partnerships** and existing LRG platforms to amplify the voice of local actors at various levels of governance (national, regional, global) on a wide range of global and urban development challenges.



**Bring innovation and solutions** that can be replicated and scaled, turning local experiments into global achievements.



**Help realizing the values agenda** of the EU at times of democratic regression and faltering international solidarity.



**Act as trusted partners** in implementing Europe's external action and development cooperation agenda, rooted in legitimacy and proximity to citizens.



**Organise collectively** through networks and alliances, making city diplomacy a structured and effective complement to national and European action.

*The present narrative and views are those from participating cities and do not represent those of the European Commission.*



**For more info, visit the website of the Programme:**

[https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/programmes/partnerships-sustainable-cities\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/programmes/partnerships-sustainable-cities_en)



**Partnerships for Sustainable Cities**



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