

# Team Europe Democracy (TED) Initiative

## WEBINAR REPORT

### *Strengthening Local Democratic Resilience - Entry Points for Supporting and Engaging with Local Communities and Actors in Fragile Contexts*

TED Working Group (WG) 2 on Political and Civic Participation

4<sup>th</sup> October 2024

#### Executive Summary

On 4<sup>th</sup> of October 2024, the TED WG2 hosted a webinar on *Strengthening Local Democratic Resilience - Entry Points for Supporting and Engaging with Local Communities and Actors in Fragile Contexts*. The event gathered representatives from the European Commission, including EU Delegations, Member States, local government platforms, international organisations and civil society. Participants shared strategies for engaging with local actors - both elected and non-elected - underscoring their integral role in upholding democratic processes and ensuring the continuous delivery of public services during crises. There was a clear preference for small-scale, actionable initiatives that adopt a 'light-touch' approach, prioritising minimal intrusion and being grounded in local realities.

The discussions emphasised the importance of inclusive governance and trust-building, encouraging communities - particularly local leaders, women and youth - to actively participate, and be influential, in decision making processes, local planning and budgeting.

A key takeaway from the first session on sharing experiences in supporting local democratic resilience in fragile contexts is the emphasis on empowering local actors to strengthen governance. ALDA highlighted that by prioritising community-level initiatives and supporting collaboration between civil society organisations and local authorities, stable and inclusive governance structures can be created to withstand political instability and support the most vulnerable populations. DG INTPA G2 underscored the need to strengthen local governance as a safeguard against democratic backsliding, promoting the Territorial Approach to Local Development (TALD) and the EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) initiative to facilitate multi-stakeholder collaboration, where local authorities serve as key mediators. By encouraging adaptive, community-led solutions and promoting civic dialogue, these initiatives aim to empower civil society and local actors, ultimately enhancing democratic resilience and public service delivery amidst political instability. Complementing these perspectives, UNDP's work across various regional contexts, with a focus on institutional capacity building and illustrating the significance of collaborative community governance. In Somalia, this approach hopes to facilitate reconciliation, critical resources and address jurisdictional challenges while achieving the SDGs.

During the second session, a panel discussion highlighted decentralised development cooperation, particularly through city-to-city partnerships, as a strategy to enhance local governance and address development challenges.

A representative from the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), speaking on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), outlined its five core elements:



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: local autonomy for customised strategies; capacity building through knowledge exchange; civil society engagement for community participation; transparency to promote public trust; and direct dialogue for identifying local needs. BMZ also proposed entry points for enhancing these partnerships, including participatory processes, long-term municipal collaborations and urban diplomacy, while encouraging flexibility and adaptation to evolving local contexts. Platforma echoed these sentiments by highlighting initiatives aimed at rebuilding trust, capacity and promoting social inclusion through accountability models, particularly in recovery contexts. They underscored the potential for local governments to collaborate with the private sector and civil society, motivating community engagement while leveraging the Global Gateway for funding and technical support for local development initiatives. Additionally, the EU Delegation (EUD) in Zimbabwe addressed the challenges faced by local authorities amid the ongoing economic and political crisis, which have led to increased corruption and civic disengagement. To counter these issues, the EUD is pursuing a dual engagement strategy involving citizens (local leaders), civil society (such as churches) and local governments, focusing on capacity building, awareness, digitalisation for transparency and partnerships to enhance service delivery and strengthen democratic processes in the absence of central government support.

In conclusion, engaging local authorities requires nuanced, context-aware strategies that leverage strong community leadership and enhance collaboration between civil society and local governance. By prioritising community engagement and implementing deliberative processes and joint actions, such as the city-to-city partnerships, political sensitivities can be navigated, ultimately advancing resilient local democratic governance.

## Introduction

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 2024, TED WG2 hosted a webinar focused on strengthening local democratic governance, uniting practitioners, civil society organisations (CSO), EU institutions and governance experts to explore strategies for building resilience in politically fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

The discussions highlighted the crucial role that local communities and actors - both elected and non-elected – play in navigating the instability and uncertainty inherent in these environments, positioning them as **key entry points for pursuing sustainable solutions** to disrupted democratic dialogues. Emphasising the importance of inclusive local governance, participants underscored the significance of partnerships and collaborative actions, central to the WG2's mission. This culminated in a call to operationalise the insights shared during the webinar, transforming concepts into tangible steps for engaging local actors, empowering citizens and strengthening governance structures.

**Session 1: Practitioners' presentations on sharing experience – including from local partners, best practices and challenges – in supporting local democratic resilience in fragile contexts.**

### 1. ALDA

During the webinar, ALDA outlined its strategic approach to strengthening democracy through local governance, with a focus on decentralisation and the empowerment of local authorities and civil society. Instead of pursuing large-scale regime change, ALDA prioritises **protecting and reinforcing existing democratic foundations** ('do no harm') by emphasising



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community-level initiatives that offer stability and support to the most vulnerable (building governance from the ground up, city2city, region2region, community2community). **Women and youth** are often at the forefront of these types of efforts.

A central theme is the **empowerment of local actors** - both elected and non-elected, such as community leaders and technical authorities - particularly in transitional or fragile regimes. Engaging these often-overlooked stakeholders helps ensure the continuity of governance, during periods of political instability. Since these actors remain in place during political turnover, their involvement is important in maintaining public services (education and healthcare).

Rather than directly funding local governments, ALDA encourages **collaboration between CSOs and local authorities**. Through joint consultations, co-writing proposals and organising events, ALDA aims to encourage enduring partnerships that transcend political cycles as well as shift mindsets. A key tool in this process is ALDA's **regranting system**, which offers small grants (€10,000 to €30,000) to support collaborative projects between citizens, CSOs and local authorities. This system plays a crucial role in discovering and supporting emerging actors, particularly in underrepresented regions, while creating a network of advocates for long-term democratic change.

ALDA emphasised creativity and innovative, 'out-of-the-box' (go beyond the conventional development frameworks) solutions when working in challenging environments. Small/micro-level initiatives, led by resilient 'local connectors,' linked to broader networks to facilitate peer-to-peer support and learning are promoted. Short-term project cycles may yield immediate results; however, they often fail to create the necessary deep-rooted impact.

Importantly ALDA avoids directly discussing democracy with their partners, rather approach it through 'less intrusive' focus areas **like strengthening local inclusive governance in provisions of public services** (education, healthcare). This mitigates social pressures, conflict risks and ensures the safety of those involved.

Integrated development diagnostics, a participatory tool, helps ALDA map local contexts, identify strong local partners, approachable traditional structures and develop co-created solutions tailored to each environment. Long-term trust and partnerships remain at the heart of their strategy, enabling them to make lasting impacts in fragile or conflict-affected regions.

Following case studies put these shared strategies into practice:

Ukraine	<b>Decentralised cooperation model</b> , facilitation of collaboration through local democracy agencies, creating long-term collaboration between local authorities, civil society and European partners amidst the ongoing conflict. This initiative has included engaging internally displaced persons (IDPs) in local activities, connecting them with their home communities and linking these efforts to broader EU migration policies.
Tunisia	Support to a slow, non-linear but steady process of democratisation by <b>building long-term partnerships with local stakeholders</b> . These relationships have been vital in sustaining progress even as the political landscape shifts, demonstrating the importance of trust-building and sustained engagement.
Libya	Focus on training local authorities and <b>building capacity for governance</b> , often outside the country (due to the environment). This work, supported by



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	the European Commission, highlights the challenges and importance of sustaining democratic efforts in conflict zones
Sahel	Engagement with diaspora communities. By working closely with IDPs and <b>aligning these efforts with EU migration policies and development activities</b> , ALDA has been able to strengthen local governance in their home communities, ensuring that development efforts are both locally driven and internationally supported.
Belarus	Focus on maintaining civic engagement for over 15 years through media integrity initiatives, connecting civil society, media and local institutions, providing an essential platform for democratic discourse even under an authoritarian regime.
Kyrgyzstan	Focus on <b>media-led democratic engagement, connecting civil society with local institutions</b> to encourage a more inclusive and participatory governance system.
Venezuela & Nicaragua	Collaboration with Spanish and Portuguese partners to support <b>decentralised cooperation and democratic engagement</b> in difficult political contexts, ensuring that local democratic actors are empowered to continue their work despite the challenges.

For more information: [https://www.alda-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/A-WEALTH-OF-EXPERTISE2024\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.alda-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/A-WEALTH-OF-EXPERTISE2024_compressed.pdf)

## 2. EU DG INTPA G2

The increasing threat of democratic backsliding, autocratic tendencies and recentralisation worldwide underscores the urgent need to reinforce local democracy, particularly in fragile contexts. During the webinar, DG INTPA G2 provided perspectives into **how local governance, civil society and multi-stakeholder collaboration are critical to sustaining democracy** in these challenging environments.

The multi-stakeholder and **Territorial Approach to Local Development (TALD)** approaches were introduced, where the role for local authorities was underscored as of utmost importance due to their proximity and deep understanding of local, community, realities. These actors are often seen as the legitimate rulers, grounded in traditional and historical leadership. Public well-being in politically unstable environments rely heavily on local (public) investments and the continued delivery of essential services such as health, education, water and sanitation.

Indeed, there is a challenge of integrating these actors, hence why **adaptive approaches are crucial in maintaining local legitimacy and engaging traditional authorities**.

TALD (implemented in Angola and Colombia) therefore offers a bottom-up, adaptive (applied in different formats) strategy that integrates multiple sectors and actors to ensure sustainable service delivery. TALD positions local authorities not as mere agents of national policy but as mediators of local interests, playing a central role in promoting transparency, citizen engagement and decision-making at the local level.

Venezuela in 2023, where TALD enabled the EU to re-engage with local authorities through civic dialogues aimed at addressing municipal service challenges exacerbated by the migration crisis, was highlighted as a pointed example. Upcoming initiatives in Haiti and



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Guinea Bissau further illustrated the **potential for community-led solutions in fragile contexts**.

**Decentralised cooperation** was also repeated, in light of facilitating peer-to-peer learning between sub-national governments, enabling cooperation even when national dialogues are constrained. **City2City partnerships**, for instance, encourages participatory governance and helps restore trust in fragile contexts. The **REBUILD Project** in Libya was relied on to demonstrate how decentralised cooperation can strengthen local governance despite political divides, though flexible, sustained engagement. Additionally, the Colombian 'Gen-actor' project was showcased on how urban gardens, developed through a participatory approach, transformed communities into inclusive, green spaces, providing food security and economic opportunities for 30,000 residents, including migrants and women, while building trust across diverse groups.

DG INTPA G2 also introduced the **newly launched EU SEE (EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society) initiative**, a transnational, 6-year project aimed at addressing shrinking civic space in fragile contexts. Unlike a traditional watchdog approach, this initiative, led by civil society, **combines monitoring, early warning systems and cross-regional collaboration to mitigate the risks posed by shrinking civic space**. The importance of an intersectional approach was stressed, which takes into account the diverse impacts of civic space restrictions on different communities. Civil society actors are and should be, increasingly seen not just as watchdogs but also as bridge builders in governance, contributing to societal development alongside local authorities.

The EU SEE initiative includes a monitoring and early warning system that tracks shifts in rights, resources and openness in fragile environments. By incorporating regional and public interest groups, the initiative supports cross-regional dialogues that engage a broad range of actors beyond traditional civil and political spheres. The importance of inclusive national strategies that combat shrinking civic space and facilitate dialogue between civil society, local governance and security sectors (including local policing) was underscored. However, while civil society actors hold local authorities accountable (public service delivery responsibilities), tensions can arise from their differing roles. To manage these tensions, open communication (non-confrontational) and trust-building are essential, allowing for collaboration that enhances democratic processes and improves community well-being.

**An interesting discussion emerged** during the event, sparked by a question about indicators needed to measure the success in community-building efforts, especially in the context of shrinking civic space. How can joint efforts facilitate the creation of communities and platforms for local actors to exchange experiences?

A recurring challenge was that of securing long-term funding (increasing pressure to demonstrate impact with tighter budgets) and interoperability among existing platforms. Emphasis was placed on the need for consistent, sustainable funding, as short-term project cycles often hinder the **development of impactful long-lasting collaborations**. There was also a call for better technical connections between existing platforms and for clearer definitions of their purposes.

To address these challenges, participants proposed several **potential indicators of success**, such as tracking the growth and diversity of partnerships and actors involved in initiatives; measuring engagement levels with non-traditional stakeholders; and assessing levels of democratic literacy/education, the capacity building offers and available infrastructure for civic dialogue.



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## 3. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

UNDP operates within diverse regional contexts with varying levels of local democracy and governance, acting as a neutral facilitator to support local governments and national institutions in advancing the SDGs at the local level.

UNDP's **approach focuses on both the supply and demand sides:**

- On the supply side, it **strengthens local governance by building institutional and administrative capacities**, improving local public financial management and ensuring quality service delivery, such as water and sanitation (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Additionally, UNDP emphasises the importance of digital transformation for local service delivery, exemplified by inter-municipal cooperation initiatives in North Macedonia.
- On the demand side, UNDP **empowers citizens to actively participate in local democratic processes**, with special focus on women and youth. This includes promoting transparency, supporting local elections and building capacities of elected officials.

Collaboration with CSOs in the Western Balkans, for instance, expands democratic space, as recent evaluations have shown the programme's success in mitigating shrinking civic space and boosting the legitimacy of local governments in relation to civil society.

UNDP also **addresses conflict drivers through inclusive, gender-responsive and participatory approaches**, ensuring governance reflects the needs of all community members. Capacity-building efforts should also focus on participatory budgeting, women's empowerment and youth engagement, targeting newly elected officials (mayors and municipal councillors) and CSOs to promote transparency and accountability.

UNDP encourages (rural) communities to recognise their potential for improved communal services and supports urban transformation initiatives aimed at enhancing conditions for citizens. A strong commitment to human rights-based approaches, gender empowerment and youth leadership is central to the UNDP's community governance strategies, ensuring inclusive decision-making processes that builds trust in and legitimacy of public institutions.

Finally, the **role of the international community in shaping social contracts at the local governance level is critical**. By balancing societal needs and governmental structures, broader challenges like migration, trade and climate change can be addressed.

Several case studies (**with links**) were shared to illustrate UNDP's approaches in practice:

- In [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), for example, UNDP assists local governments in implementing performance-based methods to improve service provisions, like water supply and sanitation.
- In [North Macedonia](#), the focus is on introducing systematised digital transformation solutions for local service delivery through inter-municipal cooperation (LOGES cloud-based platform for e-services, adopted by 1/3 of municipalities).
- In the [Western Balkans](#), the EU-funded ReLOaD Programme collaborates with CSOs to expand democratic space, helping to counteract the shrinking civic space in the



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region. It also aims to enhance access to funding, while promoting women's empowerment and encouraging youth participation in local governance.

- Also in 6 Balkan countries - Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo - through the [Youth 4 Inclusion, Equality & Trust | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\)](#), UNDP promotes trust-building at the local level among youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds and empowers them by facilitating their engagement in local decision-making including through local youth councils.
- In [Georgia](#), UNDP, in partnership with the Government of Denmark, advanced local service delivery and decentralisation, focusing on marginalised groups like women, youth and ethnic minorities.
- In both [Uzbekistan](#) and [Kazakhstan](#) (local self-governance since 2018) focus is on enhancing the understanding of local governments' expanded functions, particularly regarding local budgets and the establishment of communal enterprises. It promotes direct participation of rural citizens in shaping their community's future. Additionally, UNDP supports local authorities in improving living conditions for rural communities, ensuring their access to basic infrastructure and socio-economic services, including health and education.
- Essential support to local democratic governance includes a human rights-based approach, people-centred development and gender equality. In [Armenia](#), efforts are directed at strengthening local service delivery and transparency, particularly with an emphasis on women and youth leadership in community development, delivery accountability and businesses.
- In the [Eastern Partnership](#), UNDP supports urban transformation by helping cities explore new paths of growth, making them more attractive for residents and investments. Integrated and inclusive development planning is also a part.
- Lastly, in Ukraine, UNDP collaborates with multi-sectoral territorial working groups to unite public, civil society and business sectors in discussing development priorities and addressing social cohesion and security issues (Ukraine's oblast-level Community Security Working Groups). Recognise the strength of integrating various sectors and actors in local governance approaches and budgets as well as align programmes with local priorities.

An interesting perspective was shared from UNDP's inclusive politics portfolio in **Somalia**, focusing on high-level political processes related to elections, constitutionalism and governance, including at the local level. Somalia's ongoing state formation faces significant challenges, particularly jurisdictional ambiguity between federal, central and local governance, which creates a power vacuum filled by non-state actors like clans and al-Shabaab. This lack of clarity around governance roles and service providers, often creating a parallel system of governance triggers political conflicts, competition, distrust and undermines social cohesion.

**Key challenges include transitioning from war to peace, tribalism to constitutionalism and humanitarian aid to development**, all connected to local governance and democracy. The dominance of elite clans in negotiations, administration and political processes further exacerbates the exclusion of large parts of the population from decision-making and political participation, threatening democracy.

UNDP **promotes collaborative community governance as a solution**, emphasising reconciliation, district-level planning, and community integration. For instance, addressing long-standing clan disputes through community platforms, ensuring community-led governance rather than externally imposed solutions, and creating interim administrations to provide essential services where government structures are absent.



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Territorial disputes, clannism and violent extremism are further exacerbated competition over resources like land and water, worsened by climate change. The reliability of services provided by non-state actors like clans and al-Shabaab often outperforms the government, increasing public trust in these parallel systems and fuelling further tensions.

To counter this, UNDP stresses the **need for government-led, community-driven governance, involving local communities directly in reconciliation processes**. They advocate for vertical integration, ensuring that local issues inform national decision-making, while civil society and non-state actors work with, rather than against, government efforts. Local ownership and the use of community members to deliver messages are crucial to building trust and avoiding perceptions of external imposition.

**Session 2: Panel discussion on entry points (re-vitalise existing and/or new) for engaging local actors and communities in local democratic governance (e.g. community and political avenues)**

## 1. German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

On behalf of BMZ, a GIZ speaker highlighted the importance of decentralised development cooperation in the webinar, particularly emphasising the value of **city-to-city partnerships** from a Member State (MS) perspective. For example, BMZ shared there were 225 such partnerships between Germany and Ukraine, strengthened with contributions from other EU MS like Poland, Sweden and France. This approach provides avenues for dialogue and cooperation that extend beyond traditional diplomatic channels, encouraging innovative local responses to development challenges.

BMZ shared 5 core elements of decentralised development cooperation:

1. **Local autonomy:** empowering local governments to control their decision-making processes, development paths and international relations. This autonomy enables municipalities to tailor, and own, their development strategies based on their citizen's unique contexts and needs.
2. **Capacity building:** facilitating exchanges of best practices and technical know-how enhances the skills and abilities of local governments. Improved efficiency in public service delivery and governance is a direct outcome of such exchanges. A notable example is the partnership between Tbilisi – Georgia and Saarbrücken - Germany, which focuses on road safety and non-motorised transport through regular dialogues among urban planning departments, leading to stronger urban management.
3. **Civil society engagement:** the role of civil society is crucial in promoting community involvement and ensuring that local voices are heard. For example, a collaboration between Harare – Zimbabwe and Munich - Germany, actively engages communities to encourage broad social commitment and drive initiatives. This partnership has been instrumental in raising awareness about the benefits of cycling and advocating for safer roads, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of urban infrastructure.
4. **Transparency and accountability:** improving service delivery and the management of municipal enterprises builds citizens' trust in democratic processes. Effective



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governance leads to improved service delivery. An example of this is the partnership between Hamburg - Germany and Amman - Jordan, which resulted in improved drinking water quality and reliability through municipal utility cooperation, coaching and advice. This resulted in greater accountability and public trust in municipal services.

5. **Local needs identification:** projects should emerge from direct dialogues between municipalities, with minimal interference from higher authorities. This ensures they are responsive to specific community needs. An example shared was that of a partnership between Kyiv - Ukraine and Berlin - Germany, which focused on developing local startup ecosystems, creating synergies between companies (increase local investment and technical transfer) from both cities.

Possible entry points shared by BMZ included:

**Participatory processes:** involving local communities in project planning and implementation builds resilience and sustainability. This participatory approach ensures initiatives align with community needs, encouraging ownership and commitment from local actors. An example is the 'Small Project Fund' implemented by SKEW, which supports community-led projects with funding of up to €50,000, demonstrating that smaller steps can lead to a more significant impact.

**Provision of material goods:** supporting partnerships in procuring essential/basic goods for local crisis coping strengthens municipal capacities to facilitate immediate responses, contributing to solidarity and cooperation. An example of demonstrated solidarity is the delivery of goods by German mayors directly to Ukraine.

**Long-term municipal partnerships:** these partnerships can endure political changes, allowing for sustained collaboration and resilience rooted in principles of solidarity, voluntariness, and mutual benefit. Utilising local experts for ongoing support ensures continuous engagement and consistent advice.

**Building networks:** creating connections among local actors, NGOs, and international organisations enhances mutual learning and innovative problem-solving. The 'Connective Cities Platform' serves as a hub for municipalities to network, promoting dialogue and collaboration by sharing practices, experiences, challenges, and potential solutions.

**Promotion of urban diplomacy:** this enhances local voices on the international stage, facilitating dialogue among municipalities and local government associations. Such engagement allows for the sharing of experiences and strategies on urban development, increasing visibility and influence in global discussions.

BMZ emphasised the need for partnerships to **remain flexible and adaptive to evolving local needs and frameworks**, which includes adjusting funding instruments and support measures accordingly. BMZ left the WG2's members with some food for thought in the form of open questions:

- How can we learn from each other's decentralised cooperation approaches and connect these?
- What are the experiences in urban diplomacy, especially within fragile contexts?
- Is there potential for systematic support at the European level for cities and municipalities engaged in triadic or quadripartite partnerships?



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- What existing approaches link EU policies with municipal development cooperation?
- What methodologies can assess the impact of decentralised cooperation on local governance and SDG outcomes?
  - An example would be the upcoming collaborative study with the OECD aimed at developing methodologies for monitoring and analysing the impact of decentralised development cooperation on enhancing local governance and advancing the achievement of the SDGs.

For more information:

- ["TAIEX" \(Technical Assistance and Information Exchange\) - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://european-commission.europa.eu)
- Civil Protection Ukraine: ['We provide direct and unbureaucratic support' | akzente \(giz.de\)](https://www.akzente.giz.de)
- KommuNE [Supporting municipal development cooperation worldwide - giz.de](https://www.giz.de)
- [Connective Cities \(connective-cities.net\)](https://www.connective-cities.net)
- [Betreiberplattform \(utility-platform.de\)](https://www.utility-platform.de)
- [Kleinprojektfonds Kommunale Entwicklungspolitik - SKEW \(engagement-global.de\)](https://www.engagement-global.de)
- Expert Fund: [Supporting municipal partnerships - giz.de](https://www.giz.de)
- [German Government and federal states cooperate in development cooperation - giz.de](https://www.giz.de)

To enhance collaboration and improve outcomes, a comprehensive mapping of ongoing initiatives (who, where, what) was suggested during the discussion; this would enable stakeholders to understand the landscape of current activities and facilitate more effective partnerships. Furthermore, establishing a central repository for resources, programming updates and member contacts would significantly enhance the coordination across various levels

## 2. Platforma

Platforma presented its foundational overview as a pan-European coalition composed of local and regional governments along with their associations, active in promoting decentralised development cooperation. The coalition operates through **three main pillars**:

- (1) advocacy, where it acts as the voice for European local and regional governments in shaping development policy and sustainable development agendas, particularly in areas such as EU neighbourhood policy and global citizenship education;
- (2) capacity building, which focuses on raising awareness and strengthening the capabilities of local governments and civil servants to ensure effective governance and service delivery; and,
- (3) as a knowledge hub, Platforma positions itself as a centre of expertise, disseminating valuable knowledge to relevant stakeholders to enhance their understanding and operational capacities in the field of decentralised development.

During the webinar, Platforma outlined initiatives aimed at rebuilding trust, creating open democratic dialogue opportunities, promoting social inclusion and identifying entry points for engagement in fragile contexts.

As to **rebuilding trust and opening democratic dialogue**, in response to the humanitarian needs in Ukraine, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CCRE CEMR), has shifted its **focus to city-to-city partnerships**, developing long-term support for recovery and reconstruction across 1,000 partnerships in 1,000 cities. This initiative emphasises multi-level



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governance and coordination among the EU, MS and local government associations in Ukraine. Similarly, the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG International) is working in Ethiopia to rebuild trust between local governments and communities through social accountability models in post-conflict environments. Their efforts include providing psychosocial support and crisis management tools to enhance local service delivery and facilitate dialogue. In Myanmar, the institutionalisation of social workers within governance systems aims to strengthen community trust and local authority engagement. Meanwhile, in Zimbabwe, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) supports national associations of local authorities (including urban councils and rural district associations) in advocating for autonomy and inclusive decision-making amid economic and democratic crises. This initiative promotes citizen participation through community forums and participatory budgeting, with local governments (local leaders often from opposition parties) stepping in to fill the void left by limited support from the central government.

**Social inclusion** is explored through the Nexus Programme in Uganda where child welfare and gender-based violence is addressed by supporting district local governments and community structures to promote equality in access to services and civic participation. In Lebanon and Jordan, the Massar Project improves service delivery in water management, health, and sanitation while promoting social cohesion amidst the refugee crises. This is realised by integrating service delivery into the crisis response for hosting Syrian refugees and strengthening grassroots capacities within local governments. Both programmes/projects were supported by VNG International. Fons Mallorquí in Burkina Faso supports initiatives aimed at enhancing economic participation empower 300 women through financial management workshops conducted in collaboration with local administrations. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, efforts focus on education, literacy and support for women, ensuring educational continuity and providing safe spaces amidst the absence of formal schooling, facilitated by collaboration with local NGOs and communities. Lastly, in Tunisia, local democracy associations have taken the initiative to maintain engagement and empower women politically following the disbandment of local councils, thereby enhancing women's participation in local politics and strategic discussions.

In Lebanon, VNG International supports initiatives focused on disaster risk prevention and preparedness for national governments within the framework of post-disaster recovery. Similarly, in Morocco, expertise is being shared between Moroccan and Dutch municipalities in response to the most recent earthquake, facilitating technical cooperation for recovery efforts. Meanwhile, in Zimbabwe, as central government transfers have collapsed, the clgf is supporting local governments in shifting their financing strategies. By encouraging revenue diversification and increasing collections from the informal sector, local authorities are demonstrating resilience and financial autonomy. This includes implementing effective debt management strategies and developing infrastructure despite the constraints caused by the lack of central government support. These examples highlight key economic and political entry points for operating in fragile contexts.

The presentation highlighted several key opportunities for local governments, including the **potential to establish partnerships with the private sector and civil society**, leveraging their expertise, technology and funding for mutual benefit. Their specific technical knowledge and expertise are invaluable for effective governance and community engagement, which can be further strengthened through capacity-building efforts, particularly in managing local resources. City-to-city collaborations and collective problem-solving also play a role in facilitating peer learning and mutual support, promoting continuous improvement in areas such as urban planning, disaster response and community engagement. Additionally,



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collaboration with European Union Delegations (EUDs) opens up access to funding and technical support for local development initiatives, with the Global Gateway acting as a financial enabler for decentralised cooperation and local economic development<sup>1</sup>.

In addressing questions related to Regional Hubs for Protection Services and the role of the private sector, Platforma highlighted two key areas. First, Regional Hubs for Protection Services are established to facilitate the exchange of experiences and best practices among local governments and organisations. Through collaboration and knowledge sharing, these hubs aim to enhance the capacity of local authorities to implement effective protection strategies through mutual learning within a specific regional context.

Second, **the private sector plays an important role in city-to-city cooperation**. European municipalities can mobilise socially responsible companies to contribute to local economic development and support initiatives in partner countries. One notable example is the Platforma Awards (<https://platformawards.eu/>), which showcased the collaboration between the municipality of Anderlecht (Belgium) and a partner municipality in Senegal. This partnership focused on sustainable local fishing by financing new nets for fishermen, renovating facilities for women to sell fish and other products, thus creating a market, and opening a community centre that also served as a local restaurant. The involvement of the private sector not only improved sustainability and economic opportunities but also strengthened social cohesion, illustrating the broad benefits of such engagements.

## 3. European Union Delegation (EUD) in Zimbabwe

The EUD in Zimbabwe outlined the critical challenges posed by the ongoing economic and political crisis. Local authorities, grappling with significantly reduced or non-existent central government grants, have become increasingly reliant on citizen-generated revenue, such as tax collections. This dependency has also enabled an environment vulnerable to corruption, political polarisation and shrinking civic space. The prolonged crisis, coupled with the absence of public services, has led to widespread disillusionment among citizens, many of whom are discouraged from engaging in democratic processes due to fears of political violence or a lack of understanding of how to exercise their civic rights.

The EUD shared that local authorities also often adopt citizen engagement strategies in a superficial manner, fulfilling legal obligations without genuinely implementing citizens' suggestions. To address these challenges, the EUD has focused on working at the local government level, adopting a dual approach that engages both the demand side (citizens) and the supply side (local governments). This strategy yielded even better results by involving a trifecta: citizens, civil society and local authorities.

**Key entry points for engagement in this context** include the new constitution, which provides for decentralisation and devolution. **Reviving and strengthening existing formal mechanisms**, such as Ward Development Committees and Village Development Committees, is crucial, as these platforms, which involve respected local leaders and headmen, facilitate community engagement. In the absence of central government support, citizens are increasingly taking the lead to fill the governance vacuum.

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<sup>1</sup> ECDPM also shared during the webinar a publication on local authorities and the Global Gateway: <https://ecdpm.org/work/eu-global-gateway-strategy-giving-local-authorities-voice>



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Additionally, local authority associations have played a key role in amplifying local voices and exchanging best practices. **Empowering community-based and citizen-led organisations**, including churches, has also raised awareness and increased participation in local governance. The EUD has focused on strengthening the capacity of local authority administrations and elected officials to improve service delivery and dialogue, employing a 'light-touch model' of capacity building that allows councils to operate independently. For example, **digitalising local government processes**, such as document registries and financial databases, has improved transparency and revenue collection.

The EUD also highlighted **opportunities for partnerships, particularly in pooling resources among development partners to create a greater impact**. By initially focusing on less politically sensitive interventions like digitalisation and gender mainstreaming into local planning/budgeting, local authorities can build momentum before addressing more contentious issues. **Peer-to-peer learning, benchmarking and recognising high-performing councils further encourage improvement in participatory local governance**, creating an environment in which local authorities can enhance service delivery and strengthen democratic processes.

## Q&A, reflection and final remarks

The discussions revealed several critical questions into the complexities of engaging local authorities, particularly those perceived as alternative power centres to central government. Participants noted that handling such dynamics requires a case-specific approach, emphasising the importance of strong local leadership. This leadership can challenge national levels, which, while potentially risky, is essential for encouraging a more democratic environment.

When it comes to approaching central authorities in politically sensitive contexts, the strategy should **focus on engaging local solution topics**. If direct engagement is not feasible, assisting local actors through small, actionable initiatives can effectively promote development. This nuanced approach acknowledges the unique challenges faced at the local level, particularly in motivating citizen participation. Opportunities have arisen for implementing deliberative processes, such as citizen assemblies and panels, which aim to rebuild trust between local institutions and citizens. These initiatives, anchored in a **whole-of-society approach**, include organising community forums for prioritisation and leveraging digital tools to enhance the transparency of municipal councils.

The **relationship between CSOs and local authorities** often demonstrates a fluid dynamic, with civil society leaders frequently taking on elected roles within local governance structures. This interconnectedness reinforces the notion that a community-centred approach, involving both CSOs and local authorities, can better achieve the broader goal of democratic resilience. However, participants recognised that at the national level, the distance between CSOs and elected political leaders tends to be greater, highlighting a need for strategic engagement.

In the context of Somalia, discussions emphasised the need for careful consideration when promoting federal-level activities at the local level. There are concerns that such initiatives could inadvertently pave the way for a non-democratic unitary regime instead of a genuine democratic system. To ensure true democratic development, it is crucial to **integrate community-level processes with high-level initiatives, employing both top-down and bottom-up approaches**. Although there is a consensus among Somalis regarding the desire



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to build a federal state, the specifics of federalism remain a topic of active discussion, with local communities playing a vital role in shaping the process.

Participants also raised important considerations regarding the perception of Western interventions, which are often viewed as imperialistic. This perception poses risks for local organisations, underscoring the need for communication strategies that prioritise practical development topics and context-sensitive approaches ('light-touch,'), especially in the Sahel region. Furthermore, **peer-to-peer approaches between local authorities** emerged as vital mechanisms that can complement technical cooperation support. Enhancing these connections within EU and MS technical assistance projects is essential for promoting collaborative growth.

Finally, **city-to-city partnerships** were noted as a resilient form of collaboration that can withstand political changes. These partnerships provide access to expertise, facilitate connections with exchange hubs and enables cities to tap into broader markets. This leads to stability and continuity in local governance efforts as well as reflect the commitment of cities to support one another through varying political landscapes, ultimately contributing to more sustainable development outcomes.



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