# Potential and practices of decentralised development cooperation: an international perspective

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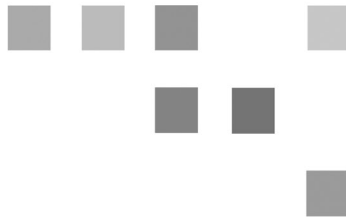
# 1. Introduction



International development cooperation is undergoing a revision of its main parameters (objectives, agents, modalities, etc.) in light of current global problems for which the principles and vision of the traditional cooperation system appear inadequate.

The 2030 Agenda, despite its limitations, represents an ambitious framework in terms of the goals pursued, and an opportunity to promote changes in global dynamics, particularly those that have a self-destructive nature within the environmental, social and economic spheres. The breadth of its goals necessarily leads to a multilevel, multi-stakeholder and integrated approach, where cooperation is essential. However, the current international cooperation system no longer seems appropriate for this function, and alternative or novel approaches are needed to meet future challenges.

Decentralised development cooperation (DDC), a practice which is steadily growing, is proposed as an approach capable of promoting relations of cooperation and solidarity with greater horizontality and reciprocity, involving different stakeholders and responding at sub-state levels, both to problems closest to the citizens and to systemic and structural issues.

However, in many cases, these practices do not seem to reach their potential either in developing relations or in sharing technical capacities, at times simply limiting themselves to reproducing schemes already struggling to keep pace with a reality that is profoundly transforming.

The objective of our study is to take an in-depth look at DDC practices from an international perspective in order to identify the main features in use, with a view to capitalising on their strengths and potential. The study also endeavours to identify whether the different state frameworks have led to the creation of differentiated models, and how these might support DDC practices.

Our study aims to complement other studies which focus on specific cases, providing an overall, and comparative, vision that, within its limitations, may help guide practices to meet future needs. For this, a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach is taken, combining different sources.

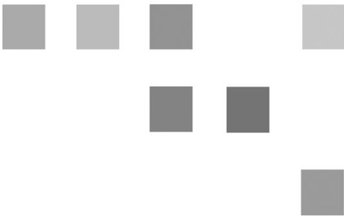
Firstly, data from the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) for the year 2019 (prior to the possible distorting effect of the pandemic) is analysed, as well as the main classifications in use. Although these data are of great interest for offering a comparative perspective due to their homogenization, there are limitations. The design of DAC to measure Official Development Assistance (ODA) was not done

with these practices in mind and, as is shown later, this makes it difficult to draw robust conclusions from it.

Secondly, previous studies on decentralised cooperation are reviewed, both from academic sources and international organisations, paying particular attention to comparative studies (Copsey and Rowe, 2012; Fernández de Losada et al., 2013, 2018; Kania, 2020, 2021; OECD, 2018, 2019; Pérez, 2018; Valmorbida, 2018; Dali et al., 2019). The 5 countries selected for a more in-depth study, because of their quantitative relevance and trajectory, are Germany, Canada, Spain, France and Belgium.

This publication adds to the long history of research work presented by the research group on Policy Coherence for Development and International Cooperation at the Hegoa Institute (UPV/EHU). This includes various publications on decentralised development cooperation (see, for example, Unceta et al., 2011, 2012, 2013; Gutiérrez-Goiria et al., 2012; Amiano et al., 2014; Labaien, 2014; Martínez, 2021; Martínez and Venegas, 2016; Villena, 2021).

# 2. Contextualization: decentralised development cooperation



DDC, which falls within an already established framework of international cooperation, has been evolving towards new ways of cooperation. This type of cooperation has particular characteristics, with potentialities and limitations.

## 2.1. Origin and concept of decentralised development cooperation

### Cooperation for development: from its inception to the 2030 Agenda

International development cooperation emerged shortly after the Second World War. Visible shortcomings in many parts of the world contrasted with the situation in *developed* or *industrialised* countries and gave rise to an international cooperation system made up of a significant number of international organisations (from United Nations agencies to the OECD Development Assistance Committee) and national agencies.

The aspiration was to solve problems, such as poverty, while reducing the gap between certain countries. Within this framework, Official Development Assistance, as a transfer system, played a central role, and it was hoped that it would serve as a catalyst to promote structural changes.

However, over time, it became clear that the problems were much more complex, and that the shortcomings and inequalities at a global level were far from being resolved.

Firstly, the proposed model did not consider the main issues facing global economic and financial interdependence. International trade, debt problems or foreign investment processes, and their modes of operation and asymmetries, were fundamental conditioning factors in development processes. Added to this were global problems highlighted by neoliberal views, such as financial volatility. The effect of all these issues far exceeded the capabilities of the current cooperation system.

Secondly, as early as the 1970s it was argued that the model of the higher-income countries was environmentally unsustainable (Meadows et al., 1972) and, therefore, could not be universalized. This would logically lead to questioning the proposed development model, with a view to moving towards one that was more sustainable.

Thirdly, even in those places where significant economic growth was taking place, the problems of unemployment, inequality and poverty remained unresolved and therefore needed closer attention.

These questions, and others related to aspects such as gender equity, institutionality, human rights, etc., have given rise to more complex debates on the processes and conditioning factors of development, as well as different proposals on the very concept of development (human, sustainable, etc.) or the questioning of "development" itself as an objective[1].

Without delving into this entire trajectory (since it exceeds the objective of this paper), the 2030 Agenda does merit closer scrutiny, as it is a current approach ratified by practically all countries within the UN framework.

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs possibly represent the most ambitious proposal so far, endorsed at an international level in terms of development and covering issues that include poverty, education, health, sustainability, inequalities, security, etc. This Agenda is not a continuation of the Goals of Millennium Development, but a much more comprehensive commitment in which human development and sustainable development agendas converge, the latter agendas previously working in parallel but with little crossover between them.

However, the 2030 Agenda proposal is not without problems. These include its non-binding nature and the weakness of its means of implementation, the lack of interrelationship and even the clashes between goals (for example, between SDG 8 on growth and decent work and others with a mainly environmental orientation). It also appears to lack the detail necessary to change the systemic elements of the current dominant development model. These shortcomings generate uncertainty as to the Agenda´s actual capacity for transformation and its overall viability.

All in all, the Agenda maintains potential as a call to global action, taking a different approach to the one in force up to now. In fact, one aspect of our study is that, by referring to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, which affect all countries, it breaks with the dichotomy of developed/undeveloped countries.

However, it is clear that the SDGs need international cooperation to widen their scope in order to be able to effectively deal with various global problems (such as

1 Unceta et al. (2021) carry out a broad review of this evolution in matters of development and cooperation.

the climate crisis, among others). Without abandoning Official Development Assistance activities, it is apparent that neither this nor the current international cooperation system is sufficient to respond to the challenges ahead. One suggestion is the promotion of Policy coherence for sustainable development as a tool to guide the orientation of policy in general.

The growing importance given to the local is also relevant, and contrasts with previous proposals. The very incorporation of SDG 11, on Sustainable cities and communities, indicates the importance given to these spaces. The 2030 Agenda, therefore, has a marked multilevel character, which highlights the need to incorporate new areas, agents, and goals within the framework of international cooperation.

## Decentralised cooperation within the framework of development cooperation

International development cooperation has traditionally been state-centric. However, as in other international spaces, the interventions of the governments of regions, cities and other sub-state spaces have been gaining importance in recent decades.

This greater relevance is explained by the growing weight of cities in terms of population and economy, the processes of political and administrative decentralisation in different places (which leads to more user-friendly services), or the associative capacity in international networks of some of these agents (Galante et al., 2020).

The role of DDC, residual until recently, has been gaining importance as a result of its growing recognition by different stakeholders and debate frameworks of the international agenda. Specifically, and despite initial resistance within the framework of the so-called Aid Effectiveness Agenda, it is now incorporated in forums such as Accra (2008) and Busan (2011), where approaches such as the new Global Partnership allow scope for the inclusion of new agents and dynamics in international cooperation. In this framework, DDC has been applied to address these activities from a multilevel and multi-stakeholder perspective, in a more inclusive manner. This has been greatly helped by the appearance of a growing body of declarations and viewpoints, mainly within the framework of the United Nations, the European Union (EU) and the OECD, where local and regional stakeholders are increasingly being recognised as having a greater part to play.

Despite their even smaller stature, sub-state entities have progressively increased their presence as cooperation agents. Although this cooperation should not be measured

by financial resources alone, OECD studies (2018, 2019) show a progressive growth in ODA granted by sub-state agents, going from 1,700 million dollars in 2005 to 1,900 in 2015, and 2,300 in 2017. In fact, the data collected in our research confirm this trend, showing an increase in ODA to 2,645 million in 2019. These figures are fairly modest in the context of total ODA, but nevertheless they show an increasing trend, which is possibly underestimated (only 15 countries reported on these practices in 2019).

## Concept and delimitation of decentralised development cooperation

It is worth noting that there is no single, commonly accepted, definition of DDC.

To begin with, the very composition of the "sub-state" is quite diverse. On a first level, there are usually regions or the like (federated states, autonomous communities, cantons), with nuances in terms of their autonomy and powers, determined by the states. To this is usually added a provincial scope, also with differentiated characteristics. At a third level we find the municipal level, perhaps the most comparable in different places (Labaien, 2014; Unceta et al., 2013). To this should be added other particular cases in each administrative environment.

Beyond the administrative delimitation, a recent study by the OECD (2018) collects the various definitions of DDC in 7 countries and within the EU framework, showing different nuances.

In some cases, the focus is on the transfer of ODA funds originating from sub-state entities, in what we could properly call official decentralised cooperation or official decentralised aid. Within these approaches, some go as far as to make it explicit as part of these practices that the partner entities are also public institutions (which would leave out many practices that include other agents).

In other cases, the concept is broader, not only giving importance to the financial aspect but also referring to activities that include exchanges, associations or twinning between cities and regions. It is, therefore, a question of closing the gap between development cooperation and ODA. The latter refers to transfer of funds originating in OECD countries, channelled bilaterally or multilaterally and, for decades, with very defined characteristics within the framework of the DAC. Differentiating between ODA and development cooperation (a broader concept) is important especially when, as shown, the global problems being addressed are not always related to or can be solved by financial transfers. In the case of DDC (or others like

South-South Cooperation) where the transfer of funds is not one of its key features, this distinction is clearly relevant.

Other approaches consider the participation of diverse agents, including non-official ones such as Non-Governmental Development Organisations (hereafter, NGDOs). In the case of the EU, for example, this type of cooperation has been contemplated since the IV Lomé Convention (1989-90) and, rather than considering it a new modality, it is understood as a complementary approach to the traditional one, emphasising the role of civil society and other agents.

In reality, it seems clear that the interest of these practices does not lie so much in who the financing body is (which could simply replicate traditional schemes with their funds), but rather in highlighting the differential approach that this type of cooperation can provide. In practice, these are activities that have been evolving, from origins based on twinning or collaboration between cities or regions, to progressively more institutionalised forms of relationships, ODA being just one example.

For this reason, and for the purpose of our study, a broad perspective is used, which includes activities carried out with this cooperation approach. Starting from the sub-state institutions and from the funds provided by them, an attempt is made to broaden the focus by giving attention to key agents such as NGDOs or to the types of relationships and cooperation modalities proposed. As shown later, it is sometimes difficult to move away from research focused on official funds, as it is (despite its limitations) the most accessible and comparable data.

## 2.2. The potential of decentralised development cooperation

The main potentialities traditionally recognized in decentralised development cooperation are outlined below:

1. **Multilevel approach:** the need for an approach that combines international, national, regional and local spheres is often highlighted as a way of responding to global challenges. Decentralised cooperation can be a valid tool in this sense.

2. **Multi-stakeholder and participatory approach:** within the idea of this cooperation is that of making the process more inclusive, generating meetings

between public and private institutions of all kinds. Added to this is the capacity to promote the participation of civil society, NGDOs, the migrant community, the education sector and other private sector groups.

3. **Fewer constraints:** although this is not relevant for all cases, the potential here is to seek the possibility of working with fewer diplomatic, political or geostrategic constraints, in comparison to traditional cooperation. This approach offers greater potential for advancement in the policy coherence for development, incorporating broader political visions.

4. **Horizontality:** this type of cooperation can lead to a more horizontal association and reflect the principal of reciprocity. This allows for greater progress towards changing the traditional donor-recipient vision, still very much present in development cooperation (Unceta et al., 2011, Labaien, 2014).

5. **Technical and human capacities:** the technical and human capacities present in the territory should be exploited. This is especially relevant because of the greater knowledge existing at this level on issues closest to its citizens and linked to local development strategies, such as issues related to urban planning and municipal management, or others related to decentralised powers. Likewise, the experience of cities and regions in dealing with issues such as education, transport or housing should be exploited (OECD, 2019).

6. **Decentralisation processes:** building on the previous point, sub-state entities could contribute by sharing with destination countries their experience of decentralisation processes; their procedures, mechanisms and problem solving (Martínez and Sanahuja, 2012).

7. **Global citizenship education[2]:** given its greater proximity to citizenship, and perhaps also because of the responsibilities and competencies that some sub-state administrations have in educational matters, this is an area in which this type of cooperation can play a leading role (Unceta et al., 2011).

2 As shown later, the DAC frames this type of action as a modality (H01: development awareness) and as a purpose code (99820: promotion of development awareness). Beyond the textual reference in these cases, we use the term *global citizenship education* generically to refer to these practices. It is a common denomination at the international level (as in the case of CONCORD, a confederation of European NGDOs), although these activities have different approaches and denominations.

Clearly, the list includes what are desirable characteristics, or possibilities, not always present in decentralised cooperation activities. One of the motivations for our study is precisely this question; whether the practice of DDC responds to the potentialities or how it could do so. A significant gap between discourse and practice is quite common, and often inevitable. In this regard, DDC often shows a discourse closely linked to the potential derived from its nature (absence of interests, horizontality...) but combined with a very vertical model, which replicates many of the elements of traditional cooperation.

## 2.3. The limitations of decentralised development cooperation

Along with the potentialities this type of cooperation offers, there are also some limitations and problems beyond those related to its scale or competencies. Although it is difficult to make general criticisms (without specifying the different models), some problems or concerns identified in different practices and documents are listed below:

1. **Possible fragmentation and lack of coordination:** this is not a problem exclusive to DDC, but coordination problems are identified as a potential concern, given the number of small-scale activities and the multiple stakeholders involved. The involvement of different institutions that share foreign policy responsibilities, and the differences in their objectives and lines of work, have been mentioned as a possible problem, for example, in Canada (Campbell and Hatcher, 2004).

2. **Channelling of funds:** although the casuistry is varied, the participation of multiple agents can give rise to both innovative proposals and unwanted effects. This sometimes manifests itself in the form of rigidity or bureaucracy, although this is certainly not a problem exclusive to this type of cooperation. In the case of grant applications, for example, these processes can be positive for incorporation of civil society entities, and improving the allocation and transparency of funds. However, they can also lead to dysfunctions, such as excessive competition to attract funds, which makes cooperation between agents difficult. Equally, they can lead to over-complex processes and, in some cases, even limit the space for other types of civil society organisations or the administration itself (Unceta et al., 2011; Martínez and Sanahuja, 2012).

3. **Monitoring and evaluation:** much is said of the difficulty in collecting sufficient and appropriate information on these practices, which hinders their

monitoring and evaluation, as well as any potential learning outcomes. As far as the traditional ODA system is concerned, these practices continue to be underestimated (OECD, 2019), and in many cases they are small initiatives that are not counted despite the fact that they can generate interesting processes at a local level. More than this, there are practices in which the transfer of funds is not as important as in other cases, which makes another type of follow-up necessary. However, there is not yet an alternative registration proposal which would allow the identification of good practices and thus offer the opportunity for these experiences to be replicated. Nevertheless, increasingly, there are more networks and associations that include this type of practice, from a broad perspective of collaboration (**UCLG: United Cities and Local Governments**, **Platforma: European coalition of towns and regions,** the **Observatory of decentralised cooperation**, etc.).

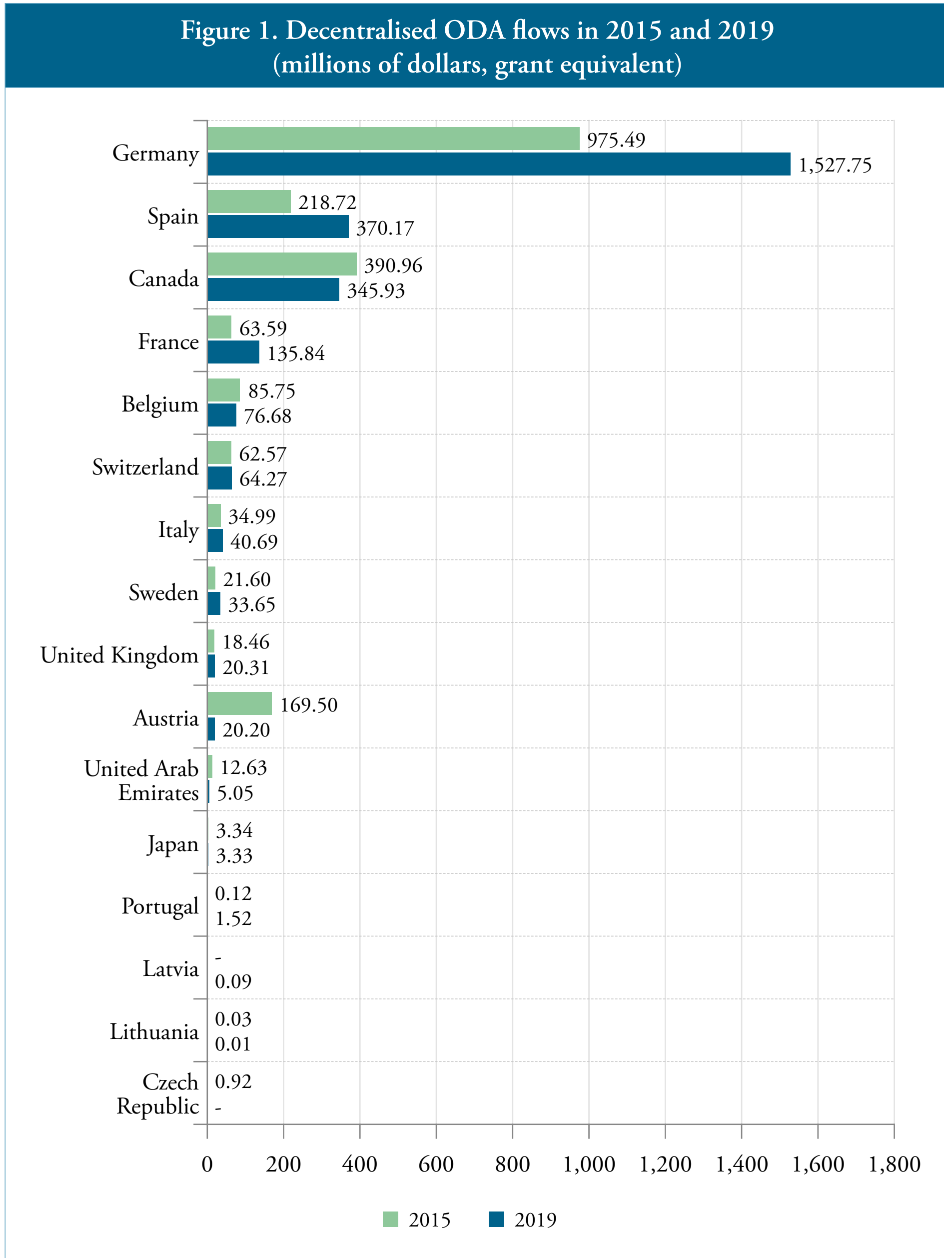
As in the case of potentialities, these limitations will occur in different ways, depending on the specific cases and practices. In some places, for example, coordination methods have been established, or appropriate transparency and monitoring of modalities has been developed, all of which reduce these problems. On other occasions, the actions involve a smaller number of agents, and this helps to simplify operations.

## 2.4. The current importance of decentralised development cooperation

While not a new phenomenon, DDC seems to be gaining some space and recognition within the framework of development cooperation activities. This is also translating into recognition in the sector and progressive institutionalisation and importance, particularly visible in the case of Spain.

The aforementioned context itself, with the 2030 Agenda and the need to rethink the international cooperation system, seems open to exploring the possibilities of these alternative practices.

A reflection of this growing importance is the recent interest stemming from academia and various institutions which have been promoting platforms and studies in relation to decentralised cooperation (Platforma, 2012; Fernández de Losada et al., 2013; OECD, 2018, 2019). Figure 1 shows the evolution of ODA funds.




Source: compiled by the authors based on the CRS-DAC database of the OECD (2022).

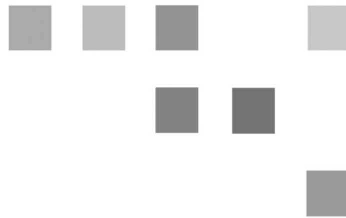
Aggregate indicators such as ODA show an upward trend in recent years. Figure 1 shows the countries that reported these practices and the ODA value for 2015 and

2019 (when it reached 2,645 million dollars), the net disbursements using the new metric *grant equivalent* [3].

In summary, in a first approximation we observe a certain tendency to increase funds (although this does not occur in all cases), together with a probable lack of reporting in various countries to the point of being non-existent in several cases.

3 With regard to accounting for ODA flows, there has recently been an improvement that especially affects reimbursable aid funds (concessional debt) measured in terms of equivalent donation (*grant equivalent*). In the case of DDC, the impact of this change is very limited, but nevertheless we follow this new metric. It should also be noted that, although not relevant for the analysis, the data include some countries that do not belong to DAC (for example, the United Arab Emirates).

# 3. Global decentralised cooperation: some notable features and debates



The key issues presented below, based on the bibliography analysed and the data collected from DAC, may serve to better understand the practices of this type of cooperation, and propose new debates or new lines of action.

## 3.1. Relevance of decentralised development cooperation

The debate around DDC, especially when external to its own stakeholders, has too often been specified in terms of its aggregation to the official cooperation system. In other words, it has focused on the added value that this cooperation provides to international cooperation processes, promoted mainly by central governments. It has also focused on the quantitative dimension, concerned with the ODA mobilised by local and regional governments.

Although both approaches are necessary, framing the debates on decentralised cooperation in these terms has prevented a broader assessment, one that is more realistic and appropriate to its own characteristics, and a true valuation of its contribution. The presence of this limitation has distorted the vision of what are, and what could be, the main contributions of DDC in response to global problems, and to the articulation of a framework of global coexistence that guarantees the sustainability of life for everyone on the planet.

A broader perspective is better for assessing the relevance of decentralised cooperation in a world that presents collective challenges of a transnational and interdependent nature which call for collective action. Thus, the emergence of DDC takes place in a context of a growing need for articulation between multilevel stakeholders whose shared, but differentiated, responsibility for global issues must lead local and regional governments and the whole of global society to move forward together. DDC is a tool that can be used to channel a large part of their responses to global problems.

The nature of DDC, moreover, allows the stakeholders involved to contribute from different backgrounds, making the cooperation more relevant and with the potential to provide a differential value that other approaches lack. We refer to the possibility of working from other more horizontal logics and of greater reciprocity compared to those typical of traditional North-South cooperation, promoted by central governments and multilateral organisations.

When talking about the relevance of DDC, the experience provided by local and regional stakeholders, with their greater links to the territory, merits attention in

some of the issues that constitute a key piece in international cooperation processes. These include local development, inter-institutional support and learning, support for civil society organisations or the management of public policies linked to the territory.

Recognition should also be given to the role of DDC in tackling the need to democratise a system of international cooperation whose nature and institutionality respond to a series of biases that concentrate power in global north countries and, moreover, from a state-centric perspective. DDC is called to play a role in promoting accessibility and democratic distribution of power in the international cooperation system, with the incorporation of diverse agents, with different perspectives and different ways of understanding and putting international cooperation into practice.

It is a cooperation that has traditionally expressed the existence of bonds of solidarity between societies and territories. This is invaluable in a context as critical as the current one, characterized by a systemic crisis (the latest manifestations of which have been the pandemic caused by COVID 19 and the effects of the war in Ukraine), and where signs of significant pressure towards securitarian and economic drift in international cooperation is likely to mark the agenda in the coming years.

## 3.2. Limited quantitative importance of decentralised development cooperation

As pointed out earlier, financial support offered by ODA should not be considered as central to analysis of DDC. First, its quantitative value is small in the context of global ODA. In addition, by its very nature, the interest of DDC seems to focus more on generating relationships, participation and exchanges, or favouring processes of change, which is often not directly reflected in the financial assistance given.

Nevertheless, given its trajectory, scope, and comparison possibilities, a review of ODA data available at a global level would be useful. By doing so, way we can give dimensions to the phenomenon, and study some general characteristics.

4 In order to facilitate access to the information mentioned in the text, in this case, and others, hyperlinks to the databases, portals and addresses cited are included, which are also listed after the bibliography. In all of these cases, the links were freely accessible and active in September 2022.

To analyse the recent evolution of decentralised ODA at an international level, we use the **Creditor Reporting System** (CRS) database[4] of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

This is the main source worldwide that enables comparison of different countries and their decentralised entities, since it uses homogeneous criteria for the registration and classification of ODA by initiatives[5]. To extract the decentralised ODA flows from the CRS database, we refer to the coding of regional and local institutions by DAC within each country (the detail of this coding can be seen in the Appendix).

Beyond the growth trend observed above (Figure 1), these funds account for a minimal part of ODA globally considered, representing 1.75% of total ODA and 2.43% of registered bilateral ODA registered by DAC in 2019[6]. If we take only the countries that report decentralised ODA, these percentages increase to 2.71% of the total and 3.87% of bilateral ODA (see Table 1).

By total amounts, Germany is clearly way ahead, representing around 58% of the total in 2019. As discussed below, these funds are basically made up of scholarships for foreigners going to study in Germany, and their imputed costs. Spain, Canada, France and Belgium follow Germany on the list and, all together, they represent 93% of the total funds of this type of ODA. Overall, the list includes 15 countries that reported this type of cooperation in 2019 (in total DAC has 30 members).

5 The CRS database differs from the aid flow database known as DAC1, which offers the official ODA figure for each country and its percentage of GDP. However, as Pérez (2018) points out, these differences between the CRS base and the DAC1 have been gradually reducing in recent years.

6 According to data from the OECD (DAC1), total ODA in 2019 was 151,499 million dollars, of which 108,752 million dollars (grant equivalent) was bilateral ODA, and the rest multilateral ODA.

| Table 1. ODA flows by donor countries (2019) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Decentralised ODA** (million US$ grant equivalent) | **Total ODA** (million US$ grant equivalent) | **Decentralised ODA/ Total ODA** (percentage) | **Bilateral ODA** (million US$ grant equivalent) | **Decentralised ODA/ Bilateral ODA** (percentage) |
| Germany | 1,527.75 | 24,197.70 | 6.31% | 18,581.10 | 8.22% |
| Spain | 370.17 | 2,943.50 | 12.58% | 1,037.09 | 35.69% |
| Canada | 345.93 | 4,725.24 | 7.32% | 3,230.35 | 10.71% |
| France | 135.84 | 12,211.36 | 1.11% | 7,421.27 | 1.83% |
| Belgium | 76.68 | 2,174.57 | 3.53% | 1,133.11 | 6.77% |
| Switzerland | 64.27 | 3,099.07 | 2.07% | 2,359.89 | 2.72% |
| Italy | 40.69 | 4,411.33 | 0.92% | 1,435.94 | 2.83% |
| Sweden | 33.65 | 5,205.24 | 0.65% | 3,468.90 | 0.97% |
| United Kingdom | 20.31 | 19,154.41 | 0.11% | 13,064.17 | 0.16% |
| Austria | 20.20 | 1,229.88 | 1.64% | 446.67 | 4.52% |
| United Arab Emirates | 5.05 | 2,240.01 | 0.23% | 2,128.36 | 0.24% |
| Japan | 3.33 | 15,587.68 | 0.02% | 11,793.64 | 0.03% |
| Portugal | 1.52 | 410.47 | 0.37% | 146.45 | 1.04% |
| Latvia | 0.09 | 34.36 | 0.27% | 4.46 | 2.06% |
| Lithuania | 0.01 | 67.67 | 0.01% | 12.01 | 0.06% |
| **Total** | **2,645.49** | **97,692.49** | **2.71%** | **68,408.24** | **3.87%** |

Source: compiled by the authors based on the CRS-DAC database of the OECD (2022).

Looking beyond the global amount, and given the difference in size of the countries and their populations, it is interesting to note the relative importance of decentralised ODA. Spain shows the most significant amount, reaching 12.58% of the total in 2019, and 35.69% of the total bilateral ODA. In descending order, Canada, Germany and Belgium are also notable for their relative share of this type of ODA.

## 3.3. Diversity of agents involved and lines of work

As already mentioned, one of the potentialities of DDC is its capacity to coordinate the activities of diverse agents through a multi-stakeholder and participatory approach. The cases studied below give an idea of this diversity.

For example, in Germany the main stakeholders are the federal states and the municipalities, which have a long tradition and their own approach when it comes to establishing cooperative relationships with agents from the global south (Fernández de Losada et al., 2013). In addition to public stakeholders, civil society organisations and foundations complete the wide range of German development cooperation agents, which include NGDOs (including two large organisations linked to the Catholic and Protestant churches) and political foundations (OECD, 2021). Furthermore, the role of universities is considerable, with responsibility for channelling 97% of the funds that are collected as ODA using DAC criteria.

In Spain, the autonomous communities take the lead as financing agents (although with notable differences between them). Also noteworthy are the contributions from councils or cities, or the more qualitative ones from universities. The NGDOs, however, are the main route for channelling funds, although the public administrations themselves, universities and other entities also participate in the channelling and execution of funds.

Belgium, with a highly decentralised government, is an example of a mixed support system for decentralised cooperation. On the one hand, it has a federal programme that supports this type of cooperation, depending on the government's priorities and strategy. On the other hand, it has regional programmes that are normally more flexible, which take advantage of the specificity of each territory, reflecting historical links with certain countries and specific issues (Fernández de Losada et al., 2013). As shown later, Belgium relies on a wide variety of agents to carry out these activities.

The international cooperation developed by territorial entities in Canada is designated by the expression "municipal cooperation on an international scale", with the Canadian Federation of Municipalities (Fédération Canadienne des Municipalités, FCM) being the main interlocutor in everything related to municipal cooperation. This Federation´s objective is to help the municipal governments of foreign countries strengthen their capacity to maintain and improve the quality of life of their citizens. Large cities, small towns and rural communities participate in the FCM, including 20 provincial and territorial associations of municipalities that represent more than 90% of the population[7]. However, the country´s vision of DDC goes beyond decentralised public administration, extending it to international solidarity organisations and associations. As indicated by Dali et al. (2019), DDC that is promoted from these local spaces aims to build cooperation from a logic of reciprocity.

7 Information taken from www.fcm.ca (Sept. 2022).

France´s approach is different in that it reflects the contributions to DDC between regions (14 in 2019), departments (56 in 2019), intercommunal and metropolitan groupings (110 in 2019) and city councils or municipalities (860), separating the latter into municipalities with more, or less, than 100,000 inhabitants. The number of territorial communities declaring these data has been increasing in recent years, especially between 2018 and 2019 (going from 470 to 1,040). NGOs have an important presence in these activities.

Table 2 shows the breakdown according to DAC data of the classification of the agents that channel decentralised ODA funds at a global level. It should be remembered that, as this is ODA data, private funds managed by NGDOs are not included here (in cases such as that of Spain, the entities of the main NGDO platform manage private funds for amounts similar to those of public funds, and only the latter are counted as ODA).

As Table 2 shows, about 95% of the funds are channelled through three main options: universities, NGOs (mainly from the donor country) and public institutions (also from the donor country).

Of the remaining funds, a small proportion is channelled through multilateral organisations (1.57%), a feature that differentiates this type of cooperation from traditional cooperation. Funds channelled through the private sector (0.13%) or Public-Private Partnerships (PPP, 0.08%) are very low, or not reported to the DAC system.

Finally, the amount of 93.61 million dollars in "Others" is striking, and reflects a problem of accounting or allocation, especially in the case of Spain (accounting for 85 million of the total 93.61 million dollars) which groups together diverse organisations such as civil society organisations, cooperation funds, institutions, etc.

| Table 2*. Global decentralised ODA by type of channelling institution (2019) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Channel ID | Type of institutions | Million US$ (grant equivalent) | Percentage of total (%) |
| **10000** | **Public sector institutions** | **469.58** | **17.75%** |
| 11000 | Donor government | 435.31 | 16.45% |
| 12000 | Recipient government | 32.43 | 1.23% |
| 13000 | Third country government (delegated cooperation) | 1.84 | 0.07% |
| **20000** | **Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and civil society** | **470.30** | **17.78%** |
| 21000 | International NGO | 19.04 | 0.72% |
| 22000 | Donor country-based NGO | 428.04 | 16.18% |
| 23000 | Developing country-based NGO | 23.21 | 0.88% |
| **30000** | **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and Networks** | **3.33** | **0.13%** |
| 31000 | Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) | 2.15 | 0.08% |
| 32000 | Networks | 0.97 | 0.04% |
| **40000** | **Multilateral organisations** | **41.55** | **1.57%** |
| 41000 | United Nations agency, fund or commission (UN) | 23.37 | 0.88% |
| 47000 | Other multilateral institution | 14.08 | 0.53% |
| **51000** | **University, college or other teaching institution, research institute or think-tank** | **1,563.77** | **59.11%** |
| **60000** | **Private sector institutions** | **3.35** | **0.13%** |
| **90000** | **Other** | **93.61** | **3.54%** |
| | **Total** | **2,645.49** | **100.00%** |

Source: compiled by the authors based on the CRS-DAC database of the OECD (2022).

* The rows in bold show the main groupings by type of agent; the amounts not highlighted in bold indicate some specific cases within these groups.

Universities aside, these are the main channelling agents in most cases:

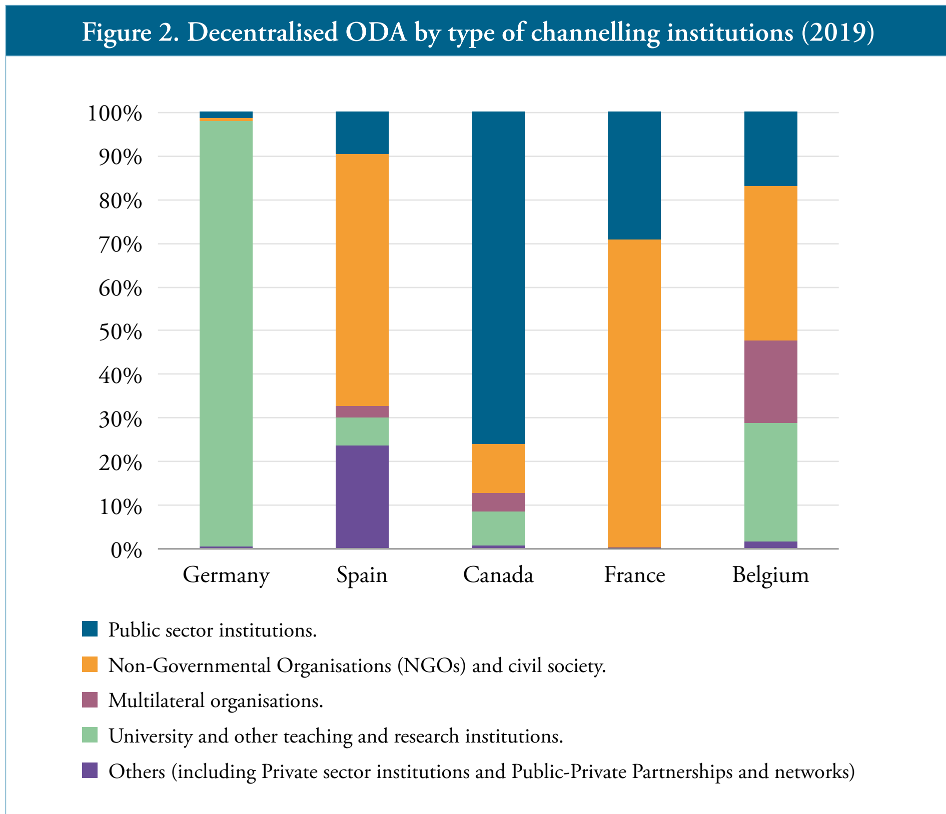
1) NGOs (17.78% of funds), with a clear predominance of NGOs from the donor country over international ones or those from the recipient country.

2) Public institutions (17.75% of the funds), mainly from the donor country, although different models can be seen. While in Germany or Canada this

involves governments and agencies at different levels of the donor country in its entirety, in Spain and Belgium the participation of institutions from partner countries reaches 17-18% of the funds channelled by public institutions. In France, the distribution is more equitable between French public entities and those of the partner country (53%-47%).

As can be seen from the data in Figure 2, each country shows a very different distribution model. For example, the importance of universities in channelling funds varies widely. Also, although globally the participation of public institutions and NGOs is very similar (approximately 470 million in both cases), in reality this is more an aggregation of diverse practices by country.

**Figure 2. Decentralised ODA by type of channelling institutions (2019)**




Source: compiled by the authors based on the CRS-DAC database of the OECD (2022).

As shown in Figure 2, in Canada the public sector channels 76% of the funds, while in France this accounts for 29%, in Belgium 17% and in Spain less than 10% (in

Germany channelling by the public sector is not even relevant compared to that of its universities).

NGOs are the main agent in Spain, France and Belgium, while they have little relevance in ODA data of the DAC for Canada and even less so for Germany.

Belgium is possibly the most interesting case for further scrutiny in terms of the variety of agents involved, since it presents a fairly balanced model of channelling between the public sector, universities, NGOs and multilateral organisations.

## 3.4. The modalities of decentralised development cooperation

The cooperation of municipalities and regions began, in many cases, through twinning, with many remaining active over a long period of time, some to a greater extent than others. Other cases show a long tradition of solidarity work by civil society or religious organisations, in some cases becoming institutionalised. Aspects such as those just mentioned, or networking and strategic alliances, where movements of cities or others may be included, show a wide variety of practices, each of which need to be studied case by case.

Given the diversity of local practices, it is difficult to consider them all together, since on many occasions there is no transfer of funds or their activities are not reported to systems such as ODA, the latter being poorly adapted to incorporation of these cases. Nevertheless, using global data from DAC, we identify modalities or modes of action.

Table 3 lists a wide variety of modalities contemplated by DAC. However, as we can see, ODA focuses on the costs attributed to students (E02), projects (C01) and costs related to refugees and asylum (H02, H03, H04, H05), together accounting for more than 90% of the total.

| Table 3*. Global decentralised ODA by type of modality (2019) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Code | Modalities | Million US$ (grant equivalent) | Percentage of total |
| **A** | **Budget support** | **2.24** | **0.09%** |
| **B** | **Core contributions and pooled programmes and funds** | **65.43** | **2.47%** |
| B01 | Core support to NGOs, other private bodies, PPPs and research institutes | 44.87 | 1.70% |
| **C** | **Project-type interventions** | **548.21** | **20.72%** |
| **D** | **Experts and other technical assistance** | **96.47** | **3.65%** |
| D01 | Donor country personnel | 60.49 | 2.29% |
| **E** | **Scholarships and student costs in donor countries** | **1,545.70** | **58.43%** |
| E02 | Imputed student costs | 1,508.99 | 57.04% |
| **G** | **Administrative costs not included elsewhere** | **38.91** | **1.47%** |
| **H** | **Other in-donor expenditures** | **348.54** | **13.17%** |
| H01 | Development awareness | 60.02 | 2.27% |
| H02-H03-H04-H05 | Costs related to refugees/asylum seekers in donor countries | 288.52 | 10.91% |
| | **Total** | **2,645.49** | **100.00%** |

Source: compiled by the authors based on the CRS-DAC database of the OECD (2022).

* The rows in bold include the main groupings by modality; the amounts not highlighted in bold indicate some specific cases within those groups.

Scholarships and student costs are the main modalities at international level (exceeding 1,545 million dollars). The costs attributed to students are particularly high, especially in the case of Germany (1,475.80 million dollars).

These costs, for some years, have represented the largest part of the contributions of the federated states (Länder) to ODA. This percentage increased over the first decade of the 21st century, from 86% of total German decentralised ODA in 2000 to 94% in 2009 (Maier, 2012). The data for 2019 show a consolidated trend in this respect.

The imputed costs are calculated by dividing the budget of the university by university degree course and by the number of students attending (usually the registrations are

free, so this is an implicit cost). Thus, student costs do not imply an added expense or a transfer, but an imputed expense, which the federated states compute as ODA[8] (Maier, 2012).

This modality, in short, is framed together with other concepts that institutions such as CONCORD (coordinator of European NGDOs) consider "inflated aid", similar to that of certain debt operations, or with the cost of refugees and asylum in the donor country (288.52 million dollars, 10.91% of the total). These are activities that may be socially interesting or necessary, but that do not fully fit with the usual concept of ODA.

Apart from these practices, the most common modality is the project (548 million, 20.72%). According to the DAC approach, this is a set of activities and results delimited in time, with previously defined objectives, geographic area and budget. On many occasions these projects are financed by public entities in competitive bidding processes, although they can also be granted directly, with agreements, or even executed by the public administrations themselves in this format. Although this approach does have certain advantages in terms of addressing specific objectives, normally verifiable, it can sometimes also suppose a very rigid framework for facing long-term problems.

Other, more flexible approaches, such as budgetary support, or contributions to entities not linked to projects, represent smaller amounts (just over 67 million

8 This practice has been criticized by NGOs, national and international experts, and the OECD itself, which in its report on German ODA in 2006 already indicated that this type of expenditure does not directly contribute to improving the educational systems of developing countries, and that they have a minimal impact on strengthening the capacities of the education sector in these countries (Maier, 2012). Along these lines, Rossiter and Hares (2022) warn that very little evidence has been generated on the impact of these activities and, although a lot is known about the benefits that international migration or improved education in countries of origin can bring, very little is known about the potential of scholarships as a development tool. These same authors highlight some problems identified in relation to this type of aid. Firstly, they highlight the fact that, taking global calculations into account, very large amounts are allocated to very few individuals, who often come from middle-income countries or from the wealthier backgrounds of their countries of origin, and that it is men who are more likely to receive this type of scholarship. Secondly, they point to the fact that this type of scholarship results in graduates migrating from their countries of origin (many times remaining in the host country) and, although educational migration can substantially benefit the country of origin through remittances, it also benefits the host country substantially if graduates remain there after their grant-supported studies.

jointly), but with significant importance in cases such as Belgium (the only one in which budgetary support is reported as a modality).

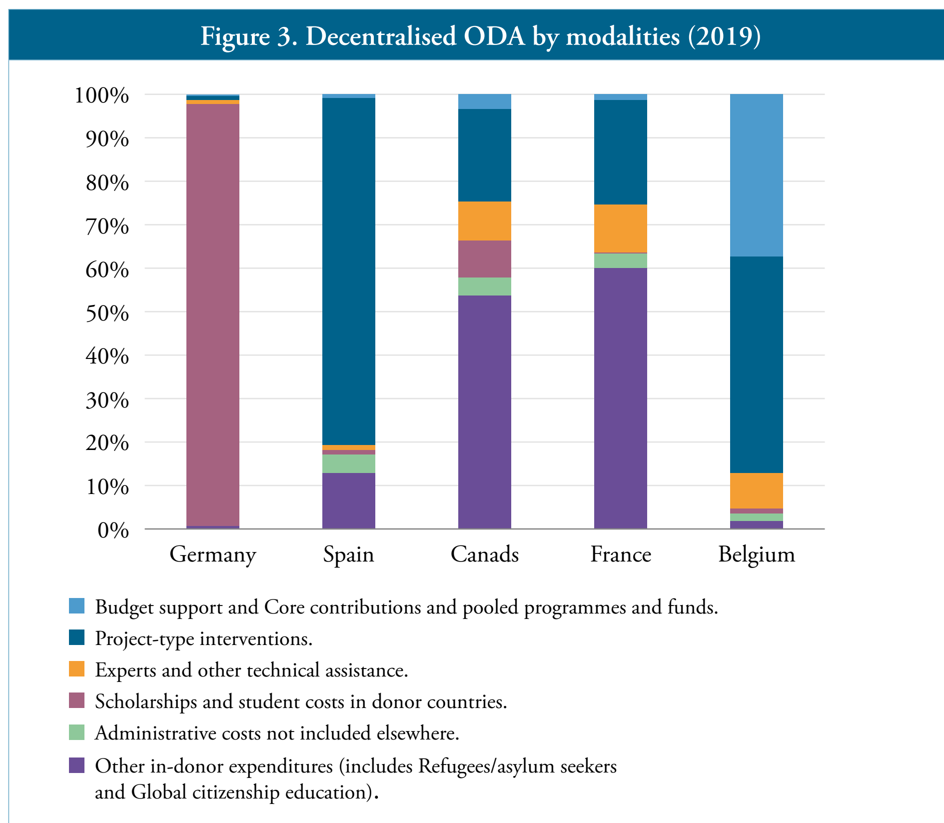
Technical assistance, attributing 96 million, is possibly an undervalued phenomenon due to the difficulty in accounting for it. This is a field in which DDC could make significant contributions, to take advantage of the technical and human capacities present in the territory in matters close to its area of competence (urban planning, water and sanitation...). Along these lines, practices in France or Belgium, which contribute comparatively significant amounts, are interesting examples.

Both in the modalities and in the sectors of action (two related issues), the activities of Global citizenship education are noteworthy. Despite its importance in DDC, its fit into DAC is somewhat problematic. In the case of modalities, it is classified in code H01, under "Other donations", and in 2019 accounted for 60 million dollars (2.27% of the total), although its weight is significantly greater in cases such as Spain.

As in the case of channelling modes, the joint profile actually hides very different models across countries in terms of the use of the modalities.

As seen in Figure 3, scholarships and student expenses represent the only significant modality in Germany according to DAC.

In France, the costs associated with refugees and asylum in French territory predominate (more than 58%), but they are combined with the use of projects (24%) and technical assistance (almost 11%, the most important case, relatively). The importance of this latter modality is explained on the basis that the French territorial communities have a financial mechanism (thanks to the Oudin-Santini law of 2005), which allows them to use up to 1% of the budget set aside for very specific sectors such as water and sanitation, energy, waste and mobility and transport for their bilateral cooperation actions.




Source: compiled by the authors based on the CRS-DAC database of the OECD (2022).

In Canada, modalities linked to refugees and asylum predominate (more than 53% of the total), and added to the imputed costs of students exceed 61% of decentralised ODA. Projects account for 21.45% of the funds, and technical assistance for 9%.

In the case of Spain, projects clearly dominate (almost 80%), followed by the "other donations" modality, which in this case does not focus on refugee issues (1.56%), but on the aforementioned H01 modality (Development awareness), accounting for 11.30%. This includes diverse activities implemented by NGDOs, public institutions and other agents.

Belgium´s decentralised ODA uses projects as the main modality, accounting for almost half of the total. It is worth noting the wide use of budgetary support as well as contributions to organisations, a modality less linked to specific activities and which represents more than 34% of the total. This is the case in the region of

Flanders in Belgium, where funds are mostly used (18 million out of 26) to support universities, but also various multilateral contributions (5.87 million) and others to Belgian NGDOs (2.32 million) are made. Among the remaining modalities, technical assistance is relatively noteworthy, in contrast to other countries, and represents almost 8% of the total funds. It is also the only country in the sample that uses the budgetary support modality (2.92% of its funds), albeit it is a relatively small amount. In this case, the "Other donations" section (1.88%) is made up of initiatives aimed at Global citizenship education.

## 3.5. Activity sectors of decentralised development cooperation

By its very nature, DDC shows certain characteristics which could serve to increase its potential in particular sectors, such as those related to municipal management and decentralised powers in areas of education, transport, housing, urban planning, etc. In general, decentralised cooperation is likely to be useful in processes of administrative decentralisation, which may cover various sectors. Actions within the framework of Global citizenship education also represent a potentially interesting sector, given the proximity of these practices to citizens, and the broad social participation that they can promote.

In order to contrast the use of these potential in practice, we offer some additional information below. As in previous cases, and recognising its limitations, it is useful to start from the DAC's vision of ODA in order to have a joint and comparable image of some key sectors.

As shown in Table 4, and taking into account the main groupings used by DAC to classify the initiatives by CRS purpose codes, the sector Social infrastructures and services is seen to exceed 1,887 million dollars (71.35% of the total). This amount is marked by activities in post-secondary education, using 57.76% of the total (within this, Germany accounts for 97%). The remaining categories, within Social infrastructures and services, add up to 13.59% of the total. Sectors traditionally associated with cooperation and basic services are included here, such as Government and civil society, Health, Non-post-secondary education, or Water and sanitation.

| Table 4*. Decentralised ODA by CRS-DAC purpose code (2019) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sectors | CRS-DAC purpose codes | Million US$ (grant equivalent) | Percentage of total |
| **Social infrastructures and services** | **100** | **1,887.66** | **71.35%** |
| Education (basic, secondary and unspecified level) | 111, 112, 113 | 46.87 | 1.77% |
| Post-secondary education | 114 | 1,528.01 | 57.76% |
| Health | 121, 122, 123 | 77.68 | 2.94% |
| Population policies/programmes and reproductive health | 130 | 21.29 | 0.80% |
| Water supply and sanitation | 140 | 43.76 | 1.65% |
| Government and civil society | 151, 152 | 145.28 | 5.49% |
| Other social infrastructure and services | 160 | 24.77 | 0.94% |
| **Economic infrastructures and services** | **200** | **15.74** | **0.59%** |
| Transport and storage, and communications | 210, 220 | 3.93 | 0.15% |
| Energy (generation, distribution and efficiency) | 231, 232, 234, 236 | 5.27 | 0.20% |
| Banking and financial services, Business and other services | 240, 250 | 6.54 | 0.25% |
| **Productive sectors** | **300: 311, 312, 313, 321, 322, 323, 331, 332** | **61.00** | **2.31%** |
| **Multisector** | **400: 410, 430** | **221.11** | **8.36%** |
| **Assistance in the form of supply of goods and General programme assistance** | **500: 510, 520, 530** | **3.77** | **0.14%** |
| **Humanitarian assistance** | **700: 720, 730, 740** | **38.40** | **1.45%** |
| **Administrative costs of donors** | **910** | **38.88** | **1.47%** |
| **Refugees in donor countries** | **930** | **288.52** | **10.91%** |
| **Unallocated/Unspecified** | **998** | **90.40** | **3.42%** |
| Promotion of development awareness (non-sector allocable) | 99820 | 62.57 | 2.37% |
| | **Total** | **2,645.49** | **100.00%** |

Source: compiled by the authors based on the CRS-DAC database of the OECD (2022).

* The rows in bold include the main groupings by modality; those not highlighted in bold indicate some specific cases within these groups.

Support for refugees in the donor country, with 288.52 million (10.91% of the total) represents another important destination, although not exempt from criticism.

Multi-sector initiatives, with 8.36%, also represent a significant amount, ahead of those for productive sectors.

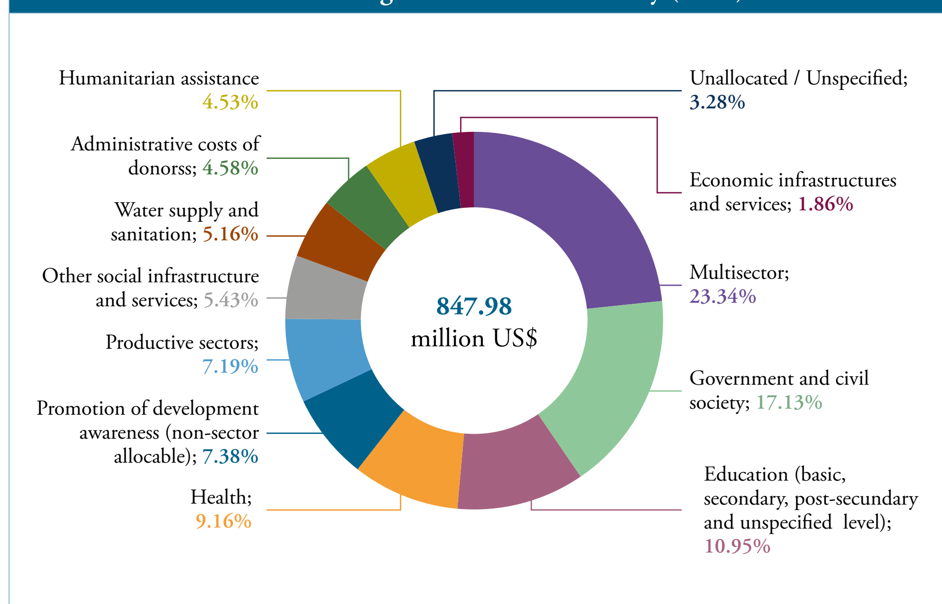
One of the characteristics of DDC is its work with citizens, something which does not fit easily within the framework of DAC. These activities appear partly as a modality within "Other in-donor expenditures", and more fully in the sector "Unallocated/unspecified". Specifically, they are given the code 99820 (Promotion of development awareness), which includes mainly activities carried out with the H01 development awareness modality already mentioned, but also others with modalities classified as projects (C01) or, to a lesser extent, technical assistance or general contributions. In total they represent 62.57 million (2.37% of the total).

Lastly, there is a low presence of humanitarian action (1.45%) in contrast to global ODA trends (14% in DAC countries in 2019). This is an area in which decentralised cooperation appears to lack the appropriate tools, although its potential contribution in this field is not exempt from debate.

Excluding the costs imputed to students, which are accounted for in the Post-secondary Education sector, and aid to refugees in the donor country, we are left with an indicative figure of the distribution of funds in the remaining sectors (Figure 4).

Figure 4 shows a more recognizable pattern for this type of activity, with very varied sectors, including "Multisector", but also those related to Government and civil society, Education, Health (including Population and reproductive health), Productive sectors, Other social infrastructure and services, and Water and sanitation.

**Figure 4. Decentralised ODA flows by sector, excluding costs imputed to students and aid to refugees in the donor country (2019)**




Source: compiled by the authors based on the CRS-DAC database of the OECD (2022).

Considering each country and the overall picture (thus including student and refugee issues), wide differences can be seen. In Germany, for example, the issue of imputed student costs means the education sector accounts for more than 97% of the funds, leaving little room for other considerations.

In Canada, Aid to refugees in the donor country predominates (53.35%), followed by flows with multi-sector destinations (20.70%) which include, among other things, student costs and scholarships, classified as "Multisector: education and training". In the Social infrastructures and services sector (13.61%), Government and civil society initiatives accounts for 14.72 million (4.26% of the total) and Health initiatives 13.88 million ( 4% of the total, rising to 5.67% when adding Population policies and reproductive health). As in other cases, there is hardly any attention given to Humanitarian action (0.02%), and the work reflected in Global citizenship education is also minimal (some isolated activities that add up to 0.34% of the total).

In Spain, Social infrastructures and services predominate (43.80% of the funds), which include activities related to Government and civil society, Education, Health

or Water, in that order. The elevated presence of the "Multisector" (24.39% of the total) also seems to indicate the broad nature of this sector, and reflects the difficulty of classifying so many projects in a single sector. "Promotion of development awareness" shows itself to be a very representative subsector, which in the case of Spain represents 11.97%. Likewise, and despite having a smaller representation (6.22%), Humanitarian aid has a relevant presence, greater than that seen in decentralised ODA from other countries.

In France, as reflected in its modalities, Aid to refugees in the donor country predominates (58%), followed by flows destined for Social infrastructures and services (with 22%), which include those directed to Water supply and sanitation (11.5% of total flows). Mention has already been made of the legal framework that the Oudin Santini law of 2005 offered for the participation of territorial communities in specific sectors such as water and sanitation, energy, or waste. In the public sanitation service of the Paris ring road or the Ile de France Water Union, for example, actions in these specific sectors have had an unbalanced evolution since 2006, with significant increases in Water and sanitation, or Energy, and less so in waste. It is worth noting that the communities distribute their funds differently depending on the sector. Thus, 80% of the funds aimed at the refugee population are processed through French Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), while humanitarian aid is managed by local governments and French CSOs and CSOs from partner countries. Among the funds earmarked for Global citizenship education in France, as well as for project-type interventions abroad, 75% are developed by French CSOs.

The case of Belgium is interesting due to its focus. Funds are mainly allocated to Social infrastructures and services, in particular the Health sector (with 27% of the funds), followed by the Multisector (with 25.7%) and the Productive sectors, especially Agriculture (11.5% of funds). This is one of the few cases where we find some dominant sectors. Among the funds without an assigned sector are activities related to Global citizenship education, totalling 1.44 million (1.88% of the total).

## 3.6. The geographical orientation of decentralised development cooperation based on the distribution of funds

The geographical aspect has traditionally been seen as one of the problems of DDC, which is usually accused of a high degree of dispersion.

In reality, it is not clear whether this cooperation is more disperse than the traditional one, or whether this is even an obstacle. In many cases, long-term relationships are maintained, as well as locations over time, and also the planning of the decentralised financing agents and the NGOs themselves tend to work at maintaining continuity in these actions.

While the usual approach to ODA and the accounting of it is not particularly useful for analysing the geographical aspect, it can provide some interesting information regarding certain countries.

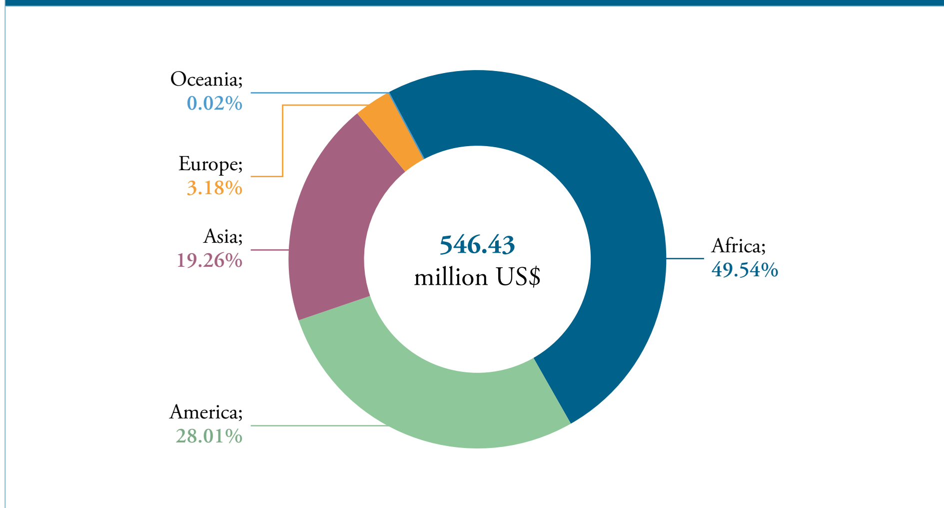
In the first place, it should be noted that most of the decentralised ODA funds collected by DAC do not have an external destination, but are executed in the donor country, within what Kania (2020) classifies as forms of decentralised domestic cooperation, where the financing agents target their own citizens, or those of the partner countries, but with expenses in their own territory (scholarships, etc.). Thus, in 2019, 73% of the funds were linked to these issues: students from low- and middle-income countries at universities in donor countries; refugees in the donor country; Global citizenship education initiatives; and administrative costs (Table 3). In short, slightly less than 27% of the funds actually involved a transfer to low- and middle-income countries in the year studied[9]. Even considering the distorting effect of the case of Germany, this proportion is striking, which seems to reinforce the idea that the ODA accounting system itself, and concept, do not respond to the needs and logic of this type of cooperation.

As for the destinations in detail, they are also marked by student costs, which have been allocated as ODA. The DAC data record the student´s country of origin as the destination of the funds, and therefore Asia is the main destination, with China and India as the main recipients (they together account for 17.63% of the total global decentralised ODA funds).

In order to carry out a more in-depth analysis, we exclude the costs attributed to students, as well as those associated with refugees in the donor country and those regional or not geographically specified funds. This leaves us with the study of the destination of slightly less than 21 % of total funds (Figure 5).

9 Within this 27% is included the item of Expert personnel and other technical assistance which, aside from its impact and value, is largely made up of payments to personnel from the donor country, which could lower the number of transfers even more.

Figure 5. Decentralised ODA by continent, excluding costs imputed to students, refugees, and geographically unallocated funds (2019)

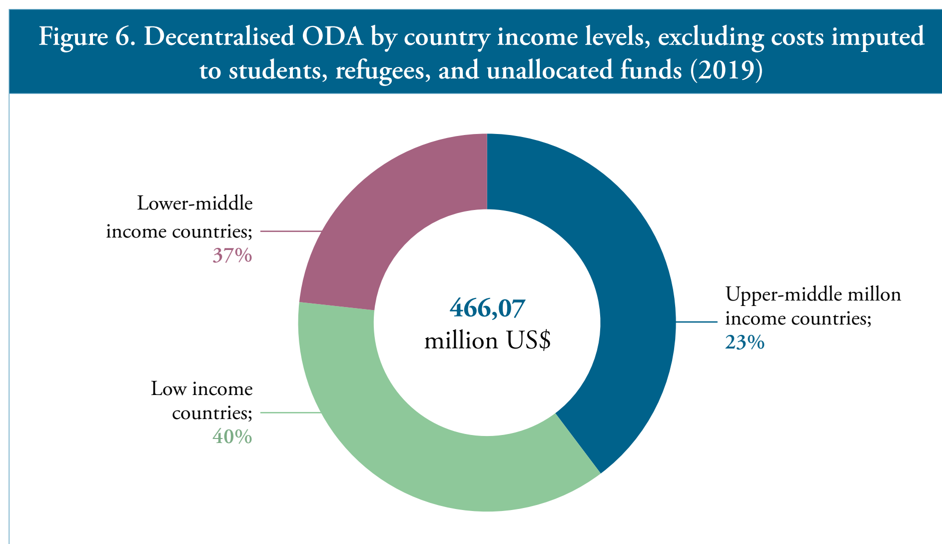



Source: compiled by the authors based on the CRS-DAC database of the OECD (2022).

As can be seen, the destination of the funds for which information is available is mainly Africa (almost 80% corresponding to Sub-Saharan Africa), followed by America (distributed in a similar way between South America and Central America and the Caribbean) and Asia. Europe and a specific amount to Oceania are residual destinations.

If we look at the destinations by income levels, and once the funds destined for students and refugees are separated, as well as those not assigned or without information, we find a distribution where the funds go first to low-income countries, followed by medium-low and finally medium-high income. In any case, these data are conditioned by the large proportion of funds that cannot be located according to the income of the countries of destination.

**Figure 6. Decentralised ODA by country income levels, excluding costs imputed to students, refugees, and unallocated funds (2019)**




Source: compiled by the authors based on the CRS-DAC database of the OECD (2022).

If we look at the geographical distribution for the countries in the sample, we first see that, by ruling out ODA linked to the imputed costs of students, refugees and the unspecified, the case of Germany becomes insignificant (it would hardly account for 1.65% of the total).

In the remaining cases (Belgium, Spain, France, Canada) the high proportion of funds that cannot be located geographically is significant. This is between 42-43% of the total funds in Belgium and Spain, 60% in France, and more than 73% in Canada, as a consequence of the predominance of refugee/asylum work in the latter two cases. Given these percentages, the way this information is recorded needs to be improved, as well as the logic behind how this is measured, an aspect which we will return to later.

In the proportion of funds that can be located geographically, the main destinations are related to foreign and historical connections between countries. This is the case, for example, with Spain and Latin American countries along with others such as Morocco or Palestine, although a significant proportion of funds also go to sub-Saharan Africa. France and Belgium predominately send funds to Sub-Saharan Africa (21% and 45% of the total respectively), in line with their specific priorities. In the case of Canada, Africa is also the main destination (14.43%, which is high given the high percentage of funds with no specified destination). As an indicator of the degree of dispersion of the funds, the first 10 recipient countries show high representation

in funding from Belgium or Spain, where they attract more than 39% and 32% of the funds respectively. In the case of France the percentage drops to 20%, and is less than 6% for Canada (note that these percentages have been calculated on the total funds, which include a significant regional or unspecified part).

## 3.7. Coordination in decentralised development cooperation

A keenness to achieve a certain degree of coordination is common in decentralised cooperation. This issue is especially important in a context such as the current one, where global challenges require a multi-stakeholder and multi-level approach. To move towards complementarity, the development of a practice is needed that takes into account other levels of the administration, as well as other entities that may have common activities in different locations or sectors.

The OECD's DAC Peer Reviews put forward recommendations along these lines for the countries in our study. In the case of Canada, in 2003, a special annex on "coherence" was included, highlighting the creation of an Association for International Cooperation to improve coordination between the 44 departments and agencies responsible for Canadian cooperation (OECD, 2003). Also the last peer review for Germany (OECD, 2021) indicated that there is significant room for improvement in coordination among German cooperation stakeholders (CSOs, federated states, municipalities, federal government), which would lead to better use of experience and partnerships and an improvement in practices. In short, coordination is an already localised issue, the lack of which can lead to various problems. It must therefore be addressed, as mentioned in the case of Belgium (Waeterloos and Renard, 2013).

In addressing these issues, the modes of coordination being adopted in the cases under study are multiple, with these initiatives being at different stages of development, encompassing institutional agents as well as civil society.

At times, coordinating bodies include different levels of government in an attempt to avoid overlap and with a view to optimising specific powers. This is the case for the Interterritorial Commission for Development Cooperation (Comisión Interterritorial de Cooperación al Desarrollo) in Spain, the Development Cooperation Committee of the German government and the federated states (Bund-Länder-Ausschuss Entwicklungszusammenarbeit), or the National Commission for Decentralised Cooperation (Commission Nationale de la Coopération Décentralisée) in France.

On a regular basis, and with different degrees of formalisation, we find bodies from entities of a similar level which share their orientations, learning and data for the practice of these activities, having specific areas of international cooperation. This includes, for example, the German Association of Cities (Deutscher Städtetag), the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP), the Association of Flemish cities and Municipalities (VVSG), or the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. In France, in addition to the Association of Regions, the Assembly of Departments, or the Association of Municipalities, is the United Cities of France (CUF), created in 1975, which functions as a multilevel federation of local authorities, with the participation of regions, departments, almost all large cities and many medium and small cities, in addition to other inter-municipal structures. Its work includes coordinating, promoting, advising and helping in the management of the actions of territorial entities in the field of Foreign Action, including decentralised cooperation within it.

Along the same lines, there are already institutionalised practices such as the conference for Autonomous Communities and Cooperation for Development in Spain (by 2022 there will already have been 15 editions), which brings together the main autonomous communities, and addresses issues such as the definition of objectives and DDC practices, promotion of collaborations and initiatives, and reflects on key issues for the sector. We also find forums such as the German government and federated states programme (Bund-Länder-Programm, known by its acronym in German, BLP), which offers its participants specific training on strategic issues of German cooperation, and promotes networking and knowledge sharing. The Service Agency for Communities in One World (**Servicestelle Kommunen in der einen Welt**) is also a tool created by the German government to promote international cooperation activities and local development, and has been advising municipalities since 2001. It offers a platform for dialogue between municipalities in Germany and global south countries, allowing the stakeholders to exchange experiences and jointly develop local solutions to global problems[10].

Another example of these technical support activities is found in the aforementioned Association of Flemish cities and Municipalities (VVSG), through training, conferences, meetings, etc. Every year, the VVSG organises a "planning week" in order to align the priorities of donors and beneficiaries and define collaborations

10 Some of its work topics are the strengthening of alliances with municipalities of global south countries, migration and development, fair trade, as well as good public purchasing practices.

with the priority countries for Belgian cooperation. In this event, representatives of both Flemish organisations and host countries meet (OECD, 2018). The Federation of Canadian Municipalities also carries out support tasks and services for municipal employees within the framework of international cooperation and its programmes. A prominent organisation in France is the Association of Professionals for International Relations and Decentralised Cooperation (ARRICOD), which includes people in charge of development cooperation in the regions, departments and municipalities and constitutes a forum for research, reflection and implementation of the various experiences of cooperation at a regional and local level in France.

The fundamental role of civil society in these decentralised cooperation practices is clear. The cases studied include coordinators or groups of Development NGOs, with a role of advocacy, coordination and promotion of these practices.

The Canadian Council for International Cooperation, created in 1968, and since 2020 known as Cooperation Canada is among these. The German Association of Non-Governmental Organisations in the field of International Development Cooperation (known by its German acronym **VENRO**), founded in 1995, currently consists of 140 organisations. In Spain, the platform **Coordinadora de Organizaciones para el Desarrollo** brings together a large number of NGDOs and regional level coordinators. In France, **Coordination SUD**, created in 1994, is the national association that brings together more than 180 French NGDOs that work in the field of international solidarity, and in Belgium we find several groups of NGOs (**ACODEV**, **NGO federatie**, **CNCD-11.11.11**).

An interesting role which serves as a meeting point between local public entities and civil society is that of Cooperation Councils, such as those that exist in Spain. Although coordination is not their main mission, these bodies, normally consultative, help to promote dialogue and coordination between the different agents of DDC.

In addition to all these initiatives at a national level, there are examples of cases that lead to coordination and collaboration at an international level. These are associations and networks that have not yet been exploited sufficiently, but that could lead to new visions and joint practices. In the case of civil society, **CONCORD** (European Confederation of NGOs for development and humanitarian aid, which brings together state associations) is one such initiative. Institutionally, some of the associations and organisations already mentioned have broad approaches closely linked to cooperation between regions and cities, such as **UCLG: United Cities and Local Governments**, **Platforma: European coalition of towns and regions** or the **Observatory for Decentralised Cooperation**.

## 3.8. Accountability and transparency in decentralised development cooperation

Good examples and practices of accountability and transparency have been found in the countries studied, which are also seen to be evolving positively over time.

Along with the websites or portals which provide aggregated and disaggregated information, some cases also present annual reports which serve as a balance and give a general perspective. This information is sometimes included along with that of the entire national development cooperation, and in others specifically for decentralised cooperation. Some practices of interest are mentioned below.

### Institutional information on decentralised cooperation in the framework of state cooperation

For some years now, the Spanish cooperation information system (**info@od**) has been presenting very detailed information on the initiatives being financed. Although the information takes time to be released (as of mid-2022, the most recent was 2019), an Excel or upload is available with all the data referring to Spanish cooperation projects, including decentralised ODA projects, all easily identifiable. In an already standardised manner, the annual reports on Spanish cooperation also provides disaggregated information on these activities.

In Germany, the website **Facts and figures on German development cooperation** gives access to facts and documents on development cooperation according to the IATI (International Aid Transparency Initiative) standard. Among the different data it offers breakdowns and graphs of the contributions of the federated states (länder) to ODA. Likewise, the **Federal Statistical Office** has a section on its portal related to development cooperation, where data in numbers on German cooperation, including decentralised cooperation, can also be accessed.

Similarly, **Belgium** and **Canada** each have a website and search engine for projects of some interest, although the question of decentralised cooperation is not highlighted.

In France, the website of the **Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs** presents initiatives in the field of international cooperation in different sections, among which is one referring to the foreign action of territorial entities which gives access to specific information, such as the Atlas of decentralised cooperation. This is discussed further in the next section.

## Specific institutional information on decentralised cooperation

In the countries studied, we find initiatives that provide information specifically on decentralised cooperation at different levels.

In Germany the portal for **German Federal States in development policy** presents the goals and activities of the development policy of the federal states. The website of the Programme of the German Government and the Federated States (BLP) contains an **interactive map** in which a search can be done for cooperation projects according to various criteria, such as which German federal state is promoting it, the country/region in which it is implemented, the theme, etc.

In France, the **Atlas of decentralised cooperation** is a useful tool, as it allows the identification of projects and other practices of more than 4,800 French sub-national entities, including a search engine with various criteria. In addition, since 2016, an annual report has been published (*L'Aide publique au développement des collectivités territoriales françaises*) which compiles the results of public development aid carried out by the regions, departments, municipalities and inter-communal groups throughout the current year.

In Spain, the **Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces** website makes it possible to locate the main data and actions of these entities, providing abundant institutional information. Although not all entities dump their data on this platform, it is a widely used reference.

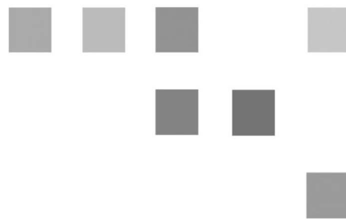
Apart from decentralised information with a joint vision at state level, the institutions themselves often present information regarding their activities on portals and their own websites, such as the various municipalities and federated states in Germany, or **support programmes for foreign activities in Flanders**. In Spain it is common for institutions to provide information on cooperation policies on their websites. In some cases (**Basque Country**, **Andalucía**) there are portals that list details of activities and allow a search and analysis of the database.

## Other analyses, accountability and transparency initiatives

It is clear that decentralised cooperation brings together diverse practices, with a large number of agents involved. For this reason, apart from official or institutional information, it is common to find analyses and reports from academics or from civil society itself.

Given the important role of NGDOs in these practices, the reports and studies promoted by this sector are particularly relevant, such as the Spanish annual report of the Association of NGDO (with extensive information on activities, budgets, etc.) or that produced by Intermon-Oxfam, which in recent years has contained a specific section on this type of cooperation. An interesting practice can be seen in the case of Germany, where the website of the **Ministry of economic cooperation and development** offers data provided by NGOs on their own funds, this information being processed by the Federal Statistical Office.

# 4. Conclusions and future lines of research



## The relevance and nature of decentralised development cooperation

Overall, decentralised development cooperation, in the countries studied, is an established and active reality. It is a practice with great potential supported by the experience of regional and local stakeholders. It deals with key themes and competencies and shows itself capable of channelling solidarity links between societies and territories.

Decentralised cooperation is also relevant for broadening the limits and scope of the international cooperation system. These practices can help to progressively democratise it, incorporating new agents and contributing to setting an agenda that is less determined by geostrategic or securitarian logics.

This cooperation does not yet have an agreed definition or delimitation; its main potential is not quantitative, but is expressed in the form of more horizontal relationships and logic, with a key role for civil society. As such, it is a cooperation that is still looking for the best way to demonstrate its potential.

## The metrics and monitoring of decentralised cooperation from the perspective of ODA

As shown, the way in which decentralised cooperation is usually "measured" often starts from Official Development Assistance. The review of ODA data from DAC, at first sight, shows the quantitative importance of this cooperation to be rather modest.

However, this system, focused on transfers and with a marked North-South character, is not really appropriate for understanding and measuring the phenomenon of decentralised cooperation (this is also seen in other practices, such as South-South Cooperation). Thus, while the use of these data has allowed us to carry out monitoring and comparison exercises of decentralised cooperation, it has had some negative implications too.

On the one hand, we observe cases, such as Spain, in which ODA data (with some limitations) are a good reflection of decentralised cooperation activities. However, especially in cases such as Germany, Canada or France, the imputation of student costs, and tasks related to refugees, completely distorts the global interpretation of the data. Thus, the measurement and study of decentralised cooperation through ODA

can project a profile which has nothing to do with the characteristics and concerns of local and regional governments in relation to their international cooperation and solidarity policies.

On the other hand, we are also witnessing a problem related to the under-dimension of a phenomenon of a qualitative nature, in which many of its main expressions (technical cooperation, political dialogue, territorial articulation, mutual learning, etc.) cannot be evaluated from data on the transfer of financial resources involved, since these actions do not reflect the true value of the exchange. Added to this are the activities carried out within this framework arising from unofficial contributions (such as private funds from NGDOs, local contributions, etc.). None of this is reflected when we analyse the practice of decentralised cooperation through ODA flows.

Clearly, financing is important, but the value of decentralised development cooperation cannot be reduced simply to funds, since this implies an underestimation of its role. Although DAC information allows to standardise and collect valuable budgetary data and classifications of interest, various aspects of it require a major review to be useful in analysing decentralised cooperation.

Thus, in order to give decentralised cooperation the weight it deserves, and take advantage of its potential contribution to the transformation and democratisation of the international cooperation system, the current approach excessively focused on ODA would gradually need to change. We are therefore faced with the task of articulating a monitoring or information system more appropriate to the nature of this cooperation; in this regard, all the reflection of South-South Cooperation could be very useful.

## The agents, practices and destinations observed

The agents behind cooperation processes are diverse. These include the government administration itself (at its different sub-state levels), civil society organisations (mainly NGDOs) and universities. In contrast, international organisations, as well as that of the private productive sector, have very little presence.

However, there are marked differences between countries, so it would be interesting to explore the possibilities of incorporating agents, based on experiences in various locations. Of special interest may be the greater incorporation and visibility of

institutions and NGDOs from global south countries, as agents that carry out the main activities there but, in many cases, do not receive the appropriate recognition.

Many of the decentralised cooperation modalities and practices have their origin in twinning relationships, which maintain different degrees of activity. An origin in civil society or religious organisations, which is becoming institutionalised, is also common. These practices, together with networking and strategic alliances, are difficult to group and sometimes to measure, because they include qualitative elements, or knowledge exchange, which are not easily quantifiable. Nevertheless, these good practices could be replicated.

Leaving aside some questionable practices, such as the imputed costs of students or those linked to refugees, the most frequent approach is to work through projects, with a previously established plan and budget. Despite being an appropriate practice in many cases, other more flexible possibilities seem to have been little explored, such as budgetary support (which is used in Belgium, for example) or the potential of technical assistance. Some practices, such as that of French municipalities in the case of water, could be studied to consider their potential.

Sectors of action, as well as the countries with which they work, depend on the experiences in each case, and on previous relations between the countries in question. In general, there is a lack of a clear orientation in these aspects, although there are good examples of practices, such as the case of Belgium, which focuses on health or certain productive sectors, and in a limited number of countries, mainly African.

One of the differential characteristics of decentralised development cooperation is its commitment to work in Global citizenship education. DAC data show a very small percentage in this regard, yet large differences are observed between countries, with Spain being the most prominent. It should be noted that this work is directly linked to NGDOs, and that the activities carried out by them are more difficult to measure, since together with the public funds they channel (which appear as ODA), they also use private resources (mainly from citizens) whose follow-up is more complicated.

Consequently, it seems necessary to advance in the relationship mechanisms is crucial to measure the cooperation between NGDOs and sub-state entities, in aspects ranging from types of financing to facilitating the collection of data or evaluation, sustaining long-term associations. In this respect, in all cases there are groups of NGDOs which form broad networks, but the relationship with public administrations takes different forms, and at times is poorly institutionalised. In Germany, however, the ministry website collects data on the activities of NGDOs,

combined with other official sources, a good practice that merits further scrutiny.

Coordination efforts at the state level are frequent in the cases studied, normally carried out separately between civil society and the institutional side, with some interrelationships depending on the case. Accountability efforts are also frequent, with portals increasingly reporting on these activities. However, from a broad point of view, it seems that the potential of some platforms, such as those related to cities or regions (UCLG, Platforma), to share practices or propose ways of measuring and expanding these practices in a cooperative way, are not sufficiently exploited.

## Limitations, future lines of study and progress

The study selected 5 countries as representative cases, but this could undoubtedly be extended to others (for example, Italy and Switzerland) with different backgrounds and practices.

A repeated issue throughout the study, which has been a key difficulty, is the lack of correspondence between the ODA system of DAC and decentralised cooperation practices. Although in cases such as Spain (possibly the most relevant in the sample, due to its size and institutionalisation) good use is made of this source, the reality is that its use for studying internationally decentralised cooperation is very complicated and gives less than satisfactory answers. With a view to future studies, more in-depth information gathered through techniques such as interviews or case studies would be necessary and, as a long-term objective, it would be worth devoting more effort to proposing standardised reporting and measurement methods that include modalities linked to relationships, technical exchanges, networks and other practices not measurable in financial reporting.

Overall, this is a sector with practices that still have room for improvement, and where the potential is still untapped. Greater knowledge of practices in other environments, or the exchange of good practices at different levels (legal practices, modalities used, agents involved, etc.) would be a good place to start for future advancements.

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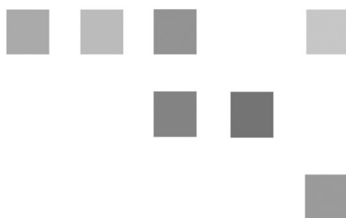

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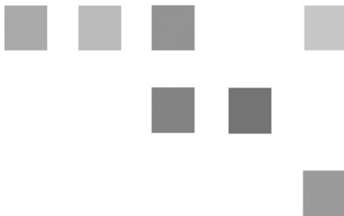
# 6. Appendix. Agents and codes used by the DAC to report on decentralised ODA



| Country | Agent | Code |
|---|---|---|
| Austria | Provincial governments, local communities | 6 |
| Belgium | Provinces/municipalities | 60 |
| Belgium | Flanders Official Regional Ministries | 70 |
| Belgium | Walloon Official Regional Ministries | 80 |
| Belgium | Brussels Official Regional Ministries | 91 |
| Belgium | German-speaking Official Regional Ministries | 94 |
| Canada | International Development Research Centre | 2 |
| Canada | Provincial Governments and municipalities | 9 |
| Czech Republic | Universities | 13 |
| Czech Republic | Regional Governments and Municipalities | 14 |
| France | Coop Decentralised | 8 |
| Germany | Federal States and Local Governments | 12 |
| Germany | Federal Institutions | 14 |
| Germany | Federal State of Schleswig-Holstein | 80 |
| Germany | City State of Hamburg | 81 |
| Germany | Federal State of Lower-Saxony | 82 |
| Germany | City State of Bremen | 83 |
| Germany | Federal State of North Rhine-Westphalia | 84 |
| Germany | Federal State of Hesse | 85 |
| Germany | Federal State of Rhineland-Palatinate | 86 |
| Germany | Federal State of Baden-Wurttemberg | 87 |
| Germany | Federal State of Bavaria | 88 |
| Germany | Federal State of Saarland | 89 |
| Germany | City State of Berlin | 90 |
| Germany | Federal State of Brandenburg | 91 |
| Germany | Federal State of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania | 92 |
| Germany | Federal State of Saxony-Anhalt | 93 |
| Germany | Federal State of Saxony | 94 |
| Germany | Federal State of Thuringia | 95 |
| Greece | Municipalities | 15 |
| Italy | Local administration | 8 |
| Italy | Public universities, research institutes and Italian red cross | 11 |
| Japan | Prefectures | 14 |
| Japan | Ordinance-designed Cities | 15 |

| Country | Agent | Code |
|---|---|---|
| Latvia | Local and regional governments | 3 |
| Lithuania | Local Authorities | 30 |
| Portugal | Municipalities | 3 |
| Slovak Republic | Local and Regional governments | 30 |
| Spain | Autonomous Governments | 15 |
| Spain | Municipalities | 16 |
| Spain | Public Universities | 20 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de Andalucía | 30 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de Aragón | 31 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma del Principado de Asturias | 32 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de las Illes Balears | 33 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de Canarias | 34 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de Cantabria | 35 |
| Spain | Comunidad de Castilla y León | 36 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de Castilla-La Mancha | 37 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de Cataluña | 38 |
| Spain | Comunidad Valenciana | 39 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de Extremadura | 40 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de Galicia | 41 |
| Spain | Comunidad de Madrid | 42 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de la Región de Murcia | 43 |
| Spain | Comunidad Foral de Navarra | 44 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco o de Euskadi | 45 |
| Spain | Comunidad Autónoma de La Rioja | 46 |
| Spain | Ciudad de Ceuta | 47 |
| Spain | Ciudad de Melilla | 48 |
| Sweden | Folke Bernadotte Academy | 20 |
| Switzerland | Cantons and Municipalities | 11 |
| United Arab Emirates | International Humanitarian City | 7 |
| United Arab Emirates | Dubai Cares | 21 |
| United Arab Emirates | Noor Dubai | 23 |
| United Kingdom | Scottish Government | 21 |
| United Kingdom | Welsh Assembly Government | 22 |

Source: OECD (2019).

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