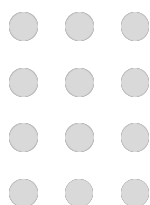


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The Evolution of Cities' International Cooperation Policies

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SciencesPo
ÉCOLE URBAINE



Editorial

International cooperation among cities has profoundly transformed local and global dynamics. From the symbolic and political twinning arrangements of the postwar era to today's urban diplomacy, local governments have become key players in addressing global challenges: sustainable ecological and climate transition, social inclusion, and shared governance. In a context marked by the weakening of multilateralism and reduced resources, their role is taking on a new, more strategic and operational dimension.

This report, the result of a collaboration between **AIMF**, **PLATFORMA**, and **Sciences Po's Urban School**, offers a unique analysis of this evolution, which we observe every day in our respective roles. It sheds light on the practices, concrete contributions, and levers for strengthening the impact of cities' international action. Thank you to the students for their rigorous work, which will help highlight and inspire the commitment of local governments on the global stage. Thank you also to the many cities and city networks that are members of AIMF and PLATFORMA for their essential contribution to this study.

Frédéric Vallier, Executive Director of AIMF;

Boris Tonhauser, Director of PLATFORMA

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Thank you to the 54 cities and umbrella organizations that are members of AIMF and Platforma for taking the time to complete the questionnaire, as well as to all those who contributed their experiences to enrich this study and with whom we had the privilege of speaking in Madagascar and Benin.

This guide was developed based on the research and reflections of Saerom Chong, Isaure Crépin, Nil Fontanarosa, and Aïnhua Giboire, students at the École Urbaine of Sciences Po Paris, under the supervision of Nicolas Maisetti, an associate professor of sociology at Paris 8 University, a faculty member at the Institute for European Studies, and a researcher at the Laboratory for Architecture, City, Urbanism, and Environment.

Introduction

This study is part of a partnership between the Sciences Po Urban School, the International Association of Francophone Mayors, and Platforma.

It aims to provide an overview of international cooperation among local governments, by identifying its transformations, its concrete contributions, and its potential for development in a changing geopolitical context.

Decentralized cooperation is defined as the external activities of local governments (municipalities, departments, regions) and their associations on the international stage¹. Legally established in France by the law of February 6, 1992, it consists of all international cooperation initiatives carried out through agreements, for a common purpose, between one or more French local governments and foreign local authorities. This “city diplomacy,” which was initially built on the values of peace and reconciliation in the aftermath of World War II, has gradually expanded on a global scale².

While the term “decentralized cooperation” remains the most common designation in France, it does not encompass the full scope of cities’ international activities, which can take many different forms: bilateral cooperation, sister city partnerships, exchanges of best practices, membership in transnational networks, or even diplomatic stances on global issues. These forms are not mutually exclusive: an effective cooperative initiative is also a diplomatic gesture, and a friendly relationship between cities can lead to concrete technical cooperation. We therefore start from the premise that we must move beyond the dichotomy between diplomacy and cooperation to observe their intersections and their inseparability.

1. Bekkouché, A., & Gallet, B. (2004). Decentralized cooperation: the emergence of local governments and territorial authorities on the international stage. p. 376.

2. Gallet, B. (2005). The Issues of the decentralized : International International and Strategic Review, No. 57(1), p. 61. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ris.057.006>.

This international action by cities is part of a broader context in which local governments are asserting themselves on the global stage. In response to what some analysts describe as a weakening of state-led multilateralism, cities have developed a narrative centered on proximity, practicality, and technical expertise, asserting their ability to address global challenges—such as climate change, migration, and development—that exceed the capacity of states alone³.

This positioning is based on what geographer Éric Swyngedouw has conceptualized as “glocalization”: local and global not as opposites but as mutually constitutive dimensions of the same phenomenon⁴.

South-South cooperation, in particular, is attracting growing interest: it could serve as a path to empowerment, allowing cities in the Global South to draw on experiences more closely aligned with their own realities, without strictly imitating external models. However, it is not without its own asymmetries, and the question of whether it truly challenges inherited hierarchies remains open.

This study is based on a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis of a questionnaire with qualitative field surveys conducted in Benin and Madagascar, respectively.

First, we worked with the AIMF and Platforma to develop a questionnaire on the evolution of international cooperation among cities, which was distributed to all members of their respective networks. Open from March 11 to April 17, 2026, it yielded 54 anonymized responses for this study, all of whom are members of the AIMF. Structured around fourteen questions combining closed-ended and open-ended items, it covers the entire “cycle” of international cooperation among local governments: the nature and geography of their partnerships, the criteria guiding their selection, their evolution over time, events that have triggered changes in international policy, the thematic priorities on the agenda, dedicated administrative capacities, budgetary resources and available funding instruments, as well as the dynamics of the exchange of best practices among cities. This analysis thus makes it possible to map the international commitments of member local governments while examining what causes them to evolve, intensify, or, at times, lose momentum.

3. Barber, B. R. (2018). What if mayors ruled the world? *The City and the Nation-State: International and Strategic Review*, No. 112(4), pp. 85–86. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ris.112.0085>

4. Swyngedouw, E., & Cox, K. (Eds.) (1997). Neither Global Nor Local: ‘Glocalization’ and the Politics of Scale. In *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local* (pp. 137–166). Guilford Press.

Two case studies then illustrate and explore these findings in greater depth from two distinct perspectives.

On the one hand, the field mission to Benin sheds light on how decentralized cooperation unfolds within municipalities themselves: its internal mechanisms, the division of roles between elected officials and technical staff, the influence of institutional intermediaries, and the conditions that do or do not allow for the transition from a formal partnership to active cooperation.

On the other hand, the study of the Association of Cities and Local Authorities of the Indian Ocean (AVCOI) examines a different form of cooperation: network-based cooperation. By connecting local authorities facing common challenges related to the insular nature of their territories, this regional network creates spaces for exchange, learning, and visibility that go beyond traditional bilateral frameworks. Through the lens of Malagasy cities, we explore what network-based cooperation can achieve for cities with vastly unequal capacities and trace the evolution of the association. To answer this question, our approach combines field observations, semi-structured interviews, and a literature review.

These three perspectives—quantitative, institutional, and network-based—converge on the same conclusion: decentralized cooperation cannot be reduced to either its legal instruments or its stated projects. It plays out at the margins of local autonomy, in the richness of human relationships, and in the ability to transform exchanges into sustainable actions.

This study is based on a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis of a questionnaire with qualitative field surveys conducted in Benin and Madagascar, respectively. Interviews were conducted with elected officials, municipal technicians, representatives of networks, and institutional stakeholders. As students, we wish to highlight the inherent limitations of our position: our observations remain partial, confined to a specific time and place, and do not claim to offer an exhaustive overview of the dynamics at play. This report constitutes an analytical contribution, not a definitive assessment.



The Cotonou Fish Market Road.

Credit: Saerom CHONG

Although this report does not use inclusive language, terms in the generic masculine form refer to both women and men.



Analysis of the Questionnaire



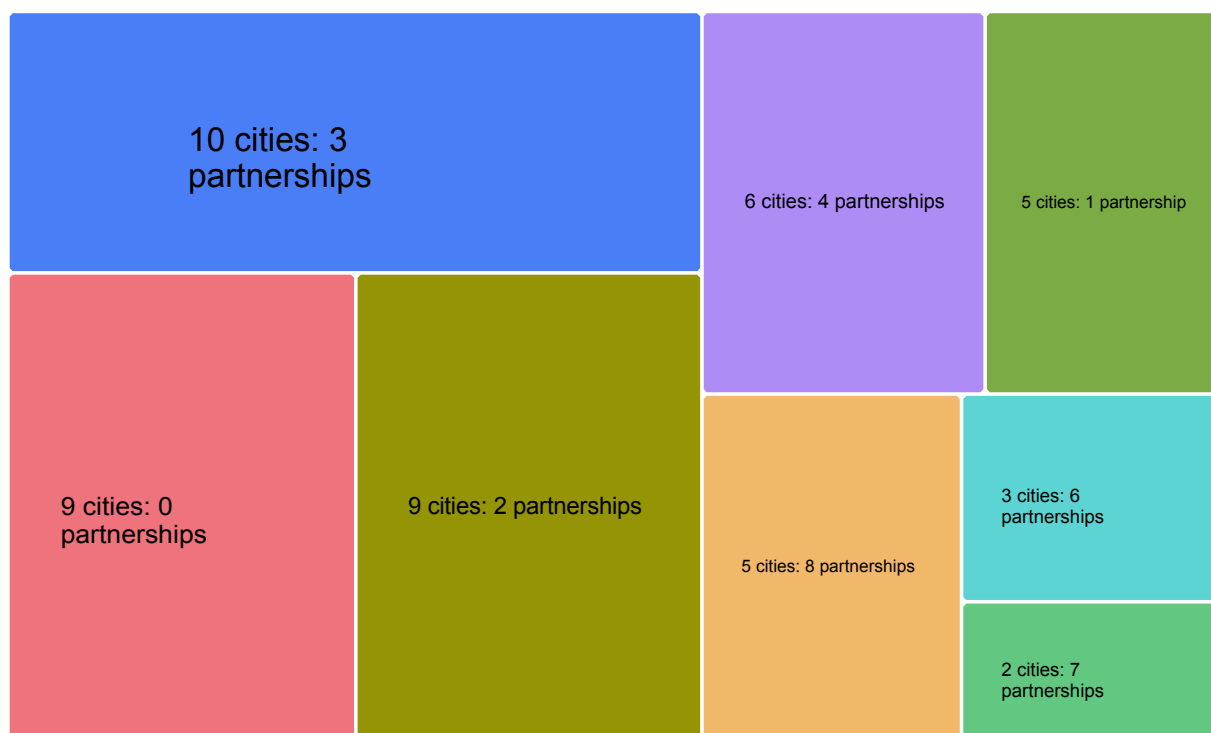
Mapping Evolving Partnerships

Diversity of Forms, Geographies, and Stakeholders

- All respondents to this survey are members of the AIMF.
- The results presented below should be interpreted in light of this sampling bias: The French-speaking context and the institutional profile of member cities inevitably shape the observed trends.
- Each question is accompanied by a methodological note available in the appendix.

1 A Sustainable Coexistence Between Sister City Partnerships and Cooperation

Agreements

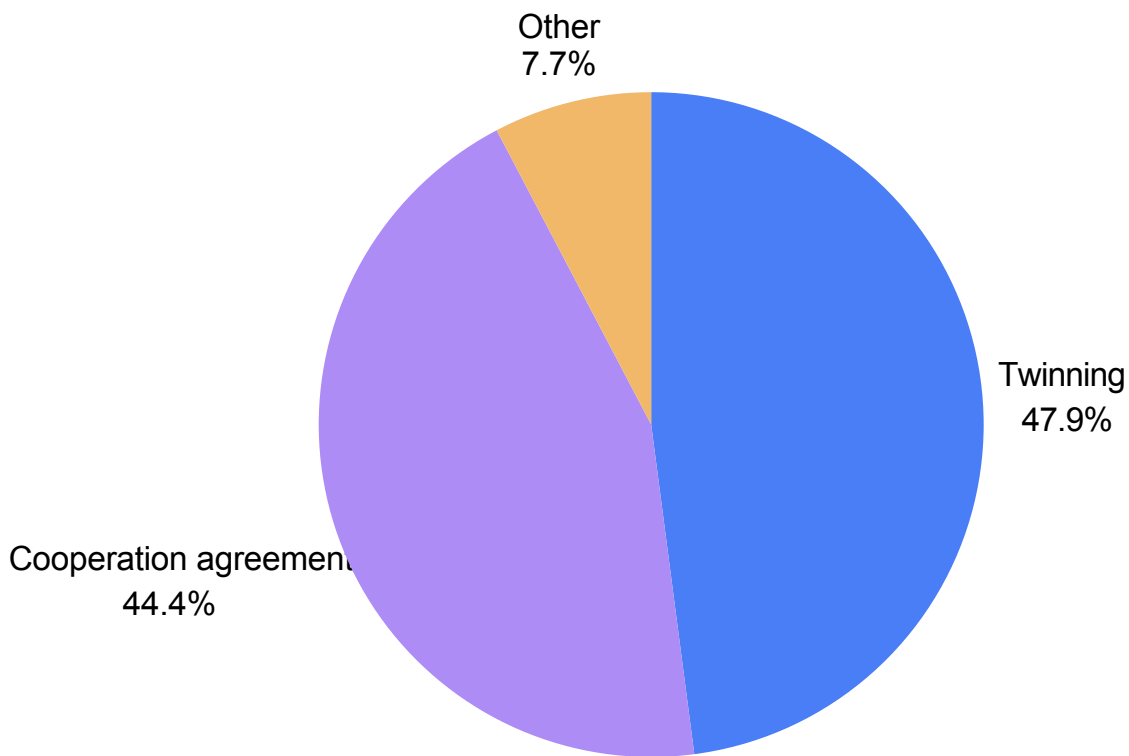


How to read this chart: "10 cities reported 3 partnerships"

49 cities

147 partnerships

1 | A sustainable coexistence between sister city relationships and cooperation agreements



Out of 169 partnerships with applicable responses

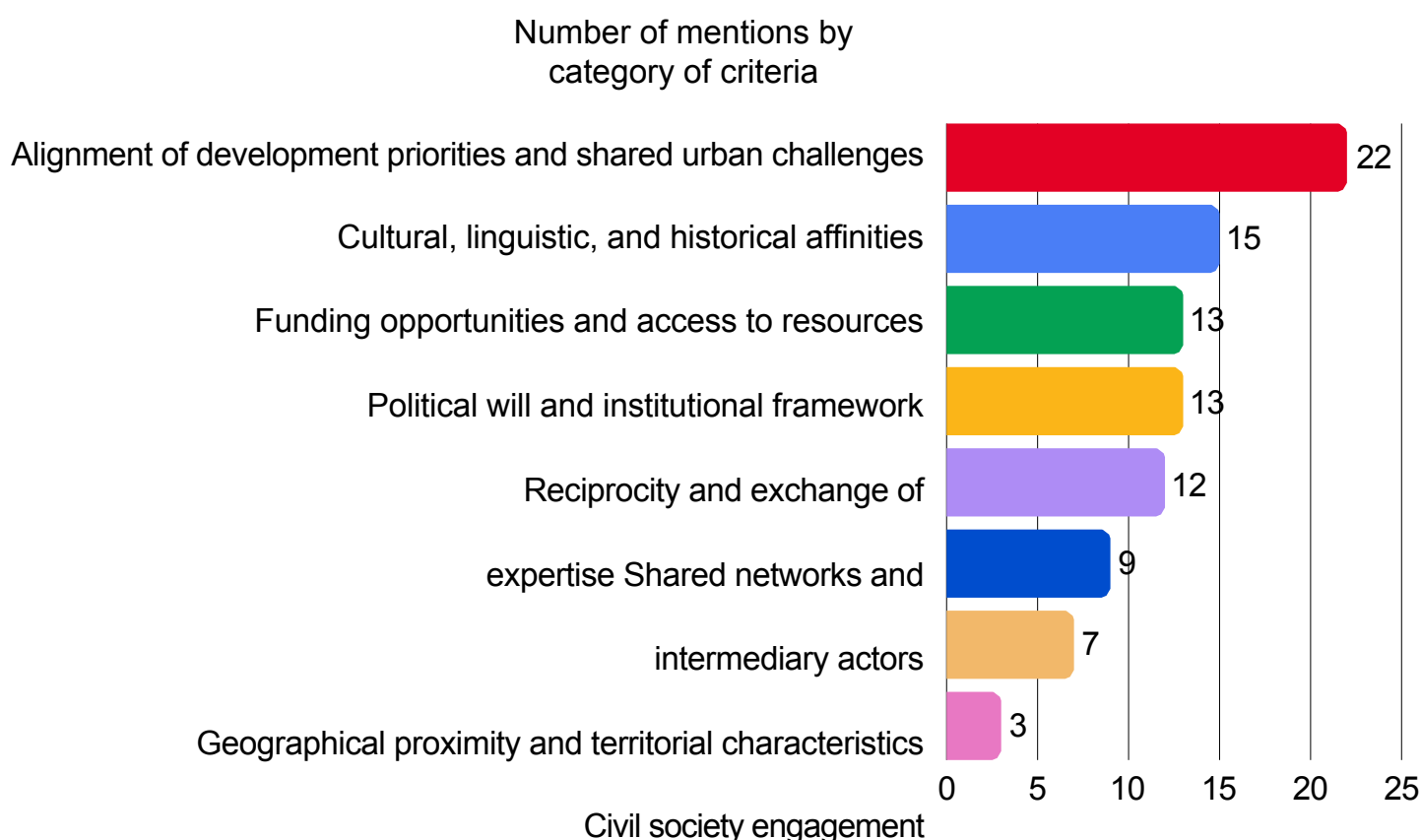
Of the 169 partnerships with applicable responses, [sister city agreements account for 47.9% of the forms identified](#), [cooperation agreements for 44.4%](#), and other forms (memorandums of understanding, friendship pacts) for 7.7%.

Twinning remains the dominant form, but its predominance is relative: nearly one in two partnerships is now based on a contractual and thematic framework.

The legacy of relationships and the operational approach coexist without one completely supplanting the other.

2 | Shared priorities take precedence over symbolic affinities in the selection of partners

“ What criteria guide your choice of cities with which you engage in international cooperation and/or a partnership? ”



Out of 52 responding cities

The *convergence of development priorities and shared urban challenges* emerged as the most frequently cited criterion, mentioned by nearly half of the respondents (“similarity of urban ecosystems” – “shared problems and challenges”). Rather than a symbolic affinity, the cities in the sample [are primarily seeking an operational partner](#) that faces the same challenges in terms of urban policy, environmental management, education, or climate resilience.

2

Shared priorities take precedence over symbolic affinities in the selection of partners

Nevertheless, *cultural and linguistic affinities* (“shared cultural values” – “linguistic similarities”) constitute the second most frequently cited criterion, and their enduring significance is notable: in a predominantly French-speaking sample, [language functions both as a selection criterion and as the foundation of cooperation itself](#) by facilitating communication, reducing coordination costs, and providing access to funding mechanisms specific to the French-speaking world. Cultural proximity therefore remains a practical factor, but it is now more often instrumentalized within a project-based framework than experienced as an end in itself.

Furthermore, nearly a quarter of respondents explicitly identify *funding opportunities* as a selection criterion (“opportunities for economic cooperation and investment”). Access to European calls for proposals or multilateral programs is fundamental to the architecture of cooperation between cities, shaping the choice of partner from the outset. In fact, the logics of cooperation driven by conviction and cooperation driven by opportunity coexist.

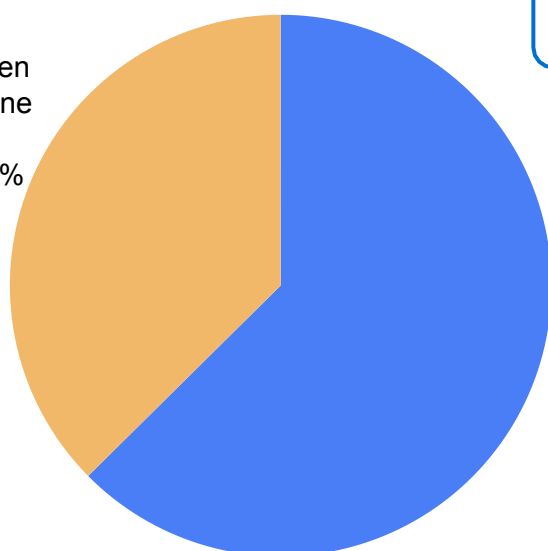
Civil society engagement as a selection criterion is mentioned by only three cities in the sample. This result suggests that, among the respondents, civil society plays a greater role in implementation than in the initiation of the partnership.

Finally, it is essential to note that the formalization of selection criteria remains inconsistent, given that cooperation projects sometimes stem from a city council decision rather than from previously defined criteria. Thus, [international cooperation is sometimes more the result of chance encounters and opportunities than of a formalized strategy](#).

3 | The Geography of Partnerships as a Reflection of the History of Decentralized Cooperation

Francophone partnerships

Partnerships between two cities, at least one of which is not Francophone: 37.4%



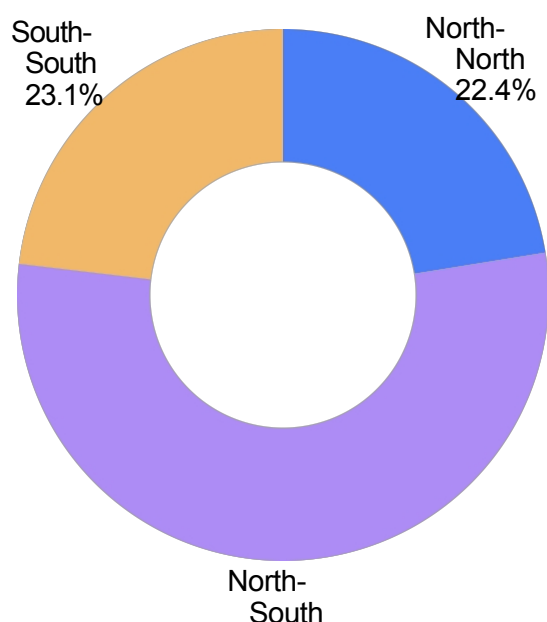
Of all the partnerships reported by AIMF member cities that responded to the questionnaire, 62.6% involve two Francophone cities*.

**For the purposes of this survey, a city is considered Francophone if it is located in a member country of La Francophonie or is a member of the AIMF network.*

Partnerships between two French-speaking cities 62.6%

Out of 147 partnerships

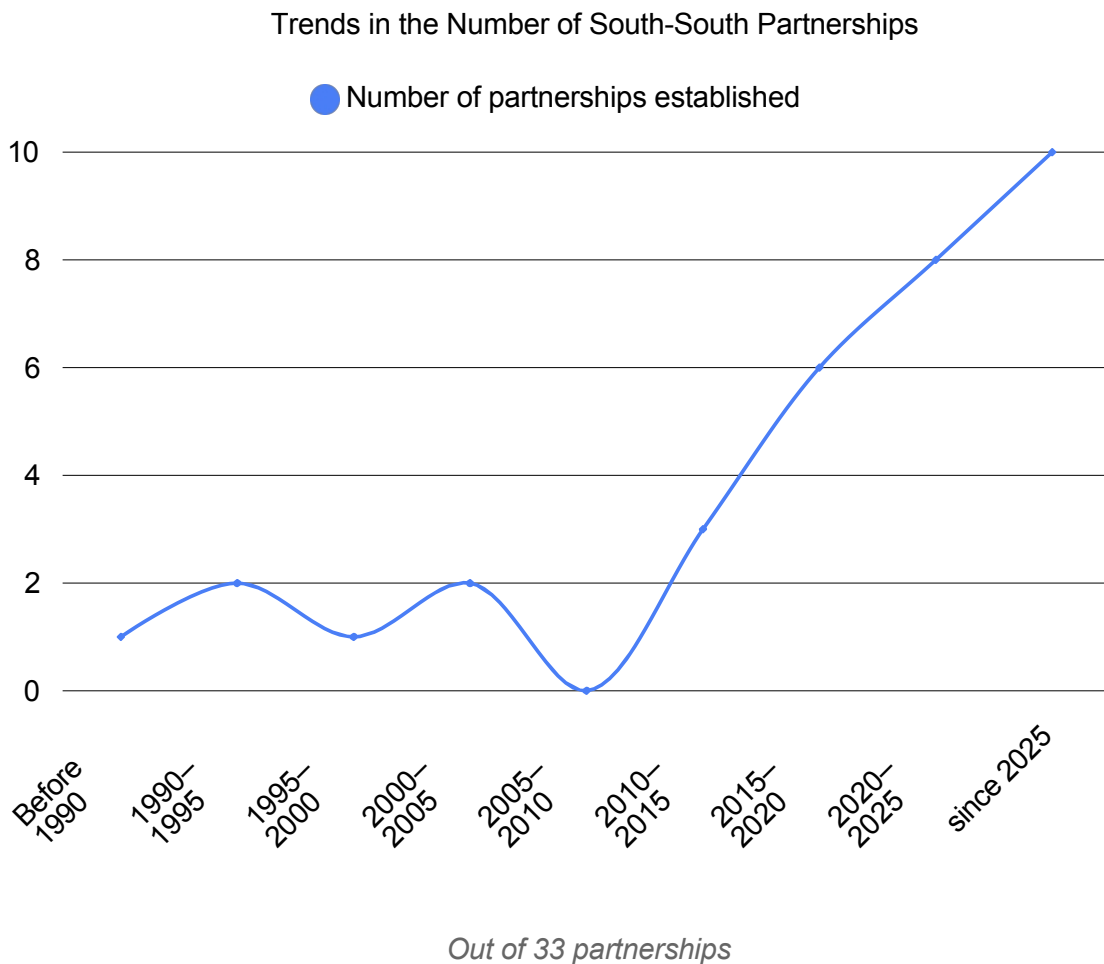
North-South, South-South, and North-North partnerships



North-South partnerships dominate, accounting for 54.4% of the relationships surveyed, followed by South-South partnerships (23.1%) and North-North partnerships (22.4%). Despite the fact that the majority of respondents were cities from the Global South (84%), South-South partnerships account for only a quarter of the relationships, reflecting a history of decentralized cooperation that has long been driven by a North-South dynamic.

54.4%

3 | The Geography of Partnerships as a Reflection of the History of Decentralized Cooperation



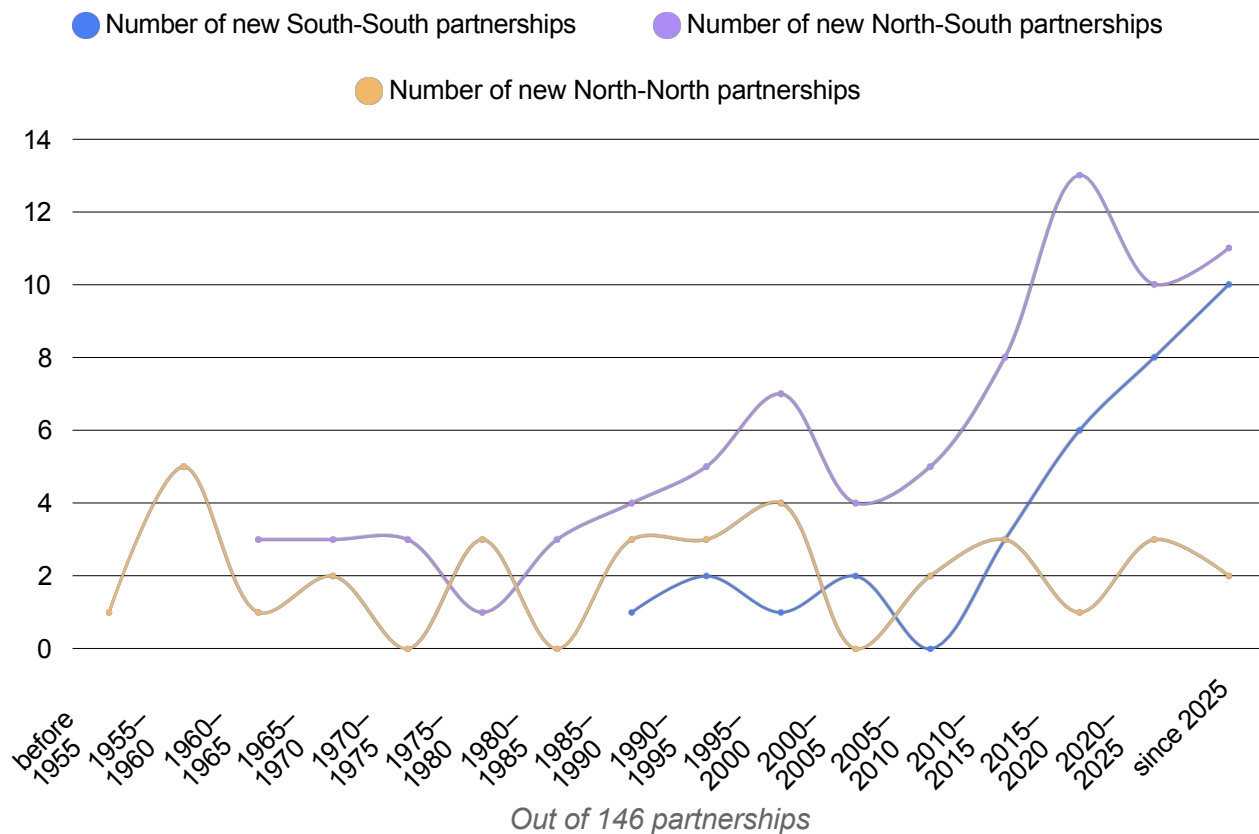
The oldest South-South partnership identified in the questionnaire responses dates back to 1989.

Since then, there has been an upward trend in South-South partnerships, particularly starting in 2015.

However, it is possible that our survey contains a bias that encourages cities to report their most recent—and therefore most active—partnerships, at the expense of partnerships that were once active but are currently dormant.

3 | The Geography of Partnerships as a Reflection of the History of Decentralized Cooperation

Trends in the Number of Partnerships

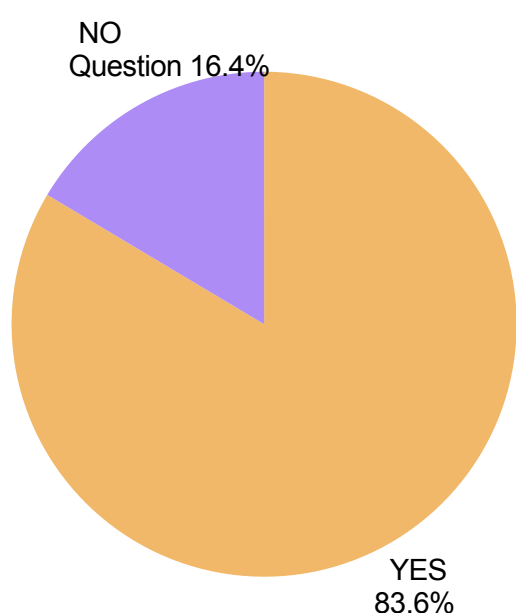


The graph above appears to show **different periods in decentralized cooperation**: Cooperation between cities seems to have emerged as a significant phenomenon in the late 1950s, involving **exclusively European countries**. The first North-South partnerships emerged a few years later, beginning in 1961. While the rate of partnership formation remained relatively stable from year to year for North-North cooperation, **North-South cooperation began to gain momentum in the 1990s**. It was also at this time that the first South-South partnerships were established.

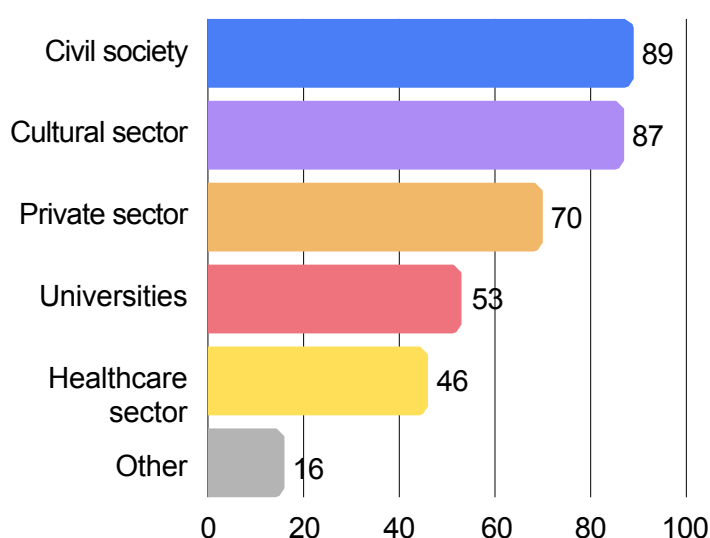
Given that the majority of cities in our sample are from the Global South (41 out of 49 respondents), it seems natural that the gradual empowerment these cities are experiencing **as a result of decentralization** would lead to a growing number of partnerships involving at least one city from the Global South. It is nevertheless too early to judge whether North-South partnerships are indeed on the decline in favor of greater South-South cooperation. Today, one could say that the two dynamics are progressing neck and neck. The world does not change overnight, and it takes time for old partnership structures to change; however, cities in the Global South are numerically in the majority and share common challenges that cities in the Global North do not face. These simple facts suggest that the trend toward **increased South-South cooperation** will continue, especially since we know that there are still many municipalities around the world that have never entered into a partnership with a foreign city.

4 | Beyond the Institutional Framework: Mobilizing Civil Society, the Cultural Sector, and the Private Sector

“ Does this cooperative relationship between two cities involve other socio-economic actors in your region? ”



Occurrence of the sectors cited by those who answered “yes” to



Out of 146 partnerships with applicable responses

The data collected reveal that the vast majority of cities’ cooperative relationships tend to [extend beyond the strictly institutional framework of local government-to-local government relations](#). The involvement of socioeconomic partners thus appears to be a structural characteristic of these partnerships rather than an exception. Civil society and the cultural sector predominate, suggesting that [decentralized cooperation is primarily based on principles of social proximity and symbolic exchange](#). The private sector nevertheless plays a significant role, indicating a growing hybridization between public and private approaches in the conduct of these cooperative efforts. Universities and the health sector round out this picture, attesting to a significant technical, scientific, and social dimension of these partnerships. Finally, the residual category “Others” includes a diverse range of actors such as the agricultural sector, urban planners, conservatories, and patriotic associations, which indicate cooperation deeply rooted in specific local realities.

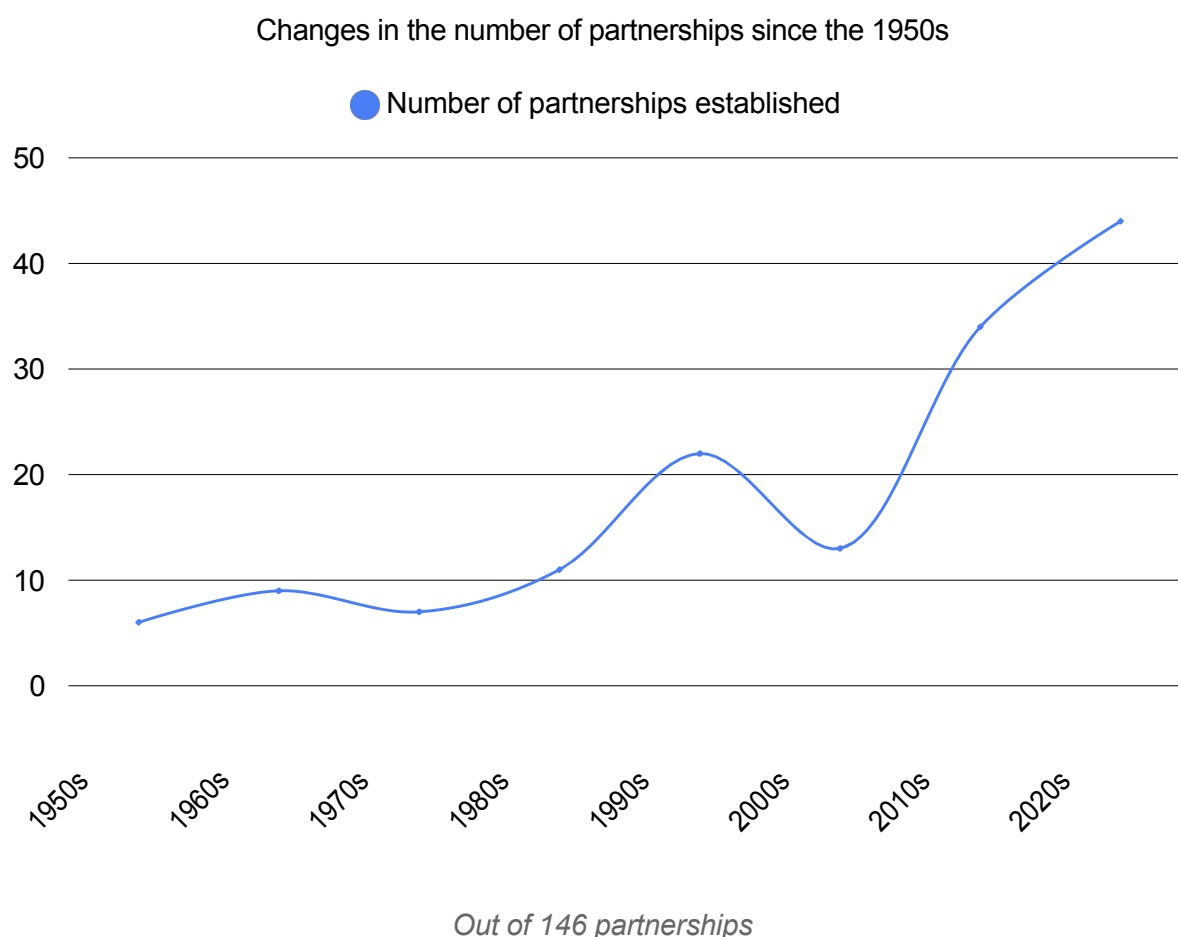
The breakdown of responses classified as “Others” is as follows: schools/high schools; the education sector; the environment; urban planners; associations; municipalities; technical experts; various options depending on requests; conservatories; patriotic associations; agriculture; community stakeholders.



Tracking the Evolution of Partnerships

Overall growth, persistent vulnerabilities, and rare disruptions

1 A trend toward intensification while documenting suspended partnerships

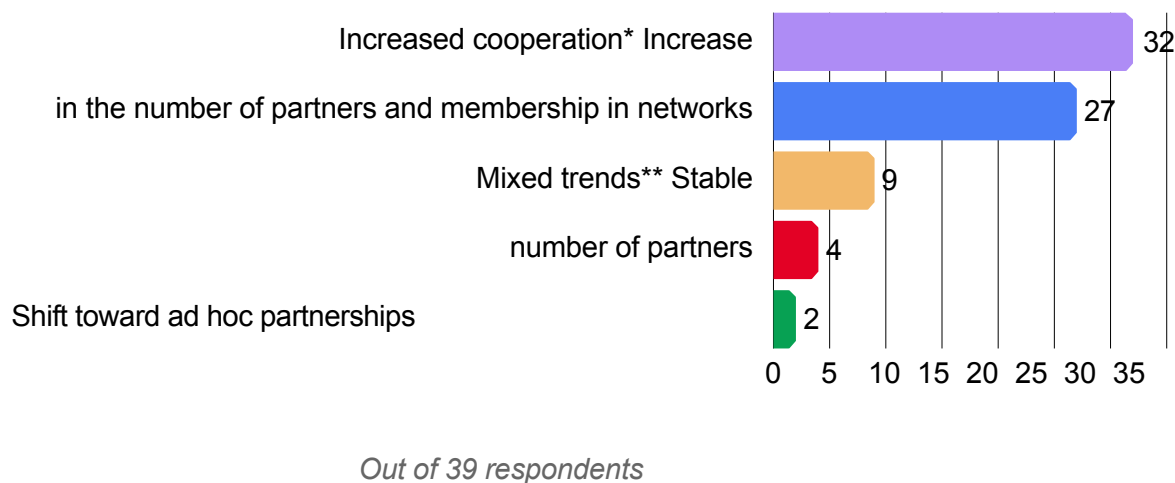


After rising slightly between the 1950s and the 1980s, the number of partnerships formed each decade doubled during the 1990s. However, it was [starting in the 2000s](#) that a particularly significant increase in the number of newly formed partnerships was observed.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that formalizing a partnership—whether through a twinning arrangement or a cooperation agreement—often comes [after several years of relations](#), a necessary period during which the partnership can take root. It would therefore be premature to conclude that there was an explosion of cooperation during the 2000s, as the paradigm shift likely began earlier but had remained undetectable until then.

1 A trend toward intensification, while also documenting suspended projects

“ How has your city’s cooperation evolved over the past ten years? ”



The dominant trend is the [growth of international cooperation over the past ten years](#): nearly half of the responding local governments report an increase in the number of partners, and nearly two-thirds report an intensification of their cooperation* through an increase in the number of projects or the strengthening of existing partnerships.

This positive trend appears to transcend institutional barriers, extending to partnerships with actors other than local government counterparts.

However, nine local governments describe a mixed picture**, revealing recurring structural weaknesses, among which financial difficulties and sensitivity to national and international contexts are most frequently cited and can result in partnerships being put on hold or even reduced.

Finally, the idea of [transforming “traditional” cooperation models](#) emerged on two occasions, particularly in favor of ad hoc partnerships: this could foreshadow an ongoing and future evolution in cooperation practices.

1 A trend toward intensification while documenting the suspension of partnerships

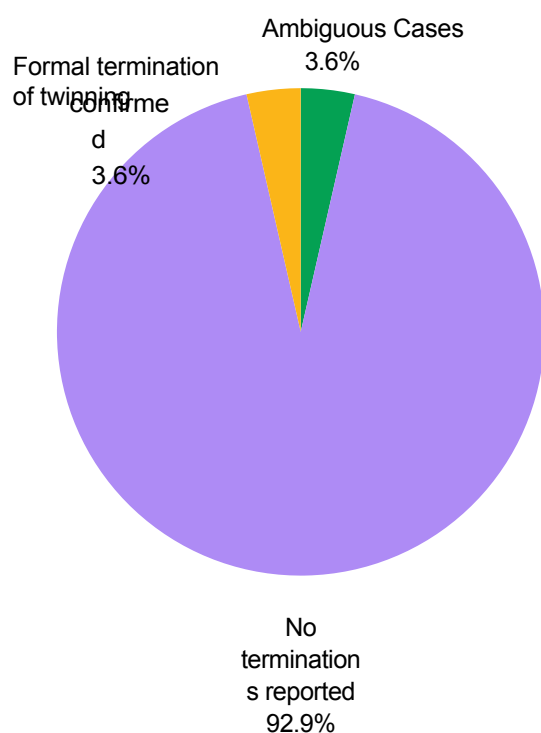
“ How has your city’s cooperation evolved over the past ten years? ”

Local governments that have experienced mixed results over the past ten years highlight several types of challenges. Some point primarily to [internal constraints](#) related to [resources](#) and [institutional functioning](#): technical cooperation has sometimes declined due to a lack of sufficient resources. Changes in local leadership have also undermined the continuity of certain initiatives, disrupting the momentum that had been built.

Other local governments have primarily felt the effects of [external disruptions](#). Several report a [near-collapse](#) of their cooperation over a given period, followed by a partial resurgence that remains difficult to consolidate. The [COVID](#) crisis also served as a significant factor in slowing progress. The end of network funding has, in some cases, directly led to a reduction in cooperation activities.

Finally, some cooperative efforts gradually [lost momentum](#) or were put on hold. Partnerships failed to yield concrete results, as the planned projects did not come to fruition, leaving the cooperation in a state of more or less prolonged suspension over the period in question.

1 A trend toward intensification while documenting instances of inactivity



Out of 54 responding cities

“List any twinning terminations (city / dates):”

Of the 54 responding cities, [only 2 reported a formal termination of the partnership](#), representing less than 4% of the sample. This figure, taken on its own, confirms the hypothesis that this is a particularly stable form of cooperation: [the twinning is not dissolved and remains a lasting form of cooperation.](#)

One of these two formal severances of sister-city relationships is particularly revealing of the current geopolitical context: in March 2022, the city of Liège officially suspended its partnership with Volgograd—which had been in place since 1959—following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This case illustrates [how major international events can](#), in a matter of weeks, [call into question ties forged over several decades](#), and [how intermunicipal cooperation](#)—often perceived as impervious to national diplomatic tensions—[does not always escape the geopolitical dynamics that transcend it.](#)

However, limiting our analysis to this count would be simplistic: two additional responses defy the binary categorization implied by our question. These two cases point to the same reality: that of partnerships in which actual cooperation has ceased without the breakup ever having been formally acknowledged. One describes a relationship “that is no longer active,” while the other refers to “reconfigurations” and “revitalizations” of partnerships rather than their termination. In both cases, [the formal link persists—or at least has not been officially severed—while actual cooperation has been suspended.](#) This type of situation is likely underrepresented in our sample, as the binary structure of our question does not allow us to fully capture it—which is precisely why another section of the questionnaire specifically addressed the active or a binary grid that would fail to capture their complexity.

dormant status of each partnership. These two cases were represented in our visualization as a distinct analytical category ("Ambiguous Cases") so as not to force them into

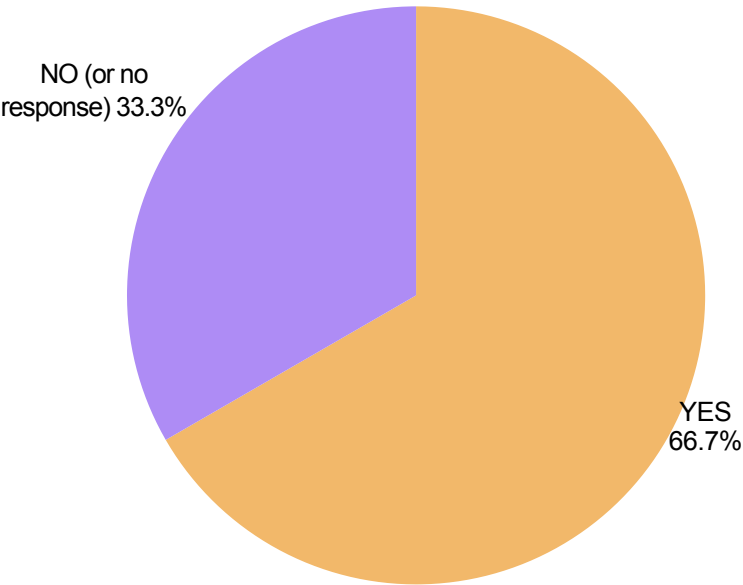
1 A trend toward intensification while also documenting cases of partnerships placed on hold

A third case illustrates the sometimes porous boundary between formal municipal cooperation and cooperation driven by nonprofit organizations.

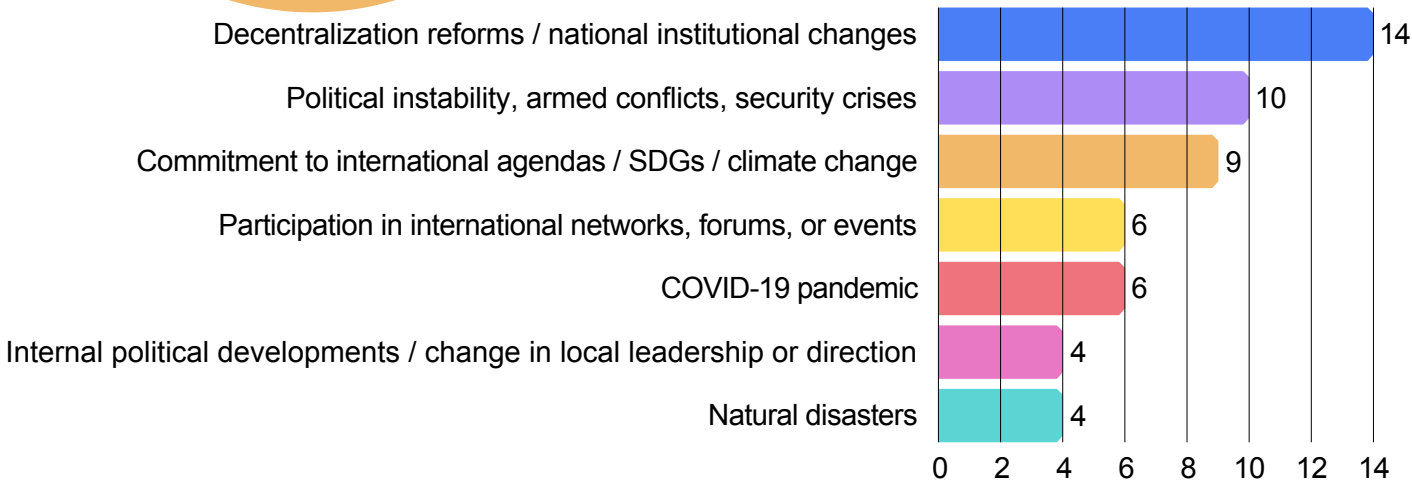
A relationship reported as a twinning termination appears, upon closer examination, to have been a cooperation led not by the partner municipality itself but by a solidarity organization acting on its behalf. The fact that this city nevertheless reported the end of this relationship speaks volumes about the asymmetry of perception in these cooperations: regardless of its legal nature on the North side, this link was experienced as a foundational partnership on the South side.

Overall, while our study identified only 2 formal terminations out of 54, it documented at least 4 in more complex forms. This result demonstrates the existence of a continuum between active cooperation, dormancy, and termination, suggesting that the stability of twinning relationships depends as much on their actual resilience as on the institutional difficulties involved in formalizing their suspension.

2 | Decentralization reforms and crises as the main drivers of change



“In recent history (the last 5, 10, or 20+ years), have there been any local, national, or international events that have led to a change in your foreign policy? Which ones?”



Among the local governments that responded positively, it is evident that their international policies are primarily shaped by **events beyond their control**. This finding underscores the dependence of local governments on their political and geographic environment—both national and international.

National factors of change dominate in terms of volume: **decentralization reforms** (14 local governments) and internal political developments (4) are the primary drivers of change, creating institutional conditions more conducive to international action. In terms of crises, geopolitical conflicts and instability (10 local governments) as well as the COVID-19 pandemic (6) have profoundly reshaped existing partnerships, sometimes severing them and sometimes fostering new forms of solidarity.

It is noteworthy that **positive externalities play a role as formative as that of crises**: adherence to international agendas such as the SDGs or climate commitments (9 local governments), as well as participation in networks and forums (6), have led **to the expansion of partnerships and integration into new dynamics of cooperation**.

3 The international agenda: between cultural roots and the growing prominence of climate issues

“ What are the main themes of the partnership? ”



A chart ranking the themes is available in the appendix.

3 The international agenda: between cultural roots and the growing importance of climate issues

“ What are the main themes of the partnership? ”

Culture (95 mentions) and technical cooperation (80 mentions) emerge as the two most prevalent themes in the sample, reflecting the two historical pillars of twinning: building human connections and the transfer of know-how. Intercultural dialogue (70) and social cohesion (68), the third and fourth most frequently cited themes, confirm that the relational dimension remains central, even in partnerships that are otherwise defined as strategic.

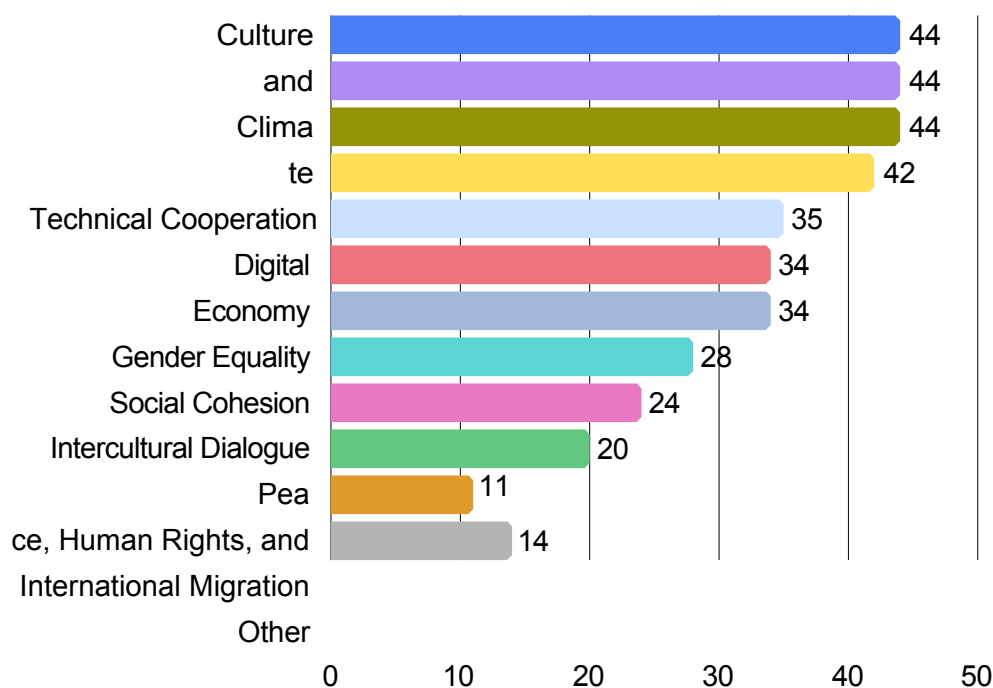
Climate (58 mentions), the sixth most frequent theme, is [particularly prominent in North-South partnerships](#) involving cities in sub-Saharan Africa and in cooperation between major metropolitan areas. A frequent link emerges between climate and digital technology (50) in intra-European or Europe-Maghreb partnerships, signaling the rise of the energy transition and smart city agendas. In South-South partnerships, on the other hand, [climate appears more closely linked to the economy](#) (75) and social cohesion, reflecting a more integrated approach to sustainable development issues.

Gender equality (40) and human rights (35), which are more common in partnerships involving European cities or those deeply embedded in UN networks, indicate a gradual integration of normative agendas, though they do not yet emerge as cross-cutting themes across the entire sample.

Finally, the themes entered in the open-ended field (sanitation, youth employment, civil registration, agriculture—each occurring between 1 and 5 times) should be interpreted as signs of cooperation that goes beyond standardized categories.

3 The international agenda: between cultural roots and the growing prominence of climate issues

“ What are the priorities on your international agenda? ”



53/54 responding municipalities

Four priorities stand out; they were cited more than 40 times by respondents : [Climate](#), [Economy](#), [Culture](#), [Technical Cooperation](#).

Among the local governments that wished to specify priorities not included in the questionnaire, the following were mentioned, in order of frequency:

- Waste management / sanitation
- Drinking Water
- Health
- Governance
- Urban Development / Urban Planning
- Agriculture
- Taxation
- Tourism
- Forest Conservation / Environment
- Francophonie
- Food Policy
- Youth Integration
- Urban Resilience

The topic of [waste management](#) was mentioned 7 times by respondents, a high frequency compared to other priorities, none of which were mentioned more than three times.

- Literacy
 - II. Tracing the Evolution of Partnerships: Overall Growth, Persistent Vulnerabilities, and Rare
 - Security
 - Breakdowns
 - Basic Social Services
-

3 The International Agenda: Between Cultural Roots and the Rising Importance of Climate Issues

The priorities on the international agenda of the responding local governments reveal a consensus around three themes tied for first place: [climate](#), [culture](#), and [technical cooperation](#), followed closely by [the economy](#). This reflects a vision of international cooperation that is both focused on urgent global challenges (particularly the climate crisis) and rooted in [the concrete exchange](#) of know-how and expertise between regions. [Culture](#) also occupies a central place, reflecting its role as a key [vehicle](#) for fostering ties between local governments.

This thematic structure is reminiscent of the concept of path [dependency](#): local governments tend to do what they know how to do, continuing to focus on areas of cooperation in which they have built up skills, relationships, and established routines. An examination of existing partnerships is revealing in this regard: [new themes \(digital technology, climate\) have not replaced the old ones \(culture, technical cooperation\), but have been added to them](#). Historical twinning arrangements and long-standing cooperative relationships remain highly influential, forming a solid foundation upon which new thematic layers are built, without the previous ones disappearing.

Digital technology, gender equality, and social cohesion do indeed form a solid second group, but peace, human rights, and especially international migration appear to be selected significantly less often—which may seem paradoxical for cities that are often directly affected by these issues. This could indicate that these themes are perceived as falling more within the purview of national governments than local authorities, as not particularly conducive to cooperation, or as politically difficult to prioritize. Finally, the “Other” category reveals very concrete and operational concerns such as waste management and sanitation, drinking water, and health and governance.

3 The international agenda: between cultural roots and the growing prominence of climate issues

A comparative analysis of the stated priorities of the international agenda and the themes actually addressed by ongoing partnerships reveals significant discrepancies, but also some points of convergence.

On the side of similarities, culture reaffirms its centrality: cited as the top priority (44 mentions, tied with climate and technical cooperation), it also ranks first in actual partnerships with 95 mentions, demonstrating genuine consistency between stated intentions and cooperation practices. Technical cooperation is another notable point of alignment: tied for first place among stated priorities (44 mentions), it ranks second in actual partnerships (80 mentions), confirming local governments' commitment to concrete exchanges of expertise.

The discrepancies, however, are striking. [Climate, which ranks joint first among stated priorities \(44 mentions\), is only the sixth most common theme in actual partnerships \(58 mentions\), far behind culture, the economy, and intercultural dialogue.](#) This discrepancy suggests that while the climate crisis is well integrated into local governments' discourse and ambitions, it still struggles to translate into structured and operational partnerships. [We can, however, hypothesize that concrete partnerships on this issue will intensify in the coming years.](#) [Intercultural dialogue, which ranks modestly among stated priorities \(28 mentions\), accounts for 70 mentions in actual partnerships, revealing that cooperation in practice is more focused on cultural and economic exchanges than on major global challenges.](#) Social cohesion (34 stated instances, 68 actual instances) follows a similar trajectory, gaining in importance in the reality of partnerships.

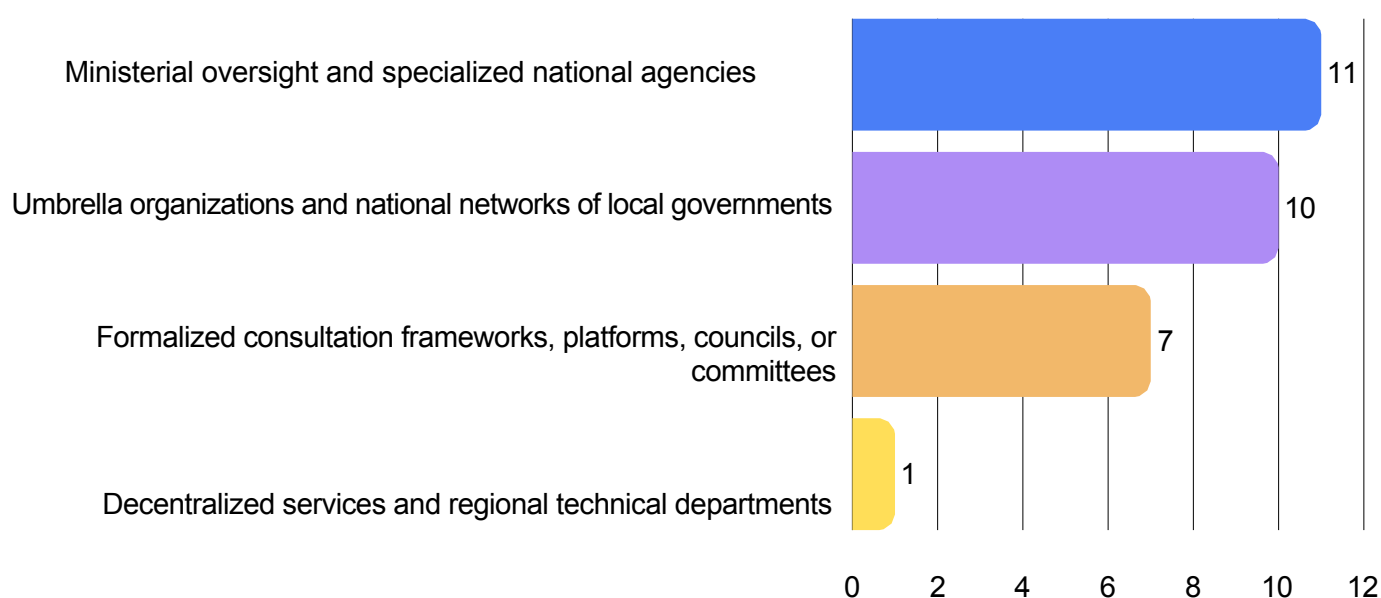


Anchoring cooperation in institutional frameworks

Between municipal autonomy and national coordination

1 The driving role of national frameworks and umbrella organizations

“Optional question, intended for umbrella organizations: Are there any forums for dialogue and cooperation between the national government and local governments in your international cooperation?”



The responses to this question show that local international cooperation often takes place within a multilevel governance framework.

Several local governments mention the role of ministries—particularly those of the Interior, Decentralization, or Foreign Affairs—in overseeing or coordinating international initiatives. Others emphasize the importance of umbrella organizations, which serve as intermediaries between the state and local governments. This trend shows that cities are developing their own international initiatives, but that these often remain tied to national, institutional, or associational frameworks.

1 The driving role of national frameworks and umbrella organizations

“Optional question for umbrella organizations: Are there any forums for dialogue and cooperation between the national government and local governments in your international cooperation?”

Responses should be interpreted with caution, as the question was optional and primarily intended for umbrella organizations. Non-responses therefore do not necessarily indicate the absence of forums for dialogue. They may also reflect the fact that some municipalities do not consider themselves the most legitimate representatives to describe the national framework for international cooperation.

The available responses, however, show a clear trend: [local governments' international cooperation is rarely viewed as a completely autonomous function](#). It is often part of a multilevel governance framework, in which the state, ministries, national decentralization agencies, local government associations, and consultation mechanisms play a coordinating, supportive, or mediating role.

Three main types of mechanisms emerge. The first involves ministerial oversight, where respondents mention ministries responsible for the interior, decentralization, local governments, or foreign affairs. The second relies on national umbrella organizations, which serve as an interface between municipalities, the central government, and international partners. The third involves formalized consultation frameworks, such as councils, commissions, or committees dedicated to dialogue between the state and local governments.

[Overall, the internationalization of local governments thus appears to be a process linked to national frameworks](#). Local governments seek to strengthen their own capacities in the area of international relations, but these capacities often remain constrained by their administrative, financial, and technical resources. At the same time, the state retains an important role in coordination and guidance to ensure that local initiatives align with national priorities. Local international cooperation thus emerges as a space where municipal initiatives, national oversight, and the intermediary role of local government networks intersect.

2 The Structuring Role of Networks as Infrastructures for Cooperation

“Which regional, global, and/or thematic networks does your local government belong to?”

Membership in Networks: A Predominantly Generalist Focus, with Specific Themes Expanding at Uneven Rates

4.

Average number of networks of network membership per responding community

The distribution is positively skewed, driven by local governments that are highly integrated into international networks.

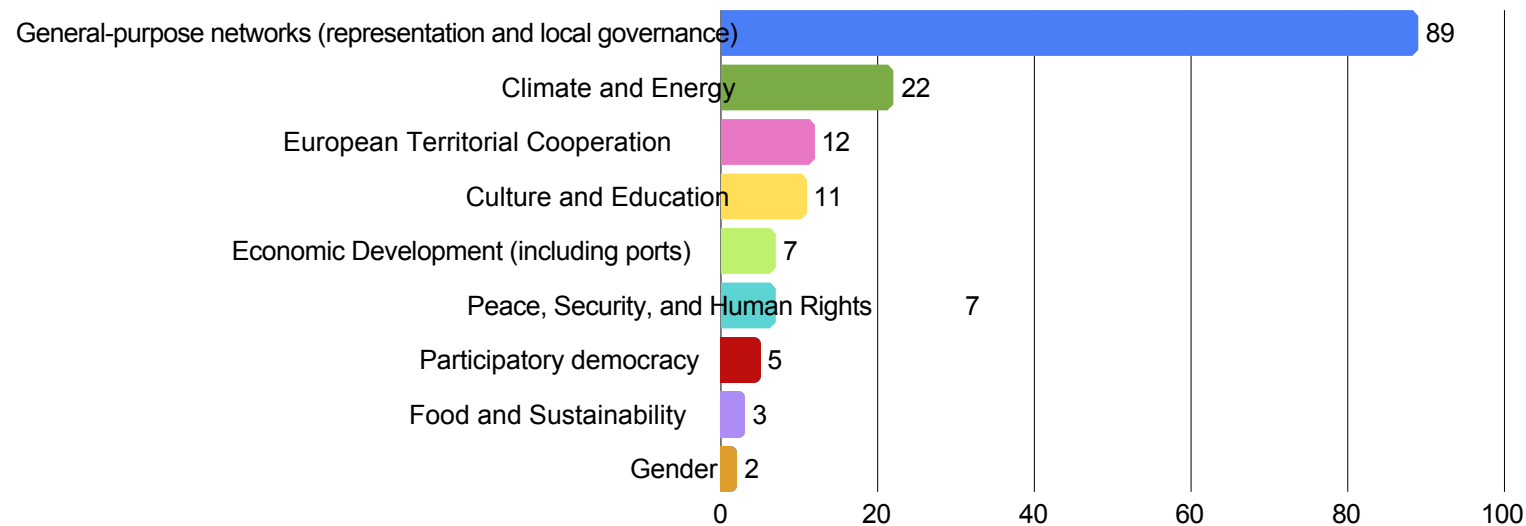
3.

Median level of to networks by responding local government

An indicator that better reflects the central trend, independent of extreme values.

Out of 48 municipalities with usable responses

Number of network mentions by category



Out of 48 local governments with usable responses

2 The foundational role of networks as infrastructure for cooperation

“ Which regional, global, and/or thematic networks does your local government belong to? ”

The 48 local governments that provided a usable response belong to an average of 4.1 networks, with a median of 3.5; the discrepancy reflects the impact of a few highly connected cities on the distribution. Since the sample consists of members or affiliates of the AIMF and the CEMR, membership in these networks serves as the structural framework upon which cities build their additional memberships, rather than an analytical variable in and of itself.

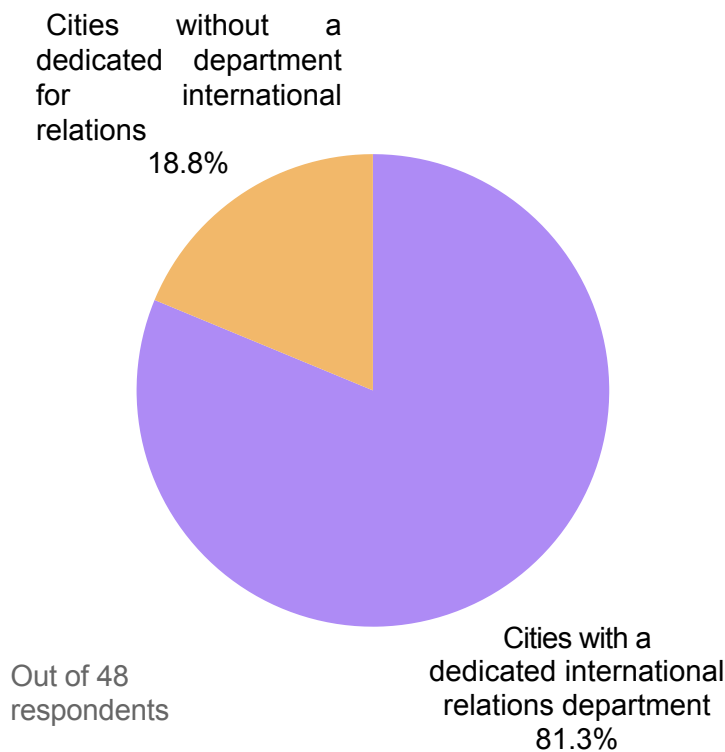
The distinction between general-purpose networks and specialized networks is the first analytically useful interpretation of these data. [General-purpose networks](#), whose purpose is representation and local governance without an exclusive focus on a single theme, account for 89 mentions and [largely dominate the landscape](#). Specific networks, built around a particular issue, account for a total of 69 mentions, but their internal distribution is uneven: [climate and energy](#) (22 mentions) [far outnumber all other themes](#), followed at a distance by European territorial cooperation (12) and culture and education (11). Gender (2) and food (3) remain low-profile issues, which contrasts with their growing prominence on international urban agendas.

A regional analysis reveals contrasting patterns: African cities combine general-purpose networks with sub-Saharan climate networks as part of a strategy of strong continental anchoring; European cities diversify their network memberships more toward cross-border cooperation and thematic networks; while North African cities occupy a pivotal position between Arab, Mediterranean, and Francophone networks. Regional and national metropolises also consistently post the highest membership scores, suggesting a correlation between institutional size and network integration—a hypothesis that warrants testing with systematic demographic data.

Two blind spots warrant attention: the [near-absence of gender-based networks](#) and the [recurring confusion between city networks and development organizations](#) in several responses. This blurring reflects the overlap between inter-municipal cooperation and development aid in the practices of certain cities in the Global South, and in itself provides insight into how these local governments perceive and define their membership in international networks.

3 Professionalization: Dedicated but Small-Scale Departments

Percentage of cities with a dedicated department for international relations



With nearly 81% of respondents reporting that they have a dedicated department for international relations, we can assume that decentralized cooperation is now relatively professionalized, with specific support provided within city halls.

Size of the department dedicated to international relations (if applicable)

This chart highlights that on a small scale, city halls, the generally decentralized services mobilize small scale and therefore do not involve a large number of municipal officials.

more than 10 people
12.2%

1 person
29.3%

5 to 10 people
24.4%



III. Anchoring Cooperation in Institutional Frameworks: Between Municipal Autonomy and National Coordination

2 to 5 people

IV | Funding cooperation

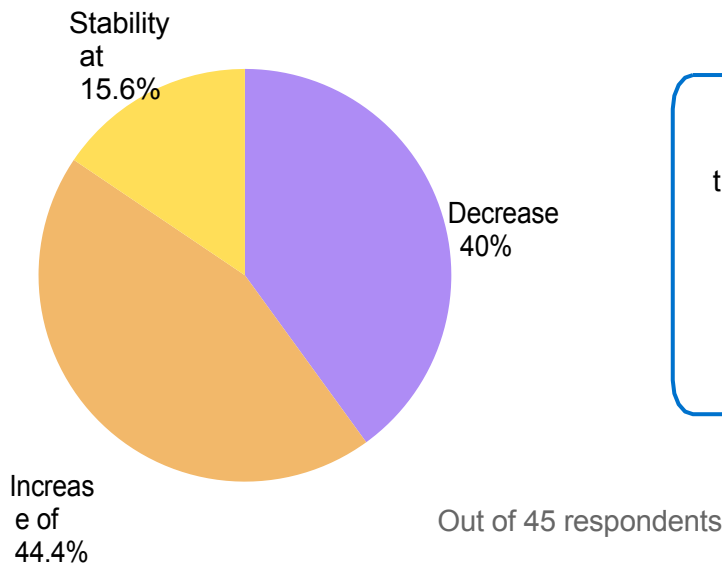
A Reliance on Own Resources in an Uneven Policy Landscape

1

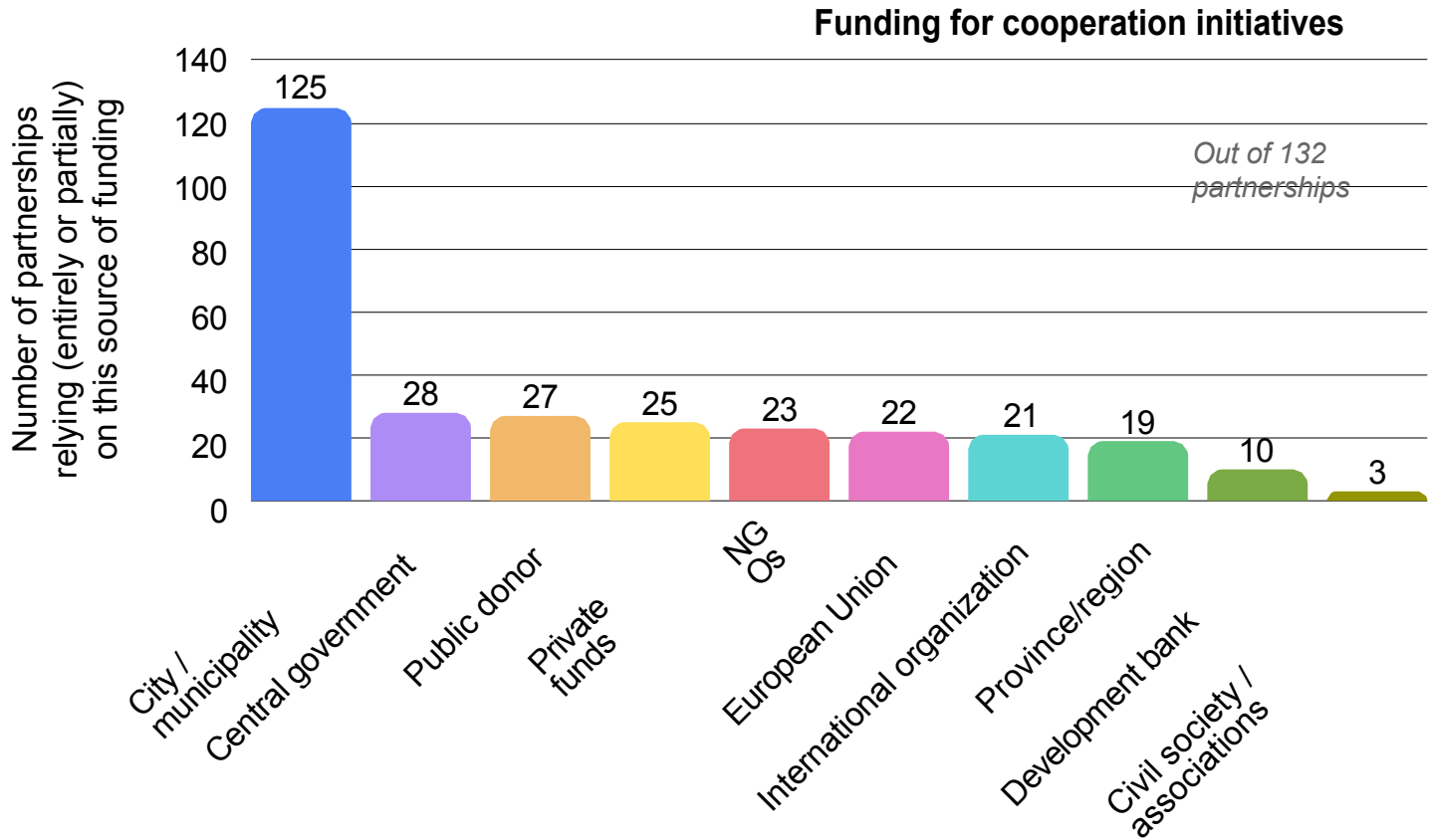
The predominance of municipal co-financing as a structuring model

Trends in the budgetary evolution of international cooperation within

local governments over the 2016–2026 period



The responses to the question regarding trends in the budget allocated to decentralized cooperation at the local level do not reveal a general trend; rather, they highlight the disparities that exist between different local contexts.



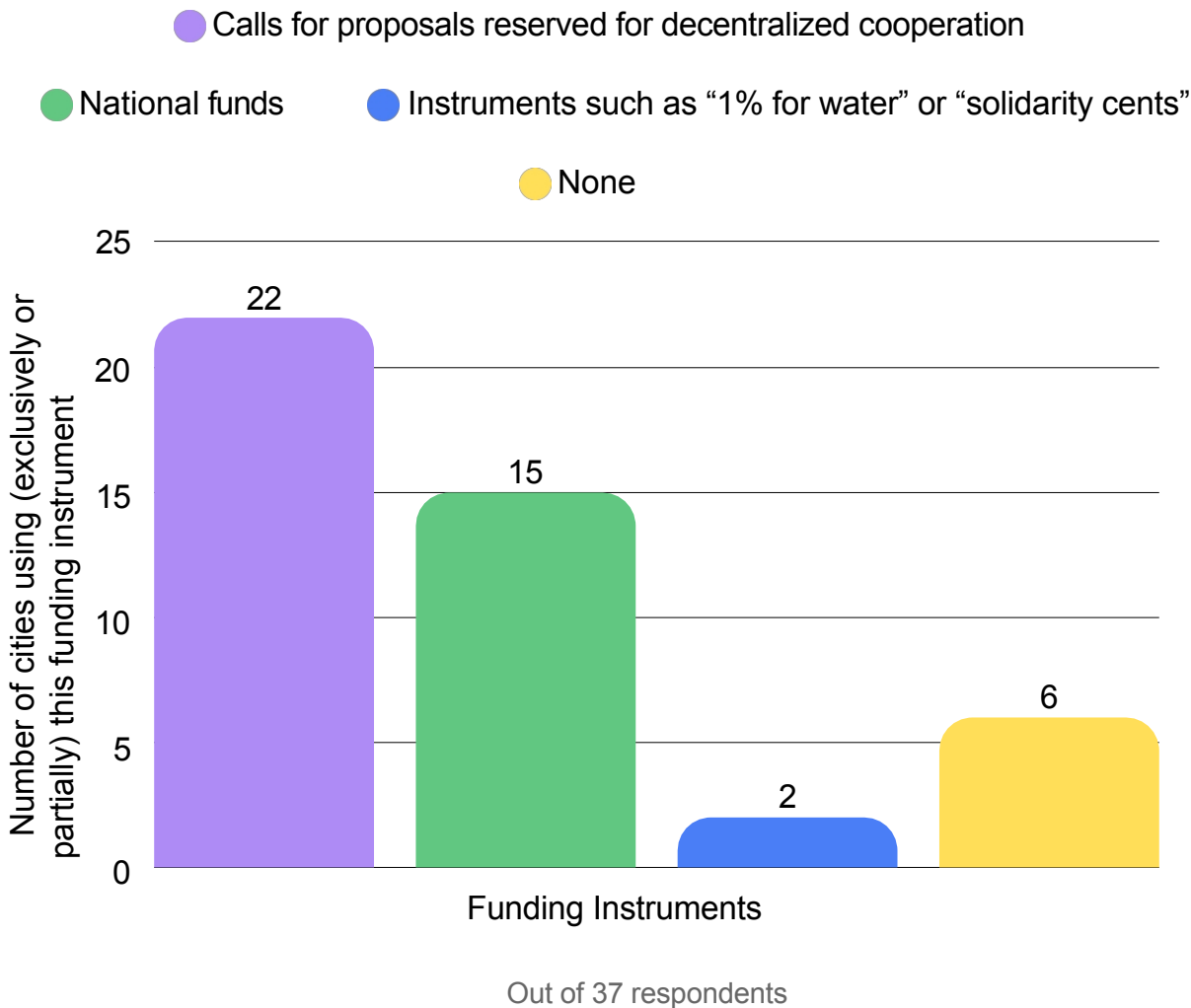
Funding for cooperation initiatives relies almost exclusively on a co-financing model in which cities are the primary funders and supplement their funds with external aid. The few partnerships that do not involve funding from cities local governments must always provide part of the funding for decentralized cooperation themselves.

are exceptional cases that confirm this trend

IV. Financing Cooperation: A Reliance on Own Resources in an Uneven Instrumental Landscape

2 | Contrasting budgets and unevenly utilized instruments

Funding instruments dedicated to decentralized cooperation



The responses to the question regarding funding instruments dedicated to decentralized cooperation highlight the importance of calls for proposals and the mobilization of national funds compared to the instruments listed in the blue column, while also revealing that a number of cities do not rely on these funding sources. Finally, the high percentage of respondents who did not provide any information (12 out of 49) calls for a cautious approach to the conclusions that might be drawn from these data, which warrant further investigation.

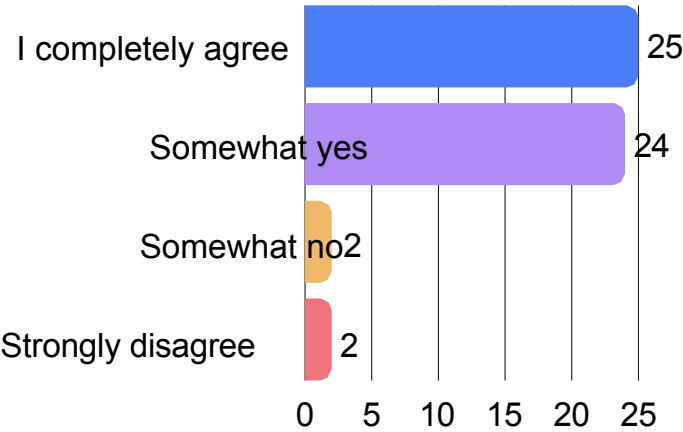
V | Traveling and Learning

Cities as Producers and Recipients of Best Practices

1

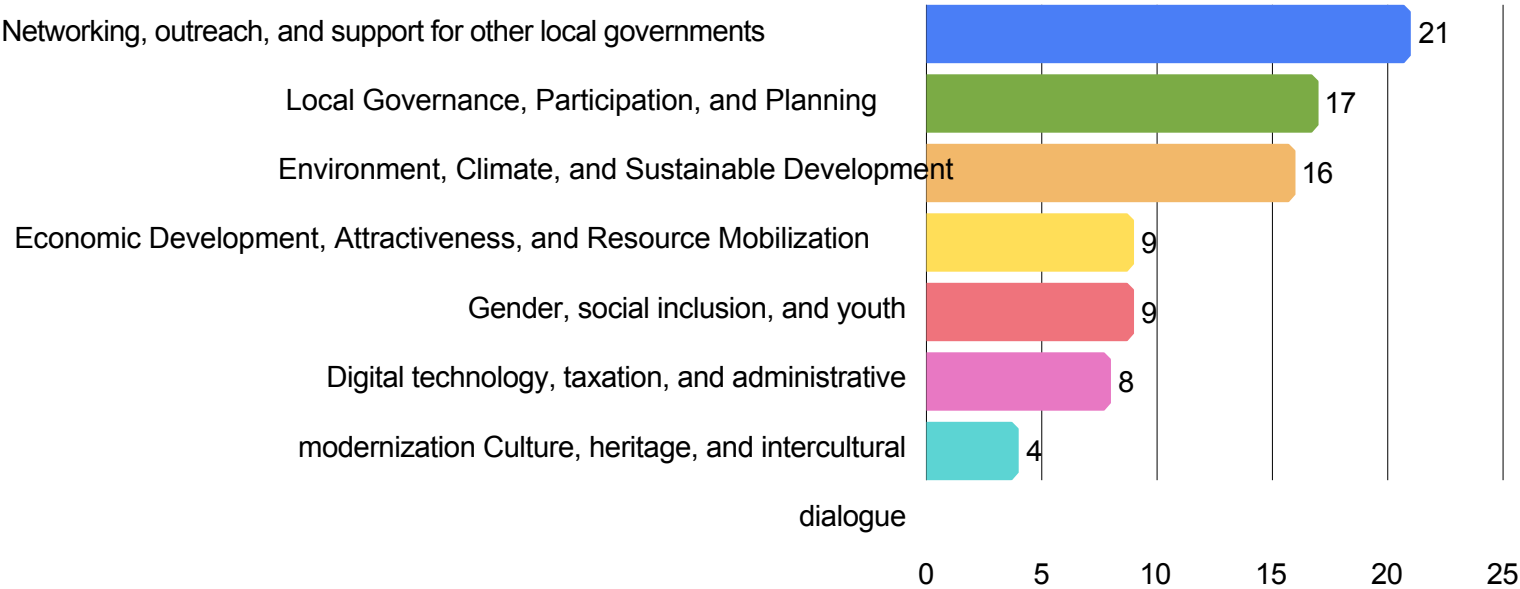
Inter-city Influence
as a widespread practice but one that is often difficult to measure

“ Would you say that your city influences other cities or regional networks by sharing its best practices (policies, governance, expertise, know-how)? ”



When asked about their ability to influence other cities or networks by sharing their best practices, strong governments report a strong government having influence. Nearly 93% responded positively.

Occurrences by thematic category



1

Intercity Influence

as a widespread practice but one that is often difficult to measure

“ Would you say that your city influences other cities or regional networks by sharing its best practices (policies, governance, expertise, know-how)? ”

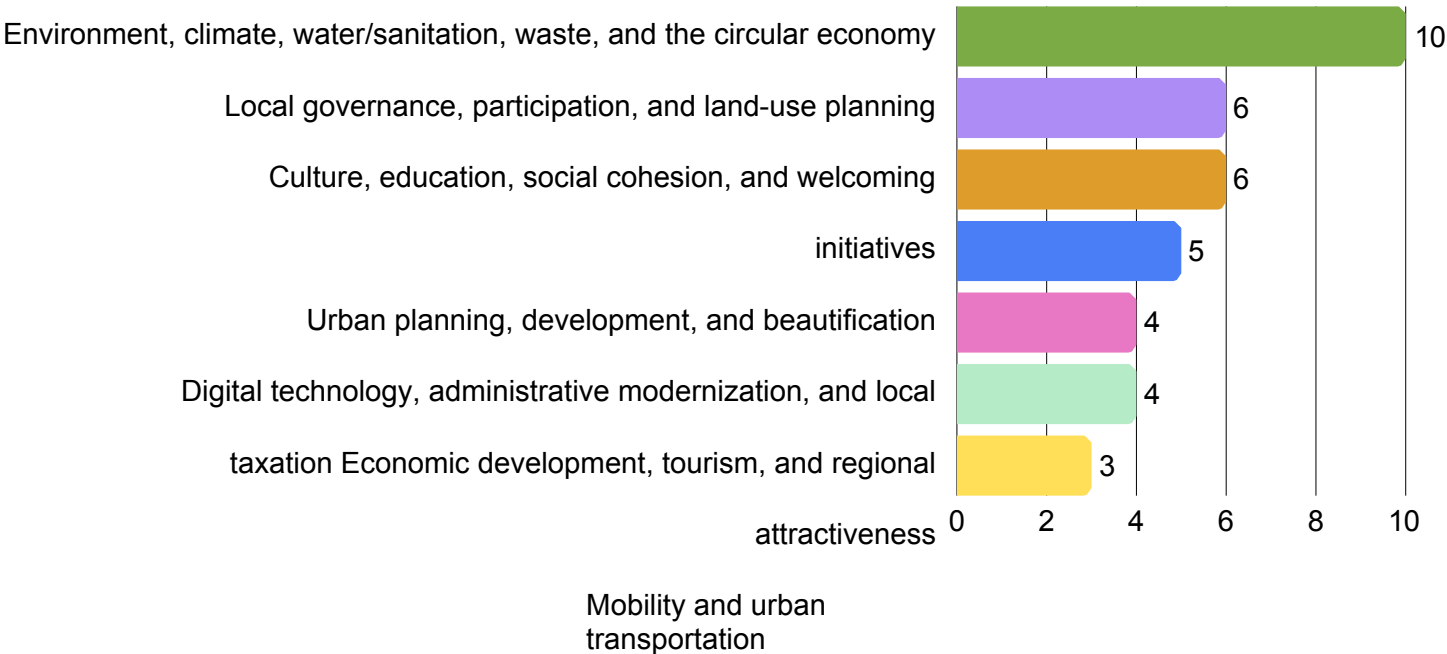
Many local governments see themselves as capable of influencing other cities by sharing their best practices, even if this influence is not always formalized through comprehensive institutional transfers. Several trends emerge. Some local governments [highlight their influence through technical best practices](#): a municipality in Central Africa cites systems for managing sewage sludge and community-based water management; a city in East Africa mentions a mobile banking payment system; while a metropolitan area in Central Africa refers to training executives from another city on financial management tools. Others claim [to exert influence through local governance by promoting specific tools such as participatory budgeting, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, or waste management systems](#). Large metropolitan areas, for their part, tend to position themselves as [more global urban benchmarks](#): a North African municipality, for example, presents itself as a “pilot city” focused on sustainable cities, the blue economy, and climate resilience, while a major city in the North highlights its influence in the areas of social cohesion and the ecological transition. In all cases, international networks and forums appear to be essential channels for sharing these experiences.

However, it is important to distinguish between declared influence and structured influence: many local governments claim to be able to inspire other regions, but not all describe the concrete mechanisms of knowledge transfer with the same precision. International cooperation thus emerges as a space for the horizontal exchange of local solutions, in which the sharing of best practices constitutes a form of influence in its own right.

2 | Learning through specific public policies rather than through broad urban models

“Are there one or more cities that you used as examples when implementing your initiatives? If so, please name the city and describe the public policy.”

Occurrences by thematic category



*Respondents may select multiple categories: a single response may be coded under several categories. Only responses mentioning an identifiable public policy were coded by theme.

The responses show that inter-city learning works less through the imitation of a global urban model than through the selection of specific public policies. Local governments do not necessarily seek to replicate a benchmark city in its entirety; rather, they draw inspiration from tools, methods, or experiences tailored to their own local needs.

This exchange of best practices primarily concerns highly operational areas: the environment, water, waste management, land-use planning, participatory governance, the digitization of services, mobility, and culture. In other words, cities learn from one another through concrete, often sector-specific solutions, rather than through broad institutional models.

This trend confirms a broader evolution in decentralized cooperation: it is becoming a space for pragmatic learning, where cities exchange practices, test solutions, and adapt foreign experiences to their local constraints. The influence between cities is therefore less vertical than horizontal, and less based on the export of a model than on the exchange of practical examples.

VI | Case Studies

Placing the Evolution of Cooperation in Specific Contexts

A Study of Decentralized Cooperation in Benin

INTRODUCTION

This field study was conducted in Benin from May 8 to 14, 2026. The objective was to gain a better understanding, through qualitative interviews, of how decentralized cooperation is perceived, organized, and implemented at the local level, as well as its recent developments. The aim was to observe the actual conditions under which partnerships are formed and to identify any obstacles they may encounter.

In total, seven interviews were conducted with stakeholders involved at various levels in decentralized cooperation:

At Cotonou City Hall, we met with the Director of Local Development and Planning, the Head of the Decentralized Cooperation and Intermunicipal Relations Department, and several professional interns working within that department.

At the National Association of Municipalities of Benin (ANCB), we spoke with the Rapporteur of the Intermunicipal Relations and Decentralized Cooperation Commission.

In Ouidah, interviews were conducted with the Executive Secretary, the Director of Local Development and Planning, the Director of the John Smith International Cultural Encounter Center, and the Mayor of Ouidah.

Prior to the fieldwork, our expectations focused primarily on two areas. First, we sought to understand how Beninese municipalities established their international partnerships and which actors were involved in forging these connections. We also wanted to observe to what extent these partnerships translated into concrete projects, or whether they sometimes remained merely formal or symbolic relationships.

The field research provided a complementary and more detailed analysis of the questionnaire results. It shows that decentralized cooperation in Benin serves both as a learning environment for local governments and as an initiative that can sometimes be difficult to implement. The municipalities we interviewed seek to develop their partnerships and make the most of their resources, particularly their cultural resources. However, their capacity for action depends heavily on their internal administrative organization, available resources, support from intermediary actors such as the ANCB or embassies, objectives set at the national level, and local political buy-in for cooperation objectives.

Overview of the International Partnerships of the Cities of Cotonou and Ouidah

As of March 2026, Cotonou has 17 decentralized cooperation partnerships: with international organizations, notably the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF), the International Association of Francophone Mayors (AIMF), the Francophonie Institute for Sustainable Development (IFDD), and the International Confederation of Francophone Sports Unions (CIUSF); with associations, such as the Order of Malta (solidarity,

civil protection) and the Brazilian association Bantu Afro Brasileiros (organization and continuation of the cultural festival “Reconnexion Brésil-Cotonou”); and finally, with numerous cities and metropolitan communities, including Naples, the Seine-Eure metropolitan community, Créteil, Marseille, Paris, Douala, Dakar, Ningbo, and Yokohama. New partnerships are currently being explored, with priority areas including the digital economy, culture, sports, and sustainable development. While some of the current partnerships aim to extend or formalize cooperation that has already borne fruit (e.g., with the city of Naples or the Seine-Eure metropolitan community), others, which are more recent (e.g., the Cotonou-Douala partnership, an agreement signed in 2023 during the 43rd AIMF Congress), have not yet led to the development of projects for the city.



Cotonou
Credit: Saerom CHONG

Still others are currently on hold despite the strength of past cooperation (e.g., the Cotonou–Ningbo sister city partnership, formalized in 2012).

The city of Ouidah, for its part, has chosen to focus its partnership activities strictly on the cultural sector. Today, decentralized cooperation is primarily carried out by inviting sister cities to major cultural and artistic events held in Ouidah, and vice versa. Over the past five years, the city of Ouidah has established sister-city relationships with Dali (Yunnan, China), New Orleans (Louisiana, United States), Les Anses d'Arlet (Martinique), Sinnamary (French Guiana), and Saint-François (Guadeloupe). Other twinning arrangements are currently under discussion with the cities of Cap-Haïtien (Haiti), Chiconi (Mayotte), Prichard (Alabama, United States), Salvador de Bahia (Brazil), Saint-Louis (Senegal), and Pointe-Noire (Republic of the Congo), while a sister-city relationship with the city of Nantes is being revived. Thus, Ouidah, which once played a central role in the transatlantic slave trade, is now striving, through an initiative focused on both remembrance and heritage, to forge ties with cities in regions that also share this common history of slavery—cities that often have a significant population of African descent, whether in French overseas territories or in cities located in Haiti, Brazil, or the United States.

Decentralized Cooperation in Benin: The Challenges of a New Initiative

According to data from the Ministry of Decentralization and Local Governance, as of 2025, partnerships with Beninese local authorities cover the following areas: social issues (51%); environmental issues (15%); capacity building (12%); and culture (10%). In terms of the geographic distribution of partnerships, 47% involve French partners, 11% German, 8% Belgian, 5% Italian, and 4% Dutch. In total, 91% of the partnerships involve cooperation with actors from the North, while South-South partnerships account for 9% of the partnerships between Beninese local governments and their foreign counterparts.

While local governments' international activities have long been built on what Viltard calls “a consensus cemented by altruistic and solidarity-based ideology” (Viltard, 2010), the situation in Benin shows that, in the context of recent decentralization, this practice faces institutional and financial constraints that limit its scope. As a result of the decentralization of the Beninese state that began in 2003, decentralized cooperation in Benin is thus marked by significant disparities in the distribution of partnerships among its 77 municipalities. Some have no partners at all, while others are very active and have up to 15 partnerships.

The development of decentralized cooperation in a given territory depends, in fact, on the prior training of local government officials capable of carrying out this mission, as well as on the financial resources necessary for the functioning of the municipal administration, particularly through the compensation of these officials. The Municipal Development Support Fund (FADEC), which is in the process of becoming the Municipal Investment Fund (FIC), is one of the funding mechanisms

VI. Practices, Challenges, and Prospects for Decentralized Cooperation in Benin

established at the national level to enable this gradual empowerment of local governments.

Today, however, other factors are hindering the implementation of decentralized cooperation in Benin's municipalities, starting with the regulatory framework for decentralized cooperation established in 2005, which, two decades later, appears obsolete in light of the new administrative bodies introduced by the Code of Territorial Administration during the 2022 reform under President Patrice Talon. Furthermore, in addition to the obstacles inherent in the municipalities' administrative capacity and the obsolescence of the regulatory framework, the varying degrees of ownership

The lack of commitment to decentralized cooperation on the part of local policymakers (low adoption of partnership-building approaches, lack of a network of contacts, and difficulties accessing information) also contributes to limiting the spread of a systematic partnership-based approach nationwide.

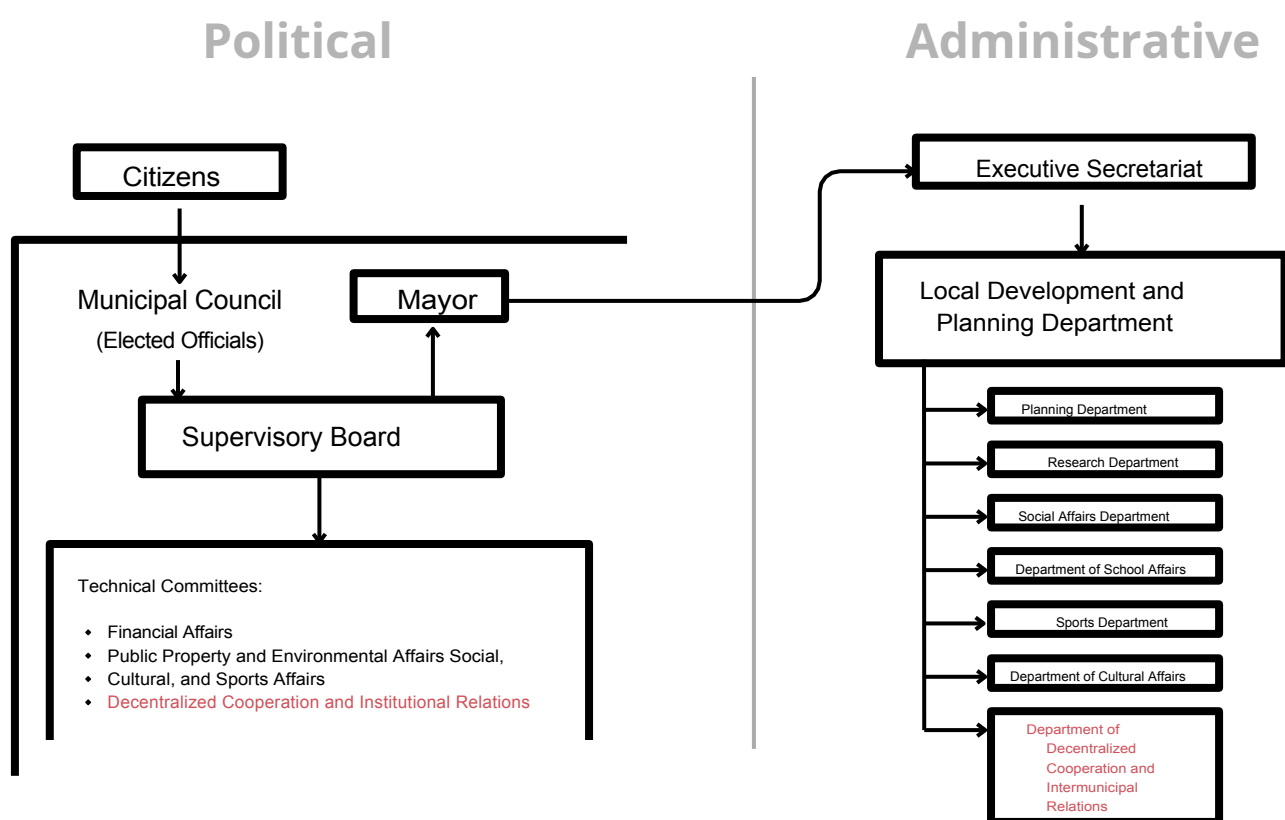
“Several structures provided for within the National Commission for Decentralized Cooperation no longer exist. Therefore, the National Commission for Decentralized Cooperation is no longer functional; it is the ANCB that has taken over this role today.”

ANCB Interview



View of Villa Ajavon, Ouidah. Photo credit: Nil FONTANAROSA

Decentralized Cooperation and the Institutional Structure of Beninese Municipalities



Structure of Municipal Institutions in Benin (2026) Credits: Nil FONTANAROSA

This diagram is an educational tool intended to illustrate the general structure of municipal institutions in Benin. It does not correspond to any actual municipality but rather represents a combination of various configurations. The number of departments under the jurisdiction of the Directorate of Local Development and Planning (DDLDP), their names, as well as the names and number of technical committees vary from one municipality to another. The more funds a municipality has allocated for its administrative operations, the larger the number of departments tends to be. However, the senior governing bodies (Mayor, Municipal Council, Supervisory Council, Executive Secretary, DDLDP) are the same in all municipalities. Furthermore, only those bodies relevant to understanding decentralized cooperation are shown. Consequently, some major bodies

VI. Practices, Challenges, and Prospects for Decentralized Cooperation in

Benin
involved in municipal operations are not included above.

In Benin, the mayor remains the leading municipal figure in the area of decentralized cooperation. This falls within his purview. The mayor determines the city's broad diplomatic priorities. That said, any project with financial implications for the municipality must be submitted for approval to the Supervisory Council, whose members are elected officials serving on the Municipal Council. Thus, although projects are explored and negotiated by the mayor, the Supervisory Council must always deliberate on them. There are also a varying number of thematic technical committees within the Supervisory Council, whose members are responsible for discussing specific aspects of the city's policy. In these committees, the Chair and the rapporteur are appointed by the majority party. Committee members are also elected officials who serve on the Municipal Council. All these officials embody the political aspect of the cooperation. As for implementation, instructions are transmitted by the Mayor to the Executive Secretary, who forwards them to the municipality's Director of Local Development and Planning, who is supported, when necessary, by a department dedicated to decentralized cooperation. This administrative aspect constitutes the technical arm of the political process. It enables the implementation and successful completion of projects.

An important point highlighted by these explanations is that decentralized cooperation is not a given. It requires a necessary long-term allocation of resources, to which elected officials must first agree. Through the Supervisory Council—which has the power to oppose the Mayor's proposals—the Mayor's objectives are evaluated and weighed against the municipality's other development goals. If

decentralized cooperation is perceived as a sustainable investment by the city, then the proposals will be approved at the political level, incorporated into the municipal development plan, and submitted to the administrative branch.

“ We are working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economy and Finance to help municipalities that approach us find partnerships, but political issues at the municipal level sometimes derail the process. The mayor won't sign an agreement on the very first trip, and results don't materialize immediately upon signing. Some municipal councils, which must authorize the mayor's trip, believe these trips are costly and don't yield short-term results, even though the results of decentralized cooperation are realized in the medium and long term.

ANCB Interview

”

A proliferation of partnerships that does not always guarantee action on the ground

One of the key lessons from the field in Benin is the need to distinguish between the formal existence of a partnership and its actual effectiveness. In several municipalities, decentralized cooperation is promoted as a tool for international engagement, but the identified partnerships do not always lead to concrete projects. The case of Cotonou illustrates this tension between

partnership density and operational implementation: the existence of numerous partnerships does not necessarily mean that all of them are active.

“ *The low level of participation by municipalities can be explained by the limited benefits received by Beninese municipalities. When a partner sends you supplies, and you have to clear customs for items shipped by container and bear the associated costs—especially if the municipalities lack the necessary funds—they sometimes abandon the process.*

” ANCB Interview

This observation complements the findings of the quantitative survey, in which twinning arrangements and cooperation agreements appear to be forms of cooperation between local governments that are still very prevalent. While these forms do exist, their mere presence is not sufficient to gauge the actual intensity of cooperation. A twinning arrangement may retain strong symbolic, historical, or diplomatic value without necessarily producing concrete effects on local policies. Indeed, the implementation of joint projects depends on financial, human, and technical resources that municipalities are not always able to mobilize. The transition from a diplomatic relationship to a concrete project is often a difficult step.

A schematic “step-by-step” understanding of decentralized cooperation leads us to distinguish three distinct levels. The first is that of the formal relationship, through a twinning arrangement, an agreement, or a declaration of intent. The second is that of active cooperation

, where the parties engage in regular exchanges and maintain a dialogue. The third level is where cooperation leads to the implementation of projects with concrete benefits for both parties.

The results of the field survey suggest that the gap between these levels should be interpreted not so much as incomplete cooperation but rather as evidence of distinct forms of cooperation. In the case of Benin, most partnership relationships seem, in fact, to result in fewer joint projects than in establishing connections between cities that share a number of commonalities, which in turn facilitates the exchange of best practices, the conduct of official visits, and the sharing of experiences. This discrepancy from our initial expectations thus leads us to broaden the definition of the effectiveness of cooperation beyond the mere implementation of projects.

“ *Today, people recognize Ouidah’s significance in historical, cultural, and religious terms. In the past, this was the place from which slaves departed for the other side. The government’s commitment to making Benin a tourist destination with flagship cities means that many people are now interested in Ouidah. We are therefore increasingly pursuing a proactive diplomatic strategy to engage with all the cities that are interested in us, even if concrete projects haven’t materialized yet. But one way or another, once tourists are here, it helps drive the local economy.*

” Ouidah Interview



Street scene, Cotonou.
Credit: Saerom CHONG

Finally, it is important to emphasize that existing partnerships require regular revitalization. There can be no active partnership without ongoing contact. However, numerous factors—starting with political turnover at the head of city governments—are highly likely to stall or slow down a partnership that had previously been dynamic.

Cooperation is largely based on the exchange of best practices

Interviews conducted in Benin show that decentralized cooperation is not limited to seeking funding or carrying out joint projects. In several cases, it also relies on the exchange of experiences, methods, and

of local know-how. This trend aligns with the results of the questionnaire survey, in which many local governments report being able to “influence” other cities by sharing their “best practices.”

In Benin, this exchange of practices often takes flexible forms. Cotonou, for example, has hosted delegations from Lomé and N'Djamena who came to learn from its waste management practices, while Ouagadougou has drawn inspiration from the operations of Cotonou's municipal police force. For Ouidah, which is seeking to develop its tourism sector, inter-city meetings frequently take place during cultural weeks or festivals, either in Benin or in partner cities. These events, which take the form of brief, goal-oriented exchanges, foster the sharing of experiences and the networking of municipal stakeholders.

“Whenever there are events or major

events in New Orleans, the city is invited. For example, two weeks ago, we went there for a jazz festival. That's where jazz was born, alongside slavery. And since we also want to create a jazz festival in Ouidah, we went there to see how things work there, to observe best practices, so we can better organize and structure what we want to establish here. We're also planning to create a mural to highlight Benin's presence in New Orleans through Ouidah. In fact, our cooperation with New Orleans focuses mainly on culture and tourism.

Ouidah Interview

”

This observation helps to qualify the idea of cooperation based on short- or long-term projects. Cities can learn from one another without necessarily formalizing this learning immediately into a joint program. In this context, cooperation serves as a space for the exchange of ideas, methods, and best practices. It exerts influence, but an influence that is often diffuse, conveyed through contacts, visits, accounts of experiences, and the observation of other communities' practices. The case of Cotonou thus demonstrates that the dissemination of best practices should not be understood solely as a complete transfer of a model. It can also take the form of partial inspiration, gradual adaptation, or an exchange limited to certain areas and tailored to the local context.

Culture as the Primary Focus of Cooperation

“ On every continent—with the exception of Oceania for now—we have cities that need to come together to champion this cultural mixing and facilitate cultural exchange, in order to show the world that we can overcome and transcend all divisions—whether based on race, ethnicity, or religion—and build a world that is a little freer, while making a significant contribution to the tourism program.”

Ouidah Interview

Among the aspects observed in the field, culture emerges as one of the most important drivers of decentralized cooperation in Benin. It is not merely a field

area of action among others. It serves as a tool for boosting regional appeal, enhancing

“ Every city is now trying to create its own festival. Porto Novo has the FIP, the Porto Novo International Festival, established in 2017. Cotonou is also preparing to launch its own festival, and so on. There are many municipalities that already have a festival of culture and the arts. In a way, cities have come to realize today that through culture, they can further empower themselves and gain visibility. You're seeing the return of masks and other objects that were looted from Africa back in the day. Since that event took place at the presidential palace, the statues have been touring Benin. It's sparked renewed interest in culture, and I believe we've come to understand that the cultural market is one that can thrive if cities truly commit to it.”

Interview in Cotonou

and building an outward-looking urban identity. Decentralized cooperation is therefore closely linked to a strategy for promoting culture and heritage.

Ouidah is a prime example of this trend. The city is leveraging its historical heritage, festivals, and cultural weeks (Vodun Days, Ouidah Blue, Ouidah Jazz) to become a leading tourist destination in West Africa. In January 2025, 435,000 visitors were welcomed during Vodun Days, a national event celebrating Vodun culture that marks the city's annual peak in tourist attendance. Ouidah has also recently launched the Sister Cities Forum initiative, a gathering of all its sister cities scheduled for 2027.

VI. Practices, Challenges, and Prospects for Decentralized Cooperation in Benin

The John Smith International Cultural Encounter Center in Ouidah reinforces this direction. Located on a site of great historical significance—the former colonial courthouse—this multidisciplinary venue, dedicated to the written arts, particularly theater, provides the city with an institutional and symbolic resource for developing international relations among cultural institutions. The creation of this cultural center was made possible by initial support from international cooperation, with an initial grant from the AIMF Cooperation Fund in 2019. Its membership in the network of European Cultural Encounter Centers demonstrates that cultural facilities can become effective vehicles for cooperation. They help connect local heritage, international networks, and projects aimed at promoting the region.

The areas of cooperation discussed in Ouidah confirm this central role of culture. Cultural cooperation, educational exchanges, and the strengthening of artisanal capacities emerge as priority areas. Culture functions there as a common language between cities, a tool for tourism development, and a resource for attracting new partners. This importance of culture aligns with the general trends revealed by the questionnaire survey, in which culture ranks among the most cross-cutting themes in cooperation between local governments. The case of Ouidah, however, allows us to go further: it demonstrates that culture is not only a theme for cooperation but also a strategy for urban diplomacy.

Cooperation Closely Linked to Non-Municipal Actors

Beninese municipalities do not build their international partnerships on their own. On the contrary, the interviews highlight the decisive role of intermediaries in identifying, formalizing, and sometimes consolidating cooperative relationships. This reliance on intermediaries is all the more significant given that not all municipalities have a sufficiently structured department to directly seek out foreign partners.

Embassies play a central role in this regard. They facilitate contact between cities in different countries (between Ouidah and Dali, for example), direct certain opportunities, and can lend diplomatic legitimacy to initial exchanges. Their involvement demonstrates that decentralized cooperation, although driven by local governments, often remains connected to traditional diplomatic channels. The international activities of municipalities are therefore not autonomous. They are part of a broader institutional environment in which states and their diplomatic missions continue to play a leading role.

“

We have been experiencing decentralization since 2003. Successive governments have each set new directions for decentralization. As a result, city governments—which are decentralized structures of the state—follow these changes. For example, the government that has just completed its 10th year in office closed Benin’s embassies. It would be difficult for Cotonou to enter into a partnership with a city whose central government no longer maintains diplomatic relations with Benin. All of this has repercussions for communities at the grassroots level, within the municipalities.

Interview in
Cotonou

”

VI. Practices, Challenges, and Prospects for Decentralized Cooperation in Benin

The National Association of Municipalities of Benin (ANCB) is another key player. It serves as an interface between Beninese municipalities and potential partners, particularly by collaborating with other umbrella organizations, such as the Umbrella Association of Municipalities of Togo (FCT) or the Moroccan Association of Municipal Council Presidents (AMPCC). This intermediary role is particularly important for municipalities that do not yet have a strong independent capacity for international outreach. The ANCB helps raise awareness of the municipalities' needs, guide partners, and structure certain cooperation initiatives.

“ We currently have, at the ANCB, two strong recommendations. The first is to provide municipalities with a guide to decentralized cooperation that will enable them to understand the mechanisms needed to establish sustainable partnerships that benefit local populations. The second is to ensure that embassies effectively mobilize partners to support municipalities. Today, we want our embassies to be a bit more proactive in supporting local communities. More than 60% of the Sustainable Development Goals are localized. Therefore, ambassadors must work to ensure that municipalities have more partnerships to address the challenges related the Sustainable Development Goals. ”

ANCB Interview

organizations, also plays this role as a facilitator for cities seeking to expand their decentralized cooperation to new horizons. The organization's annual general assemblies (the 2023 assembly was held

in Cotonou), as well as its extensive network of contacts, are assets that are made available to member cities.

“ Today, the AIMF plays a central role in our decentralized cooperation. For example, the partnerships between Ouidah and the cities of New Orleans and Cap-Haïtien were established thanks to the AIMF. The proposal to revitalize the sister-city relationship between the city of Ouidah and the city of Nantes is also thanks to the AIMF. We are working ”

baritiava that the AIMF is at the heart of
Interview in
Ouidah

At the level of another country, Morocco's partnership program in sub-Saharan Africa also illustrates the importance of institutional frameworks outside of municipalities in establishing new cooperative relationships. Partnership opportunities, therefore, do not arise solely from direct relationships between local governments. They can be facilitated by embassies, umbrella organizations, national programs, or international networks. This situation demonstrates that decentralized cooperation is all the more effective when it is conceived and carried out in collaboration with national governments.

This reliance on intermediaries reveals that not all municipalities have yet fully embraced the pursuit of partnerships. Some local governments remain more in a position of passively receiving opportunities than of proactively pursuing partnerships. The development of decentralized cooperation therefore requires not only external contacts but also a local capacity to formulate requests, identify relevant partners, and maintain these relationships over the long term.

CONCLUSION

The case of the cities of Cotonou and Ouidah confirms several trends observed in the study, while also significantly qualifying them. It shows that decentralized cooperation is a learning environment that serves the goal of expanding influence and also presents a challenge in terms of implementation. The Beninese municipalities studied seek to expand their partnerships, promote their heritage, and exchange best practices, but their actions remain dependent on national and local administrative structures, available resources, institutional intermediaries, and local political ownership.

Above all, this case study shows that decentralized cooperation cannot be analyzed solely on the basis of the number of reported partnerships. It must be examined in terms of the extent to which these partnerships are active, the resources mobilized, the actors who make them possible, and the actual impacts they have on the local level. Benin thus emerges as a particularly revealing case study of the contemporary tensions in cooperation between local governments: a strong desire for international engagement, but an implementation capacity that remains uneven.



Obama Beach, Cotonou

Credit: Nil

FONTANAROSA

The AVCOI from a Malagasy Perspective

How does a network of island local governments foster cooperation despite disparities in resources, governance, and capacity for action?

For this study, we have chosen to use the term “Malagasy” instead of “Malgache.” “Malagasy” was used by all of our local interviewees and appears in Madagascar’s Constitution as well as in all of its official documents.

INTRODUCTION

The conceptual framework of decentralized cooperation, forged within the French legal and political context, cannot be directly applied to countries of the Global South without adaptation. It accompanies decentralization processes that are still incomplete, seeking to strengthen local institutions whose autonomy remains, in practice, very limited¹. It also embodies a participatory ambition: to involve local populations in decisions that affect them, making cooperation a vehicle for “human development”². However, its concrete implementation in practice remains variable and is the subject of debate—a tension that this case study specifically aims to shed light on.

Long analyzed through the lens of relations between local governments in the North and those in the South, decentralized cooperation now takes on more diverse forms, with city networks being one of them. Indeed, by connecting local governments facing common challenges and sharing common goals, these networks create spaces for exchange, learning, and raising awareness that go beyond traditional bilateral frameworks and also lead to concrete forms of cooperation.

The Association of Cities and Local Authorities of the Indian Ocean (AVCOI) is part of this movement. It is a network of local authorities founded in 1990, bringing together some 40 member cities spread across six islands or archipelagos: the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mayotte, Réunion, and the Seychelles. Its headquarters are located in Saint-Denis, Réunion, and its governance is based on a co-presidency shared among several member cities, supplemented by vice-presidents, a secretariat, and a treasury distributed among the various islands represented. This institutional structure gives the network a degree of geographic and

1. Bekkouche, A., & Gallet, B. (2004). Decentralized cooperation: the emergence of local governments and territorial authorities on the international stage. pp. 384–385.

2. Ibid., p. 377.

political representativeness.



Location of AVCOI member cities within the islands and archipelagos of the Indian Ocean.



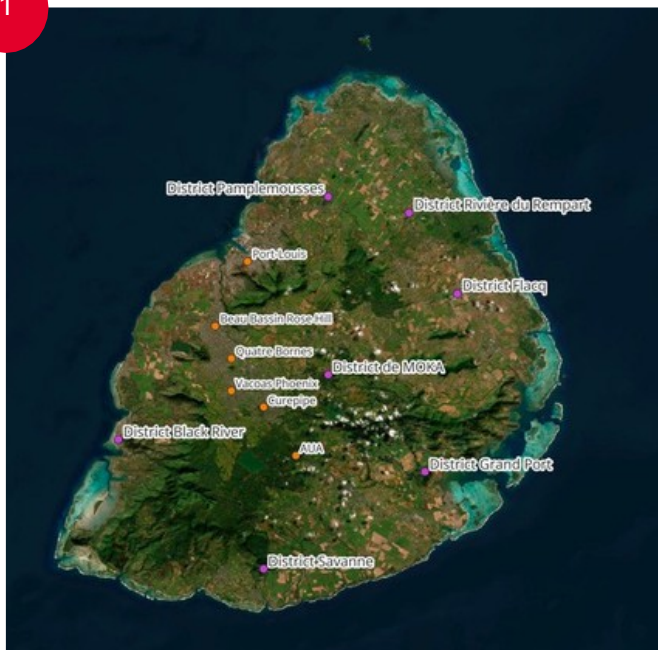
Location of AVCOI member cities in Mayotte.

METHODOLOGY

Created using QGIS software based on AVCOI data, these maps show the locations of the association’s member municipalities as of December 2025. Orange dots represent member cities and purple dots represent member districts, overlaid on a base map © Esri.

VI. AVCOI: The Conditions and Challenges of Regional Cooperation

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2



3



1

Locations of AVCOI member cities in Mauritius.

2

Locations of AVCOI member cities on Réunion Island.

3

Locations of AVCOI member cities in the Comoros.

After a period of inactivity, the network experienced a significant revival beginning in 2016, thanks to the support of the strategic partnership between AIMF and the European Union. As early as 2015, as part of an agreement with the European Commission aimed at facilitating regional platforms for dialogue among local governments, the AIMF identified AVCOI as a key institution for strengthening regional integration in the Indian Ocean, echoing the role that town twinning had historically played in European integration. This initiative is part of a broader commitment: the AIMF supports several similar platforms around the world, notably in the African Great Lakes region and in Southeast Asia. Within this framework, AVCOI functions as an entity supported by the AIMF, which notably funds the position of executive secretary, in an explicit spirit of non-substitution, according to the association. The goal is to preserve and foster a regional dynamic based on shared values, without encroaching on the network's autonomy.

The AIMF plays a central role—not only financially but also symbolically and in an almost “emotional” sense, as the association’s secretary general explains:

“ The AIMF has always held a central place through the bonds of affection that members feel for it.”

Interview with the association’s secretary general the association, May 15, 2026

The association’s annual meetings and general assemblies illustrate the network’s renewed vitality around unifying themes such as the circular economy, waste management, and climate resilience.

In terms of its operations, AVCOI relies on a dual financial mechanism: membership dues, which form the foundation of its own resources, and applications for project funding from institutional donors, foremost among which is AIMF, as well as European programs such as Interreg.

This approach illustrates a distinctive aspect of the cooperation championed by the AIMF and its members: the need to combine institutional support and capacity building with support for concrete, on-the-ground projects. This model, emblematic of the AIMF—the only network of cities that co-finances concrete projects in member cities through its Cooperation Fund—is particularly evident in the AVCOI. While the association’s ability to bring mayors together is essential, the AVCOI’s momentum also relies on concrete projects that have enabled it to engage in on-the-ground action alongside its member local governments. This development was made possible in particular by the evolution of European Union support through the AIMF-EU partnership, which has gradually shifted toward funding concrete projects.

We have chosen to analyze this network through the lens of the Malagasy local governments that are members of AVCOI. Madagascar is one of the network’s most active delegations and embodies many of the dynamics that best illustrate both its potential and its challenges.

Decentralization that is legally enshrined but faces significant limitations in its practical implementation; local governments with limited resources but genuine ambitions; and a demand for cooperation that the network sometimes struggles to fully accommodate: these are all characteristics that make Malagasy cities a particularly illuminating barometer of the conditions for successful decentralized cooperation in the Global South. In this sense, Malagasy local governments highlight the tensions and dynamics that run through the entire network.

How do Malagasy cities fit into AVCOI, a regional cooperation network that contributes to their integration into a broader space of cooperation among cities, while operating in a context marked by persistent asymmetries among its members?

This case study examines, in turn, the political and institutional conditions that shape the engagement of Malagasy local governments within the network, the concrete effects produced by the cooperation initiatives implemented, and the prospects for future development identified by the actors themselves.

Committing Despite Everything: Malagasy Cities in the Architecture of AVCOI

Between Texts and Practices: Malagasy Decentralization as a Foundational Condition for Cooperation

From Founding Texts to Realities on the Ground: A Legal Framework Undergoing Reform

The ability of Malagasy cities to engage in decentralized cooperation cannot be viewed in isolation from the institutional framework within which they operate. The current legal framework for decentralization in Madagascar is structured around the 2014 laws on decentralized local governments, supplemented by several implementing decrees adopted beginning in 2015³. On paper, this framework grants local governments a certain level of administrative and financial autonomy. In practice, however, the stakeholders interviewed during the fieldwork offer a more nuanced—or even harsher—assessment: in their view, certain provisions of these laws are “outdated,” and the entire framework requires a thorough overhaul. The effectiveness of decentralization remains theoretical and is still “undergoing a complete overhaul,” according to a ministry official interviewed. Previous oversight mechanisms—such as the review of legality conducted by decentralized authorities, the validation of certain acts and cooperation agreements, and the coordinating role played by government agencies—therefore continue to shape relations between the central government and local authorities, pending the adoption of a revised framework⁴.

4. Republic of Madagascar. (2014). Organic Law No. 2014-018 governing the powers, organizational and operational procedures of decentralized local governments, as well as the management of their own affairs, supplemented by interviews conducted with institutional actors in 2026.

3. Republic of Madagascar, Organic Law No. 2014-018, 2014.

Supporting and Regulating: The Ambivalent Role of the State in Decentralized Cooperation

The relationship between the state and local governments in the context of decentralized cooperation proves to be more complex than a simple dichotomy between constraint and autonomy. On the one hand, the state’s involvement in cooperation is institutionally mandatory: any city wishing to establish a partnership with a foreign local government must notify the ministry, which provides institutional support—including verifying legality, validating the framework, and offering logistical support depending on the nature of the proposed cooperation. The ministry also organizes coordination forums. In this context, the state plays a supporting role, which the local actors we interviewed acknowledge. Nevertheless, in certain circumstances, state procedures can create unintended friction in the implementation of cooperation projects, as we will show below.

Thus, the degree of local autonomy directly determines a city's ability to engage substantially in an international network.

A municipality that lacks control over its budget and depends on ministerial approvals for each partnership is structurally less capable of sustaining cooperation projects over the long term than a municipality with genuine fiscal and administrative autonomy. This link between effective decentralization and productive decentralized cooperation is a fundamental condition that underlies all network dynamics in Madagascar.

A Gradual Transfer: The Issue of Sectoral Competencies and Their Effective Exercise

This resource constraint is part of a broader process—the gradual transfer of authority—which is still being consolidated. According to our interviewees, sectoral ministries “do not let go entirely.” In other words, even when areas such as waste management, the environment, or civil protection formally fall under the jurisdiction of municipalities, the relevant ministries retain effective oversight over resources, decisions, and partnerships. This retention of authority and resources directly undermines the autonomy of local governments and, consequently, their ability to establish long-term partnerships.

Furthermore, it is important to note the existence of a level intended to serve as an interface: the district, an intermediate level between local authorities and ministries. Monthly meetings are organized there by the ministry—a legal requirement for coordination within the district—bringing together mayors and department heads. However, in practice, this level struggles to compensate for the actual shortfall in funding; it tends to function more as a control mechanism than as a genuine space for local empowerment.

Joining, cooperating, drawing inspiration: what AVCOI brings to Malagasy local governments

Multiple motivations: access to resources, sharing of experiences, and the imperative of openness

The motivations of Malagasy local governments to join AVCOI are numerous and often intertwined.

The first is the desire to benefit directly from projects implemented within AVCOI and to gain access to funding that is difficult to obtain outside the network. The second lies in the sharing of experiences. The local governments surveyed often cited the exchange of best practices and knowledge among local governments facing similar challenges, as well as the opportunity to forge partnerships—particularly with French and Francophone local governments—as key factors in their participation. The network thus serves to raise visibility: by participating, Malagasy cities gain access to a regional stage that allows them to be “seen from afar” and to make themselves known to institutional actors who are sometimes difficult to reach on their own. This recognition is seen as a benefit in itself, regardless of the specific projects that result from it.

5. Ferreira, C. (2023). *Handbook on Decentralization, Devolution, and the State*, Ignacio Lago, Cheltenham (UK) and Northampton (USA). *Regional & Federal Studies*, 33(3), 397–398.

Joining the association is also driven by a sense of necessity, which the stakeholders themselves describe as imperative: “Madagascar cannot afford to sever its cooperative ties,” emphasizes a representative from one of the municipalities surveyed. In line with the national policy of regional integration, this conviction is all the more compelling given the country’s insular nature: participating in external networks seems inevitable for local governments in order to avoid isolation or even “stagnation.”

The network also serves as a compass for elected officials and technical staff. As one stakeholder put it, **“you aren’t born a mayor”: AVCOI provides a space for learning and socialization in the role of a local elected official and, more broadly, a space for positioning and inspiration, allowing local governments to assess themselves and calibrate their ambitions to envision their city from a broader perspective.** In this sense, belonging to the network also means gaining a collective frame of reference that fuels local political ambition.

“AVCOI is a family”: the relational dimension of the network, between strengths and ambivalences

AVCOI is distinguished by a strong relational culture, often described by its members in emotional and familial terms:

**“ AVCOI is a family;
we know each other well. ”**

This informal dimension serves as a powerful organizational bond, where internal cohesion is based on trust and close relationships among participants. For some, the importance of this “family-like” dimension raises concerns that collaboration might turn into arenas of political confrontation rather than forums for technical exchange⁶. Yet the primacy of informality and interpersonal relationships between mayors and elected officials is crucial to establishing concrete cooperation. For example, the collaboration between Vacoas Phoenix in Mauritius and Antsirabe in Madagascar has a long history, but it has been intensified thanks to the network, according to Antsirabe’s cooperation departments. Today, the two municipalities collaborate closely, which will lead to sporting events this summer.

Nevertheless, this culture of familiarity carries a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, it fosters cooperation and “provides many ideas, courage, and strength because the problems are shared,” according to a member of the technical teams that have benefited from AVCOI projects. On the other hand, it fuels a reluctance to share “insider tips.” Some mayors describe themselves as “reluctant” to share their contacts with potentially competing cities, fearing they might lose a hard-won comparative advantage. Such views remain very much in the minority, even if they are well-founded, as cooperation is fundamental for the municipalities involved.

6. Russell, S. and Healy, A. (2015). What Kind of Urban Expertise for a Europe of Cities? The Eurocities Network and Its Experts. *European Policy*, 49(3), 54–83.

Cooperating Despite Differences: The Internal Challenges of AVCOI

dynamics at work.

The North-South divide: when diversity leads to imbalance

AVCOI brings together local governments with diverse profiles: metropolitan areas with structured administrations and relatively stable resources, such as Saint-Denis on Réunion or Victoria in the Seychelles, coexist alongside cities facing challenges of massive urbanization, poverty, and institutional fragility, such as Antananarivo. This diversity, which is a source of strength for the network, also results in a persistent asymmetry in the flow of knowledge: **“on technical issues, cities in the North lead and those in the South follow.”** The network thus reproduces, on a regional scale, a dynamic of vertical knowledge transfer that local governments would nevertheless like to move beyond.

This trend is not insignificant. It calls into question the very nature of exchange within AVCOI: is it a genuine horizontal exchange among peers, or a transfer of models designed for different contexts? The interviews reveal nuanced patterns: Antsirabe, for example, certainly draws inspiration from Victoria (a “southern” municipality with greater resources than its counterpart) on the issue of recycling bins, but adapts, experiments, and then passes on what it has learned to other Malagasy municipalities, thereby playing the role of an intermediary hub in the circulation of knowledge. The technical teams put it clearly: **these exchanges**

“are useful within AVCOI because the problems are common despite different contexts.” The North/South dichotomy itself therefore warrants scrutiny in the context of AVCOI: it describes a structural trend without necessarily reflecting the reality of the learning

sometimes “less willingness” to engage with a network whose priority issues currently align more closely with the urgent needs of less-resourced islands. Conversely, Madagascar and the Comoros generate a demand that the network “cannot fully accommodate.” Some cities wish to join, but AVCOI is unable to accept all applications, creating frustration among the excluded local governments.

*Tensions that undermine cohesion:
decentralization, politics, and geopolitics*

There is a line of institutional tension. The degree of decentralization varies considerably from one member state to another, creating situations that are difficult to compare. Cities operating in contexts of advanced decentralization have financial and administrative leeway that their counterparts lack.

A rickshaw on the road leading to one of Antsirabe’s open-air dumps.

Credit: Aïnhua GIBOIRE.



Furthermore, Antananarivo occupies a unique position within the Malagasy AVCOI network. As the only metropolis of its kind among the member cities, it enjoys exceptional visibility and institutional experience within the network, but also faces challenges specific to its size and position, which shape both its capabilities and its constraints. As a result, an implicit—and sometimes explicit—expectation has developed regarding its role: that of a “resource city,” capable of sharing its experiences—including its challenges—with other local governments in the network, so that they may draw inspiration from them and avoid certain pitfalls. This leadership role, however, remains difficult to fully assume. According to our interviewees at the German national cooperation agency ProDéCID-GIZ⁷, the capital “operates within a particularly complex institutional and political context”—a reality that reflects its political vitality and inevitably influences its room for maneuver. Furthermore, sharing one’s own management challenges in a collective setting requires a level of transparency that is not always easy to adopt, regardless of the city in question. However, several stakeholders emphasize that the value of these exchanges lies not only in sharing success stories but also in pooling the challenges encountered and the lessons learned from less successful experiences. This results in an ambivalence in Antananarivo’s position: while it is the city best placed to drive substantial exchange, it finds itself in a context that makes it difficult to fully maintain this stance.

The network also faces political tensions. The rivalry between Mauritius and Mayotte, alluded to obliquely in several interviews, illustrates how geopolitical disputes external to the network can seep in and undermine cooperation, particularly regarding the issuance of visas for working meetings and visits aimed at sharing experiences. **Local governments are not immune to the conflicts plaguing the states on which they depend, and AVCOI is no exception to this rule.**

From a Cooperation Network to a Partnership Network: An Ambition in the Making

In light of these asymmetries, a central question is raised by several interviewees: “*How can we move from equality to equity within the network?*” Several approaches were suggested, such as forming working groups among cities of comparable size and profile to foster more horizontal exchanges, or creating a directory of potential collaborations with each member.

7. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) – German Agency for International Cooperation.

These proposals point toward a more profound transformation: moving from a logic of cooperation—which implies an asymmetrical relationship between a provider and a beneficiary—to a logic of partnership, based on reciprocity and the recognition of what each member has to offer—ideas and aspirations that have driven North-South decentralized cooperation for several years. This evolution is explicitly desired by several stakeholders: **“International cooperation will be facilitated by ensuring that local governments also have something to offer.”** From this perspective, Madagascar is no longer merely a recipient territory but a source of resources: human capital, cultural and artisanal know-how, and agricultural and mineral resources are specifically cited. This ambition appears to be central to the Malagasy local governments surveyed, as well as a prerequisite for the sustainability of the network itself.

This desire to move from asymmetrical cooperation to a partnership based on reciprocity echoes the vision of relationality championed by Michele Acuto, who emphasizes that cities within networks mutually depend on one another to sustain their presence on the global stage⁸. By seeking to highlight Madagascar’s own resources, these stakeholders are part of a global ambition (“worlding”), aimed at repositioning territories often left “off the map” as active resource hubs within the globalized urban imagination. This approach aligns with Acuto’s call for a more cosmopolitan urban diplomacy, where equity and horizontal exchange among peers make it possible to move beyond mere hierarchical power dynamics.

Continuity and Representation: Local Political Instability in the Face of the Demands of Cooperation

Technical Staff and Elected Officials: Continuity Beyond Transitions

Like most cities involved in decentralized cooperation, the engagement of Malagasy cities within AVCOI is directly influenced by electoral cycles and changes in local governance, which shape the nature and regularity of their participation in the network.

In its recent history, Antananarivo has had more Presidents of the Special Delegation (the PDS is an administrative authority appointed by the state to manage a decentralized local government when the normal conditions for elections or the functioning of elected bodies are not met⁹) than elected mayors. Far from being merely anecdotal, this peculiarity raises a structural question: how can a city maintain long-term cooperation commitments when its local executive is subject to frequent changes in leadership and turnover? The response provided by several of our respondents is illuminating: in their view, **local political instability does not affect international cooperation, insofar as it is the technical staff who ensure its continuity**. Municipal technical staff align themselves with the current administration while maintaining the momentum of ongoing projects.

9. Decision No. 06-HCC/D3 of February 22, 2024, concerning Law No. 2024-002 amending and supplementing certain provisions of Law No. 2014-020 of September 27, 2014, relating to the resources of Decentralized Local Authorities, election procedures, as well as the organization, the functioning and powers of their bodies, as amended and supplemented by Law No. 2018-011 of July 11, 2018, and by Law No. 2021-010 of August 5, 2021. <https://www.hcc.gov.mg/?p=8873>.

8. Acuto, M. (2021). *How to Build a Global City: Recognizing the Symbolic Power of a Global Urban Imagination*. Cornell University Press.

This model of continuity through staff members is not unique to Madagascar but is part of a broader trend, also observed in local governments in the North. As early as 1977, drawing on the example of major French cities, Jobert and Sellier observed that the continuity of municipal action relied structurally more on the permanence of technical staff than on that of elected officials, the latter exerting only “limited” influence on the actual content of policies. This “preponderance of professionals,” which they document in the European context, is echoed in the dynamics observed in Antananarivo, where the continuity of cooperation projects is ensured by municipal technicians regardless of political transitions¹⁰. In fact, in Madagascar as elsewhere, the resilience provided by technical staff is a real asset, provided it is linked to a political will that gives it direction.

This continuity is not, however, automatic. In the case of AVCOI, the field survey highlights that changes in executive leadership regularly entail significant effort to re-establish ownership of ongoing projects. The network’s executive secretary is required to re-present the initiatives undertaken, their objectives, and their progress to new mayors and their teams when there is no dedicated department.

Between Training and Implementation: The Concrete Effects of Cooperation and Their Constraints

The circular economy and waste management: a flagship project of AVCOI

“Soft” Approaches as a Mode of Action: Training Rather Than Providing Equipment

For now, AVCOI does not fund physical infrastructure. Its involvement occurs at an earlier stage: assessments conducted by experts and consultants, the development of roadmaps for city departments and elected officials, thematic training sessions, and the exchange of best practices among member cities. **The decision to invest in “soft” rather than “hard” measures stems both from budgetary constraints and a deliberate choice.** It is based on the belief that building human capacity yields results just as sustainable as the transfer of equipment.

The journey of Antsirabe’s technical teams serves as a textbook example of the dissemination model that AVCOI seeks to foster. After receiving training from AVCOI on the circular economy (a three-day course, including travel), the director in charge of the environment was then able to enroll in a training program in Germany, as this initial certification served as the prerequisite for admission. The network thus functioned as a *gateway*: by fostering initial expertise, it opened the door to extra-regional partnerships that the local government could not have achieved on its own.

“This also opens doors to further strengthen collaborations, particularly with Europe,” she acknowledges.

10. Jobert, B., & Sellier, M. (1977). Major Cities: Local Autonomy and
VI. *Année d'innovation, Conditions and Challenges of Regional
Cooperation*, p. 209. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43117994>
-

But the most remarkable effect is not so much the individual trajectory as what it has produced collectively. Indeed, the director has systematically shared the knowledge acquired: with her staff through training reports and informal exchanges, with other municipal departments, and beyond that, with municipalities that are not members of AVCOI via the Malagasy intermunicipal solid waste management platform. **Knowledge thus circulates well beyond the formal boundaries of the network.** We are witnessing a process of dissemination whose effects extend far beyond what a traditional project evaluation would be able to assess. However, a challenge arises for AVCOI, which the director articulates clearly: the knowledge conveyed during the 2023 training sessions was “valid,” but it now needs to be “updated” and sustained. Indeed, post-training follow-up mechanisms are underdeveloped within the network once the roadmaps have been established.

In substance, the discussions within AVCOI have produced clear practical guidelines for Antsirabé. The city is drawing inspiration from the model in Victoria, Seychelles, which successfully integrated four-color waste sorting into the population’s behavior by proceeding in stages: “Victoria began by raising awareness among households and municipalities, then gradually placed bins in busy streets and parks.” Building on this example, Antsirabé is launching awareness campaigns, starting by informing the 60 neighborhood leaders so they can pass the information on to residents; it then plans a realistic second step: implementing a separation of organic and non-organic waste only, before moving toward a more sophisticated sorting system.



Waste bins in the municipality of Antsirabe. Credit:

Aïnhoa GIBOIRE.

Beyond Capacity Building: Toward Material and Infrastructure Support

Waste management initiatives in Antsirabe also face obstacles that go beyond the scope of training. Following the AVCOI training, the municipality obtained recycling bins partially funded by UNIDO. These have been held up at customs at the port of Tamatave since January 2025 due to storage fees. “It’s a wasted year, but there’s nothing we can do about it,” laments one interviewee. To resolve the situation, the government “need only” grant customs exemptions. This episode serves as a reminder that the success of cooperation projects also depends on decisions made at other institutional levels, which can create friction during implementation.



A sorting center has been built but is not operational because the sorting bins are stuck in Tamatave and Antsirabe.

Credit: Aïnhua GIBOIRE.

The interviews also reveal a broader expectation on the part of local authorities: that of support which is no longer limited to capacity building but also incorporates a material dimension. The “soft” model is beginning to show its limitations in the eyes of actors on the ground, who are now explicitly calling for “more technical and material support,” repeatedly cited as a desirable path forward. This request is not a rejection of the existing model, but rather its logical extension: once human capacities have been strengthened, staff trained, and roadmaps established, the lack of material resources to move to the implementation phase becomes the main obstacle to the sustainability of projects.

The idea of a small-scale infrastructure project in Port-Louis is cited as a concrete example, symbolizing this gradual shift toward more tangible action. The project would involve funding a pumping system to combat the severe flooding plaguing the municipality.

If this trend is confirmed, it would mark a turning point for the network: no longer just supporting cities in their thinking and planning, but helping them take direct action through an “infrastructure solution”¹¹. In return, this requires finding new funding sources and partners capable of taking on projects of a different nature and scale than the current training programs and assessments: a considerable challenge for a network whose own resources remain limited. However, the idea of mobilizing funds dedicated to the climate cause seems to be a promising starting point.

In response to this request from local governments, AVCOI is already expanding its scope of action whenever possible, in exceptional circumstances. Indeed, the network has already mobilized exceptional financial resources following Cyclone Chido, which struck Mayotte, in order to contribute to reconstruction efforts in the affected cities. According to several sources, discussions are also underway regarding support for Tamatave, which was severely affected earlier this year by Cyclone Gezani. These initiatives demonstrate a growing willingness to take action beyond mere capacity building and are already being implemented when circumstances require it.

Between Lessons Learned and Implementation: The Limits of Knowledge Transfer

Discussions within AVCOI yield tangible results: training, the transfer of best practices, and inspiration. However, translating these into concrete and sustainable actions on the ground faces constraints that stem less from the cities’ willingness than from their structural capacities.

11. Jeannot Gilles (2001), “The Impossible End of the ‘Infrastructure Solution’,” *Annales des ponts et chaussées*, No. 99, July–September, pp. 4–14.

The training provided through the network enables cities to receive a customized assessment and, in some cases, a concrete roadmap for action. However, acquiring knowledge does not guarantee its implementation. As the network's executive secretary points out, not all local governments have the same capacity to transform the lessons learned into concrete projects. A distinction thus emerges between cities able to mobilize their own financial resources to carry out the identified actions and those that, due to a lack of sufficient resources, remain at the assessment stage. The best-resourced local governments—notably certain municipalities in Réunion such as La Possession—can build on the momentum initiated by AVCOI through their own investments. Conversely, cities with the tightest budgets struggle to capitalize on the training they have received, despite recognizing its value. The limitation therefore lies not so much in the transfer of knowledge as in the varying capacities of network members to translate that knowledge into public action.

It is worth noting that this tension between knowledge transfer and effective implementation is not unique to networks in the Global South. The study by political scientist Juliana Fornasier on Eurocities, the largest European network of cities, concludes that these networks “contribute only partially to political learning at the local level,” with the effects remaining largely individual and organizational, and having limited influence on actual policy change¹². The author further emphasizes that “the dissemination

new new knowledge to within of the organization depends often on capabilities and the commitment of staff,” an observation that directly resonates with the dynamics observed within AVCOI¹³.

This parallel invites us to view the limitation on capitalization not as a failure specific to the network, but as a structural challenge inherent in network cooperation, regardless of the geographical context or available resources.

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Equipping the network, broadening its horizons: avenues for further development identified by members

The observations gathered during fieldwork and discussions with network stakeholders suggest a few avenues for reflection on possible developments for AVCOI.

Getting to know each other better to cooperate more effectively: the challenge of information sharing

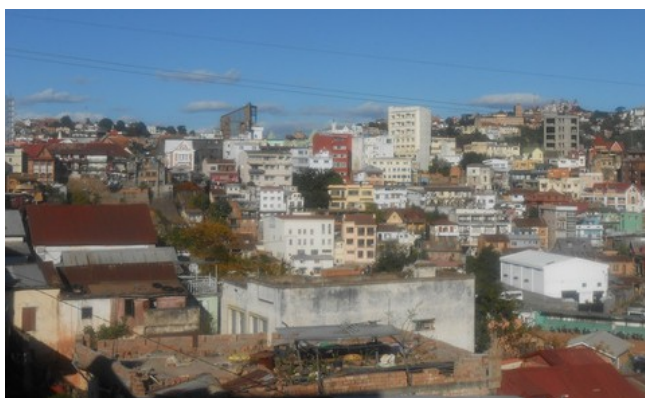
One of the most frequently raised requests is for an accessible directory listing members and potential partnerships within the network. In fact, many member cities are unfamiliar with what others are doing, what partnerships they have formed, which funders they have approached, and what projects are currently underway. This situation seems to stem less from a desire to withhold information than from the lack of formalized mechanisms for sharing it.

12. Fornasier, J. (2026). Exploring the contribution of migration city networks to policy learning in European cities: The case of Eurocities. *Cities*, 170, 106684, p. 1.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2025.106684>

13. Ibid., p. 7.

Although the rural municipality of Alasora is not a member of AVCOI, the experience of its mayor—who is frequently cited for his commitment to decentralized cooperation—offers an illuminating point of comparison. Our interview with the mayor highlighted the central role of personal networks in identifying partners, while also revealing the potential value of tools that facilitate information sharing and networking among local governments.

This demand for transparency and shared information aligns with a trend documented in networks of cities in the North. As part of the URBACT program, Domorenok et al. demonstrated that the creation of document repositories accessible to all members (visit reports, project summaries, best-practice sheets) is one of the most critical conditions for ensuring that exchanges within a network produce lasting effects at the local level¹⁴. These findings raise questions about how AVCOI could strengthen the flow and sharing of information among its members. At a time when digital tools facilitate knowledge-sharing efforts, even within organizations with limited resources, a participatory platform could contribute to a better flow of information within the network.



Credits: Isaure CRÉPIN.

Working groups tailored to the realities of each city

A second avenue involves differentiating the forums for exchange within the network. Several stakeholders point out that AVCOI's plenary meetings bring together cities with very diverse profiles in terms of size, capacity, and level of decentralization. This can make it difficult to foster truly actionable exchanges. The idea of working groups organized by city size or specific theme comes up repeatedly.

This principle of differentiation is not new in the structure of urban networks. C40, the climate network of the world's major cities, has specifically developed thematic subgroups that allow cities to work with peers of similar profiles, rather than in general assemblies where resource disparities tend to shape the discussions. This approach has already been initiated through the establishment of city pairs within the framework of certain AVCOI projects, which provide more targeted forums for exchange among local governments facing similar challenges. A shift toward working groups bringing together several local governments that share similar characteristics or challenges could build on this momentum while promoting a broader exchange of experiences within the network.

14. Domorenok, E., Bassoli, M., & Cagnoli, F. (2023). Exploring the potential of city networks for climate: The case of URBACT. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 25(6), 781–796. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2023.2272843>

Opening the Network Beyond Municipal Institutions

The discussions also highlighted a growing interest in reflecting on the role of non-municipal actors within the network. Among the actors contributing to the vitality of local areas are, in particular, young people, universities, local entrepreneurs, and associations, whose participation in cooperative efforts remains relatively limited. Several stakeholders thus mention the value of gradually opening the network to these parties, not to call into question its purpose of fostering cooperation among local governments, but to strengthen the regional roots of its projects. Such an opening could take the form of occasional participation by representatives of these groups in meetings so that they can share their experiences, needs, and expectations without necessarily becoming members of the network.

This issue of openness to non-institutional actors also arises in networks in the North: Fornasier observes that in Eurocities, nearly half of the active representatives work in cross-cutting areas—such as social affairs and European affairs—rather than strictly within the network’s thematic scope, which tends to enrich exchanges but also complicates coordination. By considering this openness, AVCOI might benefit from reflecting on governance mechanisms that would allow it to be organized while maintaining a robust decision-making framework.

Beyond Cities: The Governmental and Financial Conditions of Cooperation

Removing barriers to mobility: the visa issue

Among the most tangible barriers to regional cooperation, the issue of staff mobility is a recurring theme in the interviews. Attending AVCOI meetings, conducting field visits to a partner city, and hosting foreign technical experts—all of these practices, though central to the network’s operations, are hampered by the constraints of inter-island travel. The most telling example of these obstacles is that of the association’s current executive secretary, a Malagasy national, who is prevented from moving to Saint-Denis, Réunion—even though the association’s headquarters and bank are located there—because she and her family have been unable to obtain visas.

“States should facilitate the movement of people and goods,” says one interviewee, summarizing a widely shared expectation. Indeed, simplifying visa procedures among states whose cities are members of AVCOI—similar to what certain regional bodies have implemented to facilitate the mobility of institutional actors—would constitute a structural advance whose effects would directly benefit the quality and intensity of exchanges within the network. However, this approach goes beyond the AVCOI’s sole jurisdiction: it requires political will on the part of member states, which have sovereign authority over their migration policies.

15. Fornasier, J. (2026). Ibid., p. 7.

*Strengthening the Network's Internal Capacities:
Toward a More Robust Secretariat*

A second area for further development, frequently mentioned, concerns the human resources available to AVCOI to coordinate the network. In its current configuration, the association's secretariat operates with a staff of just one person, which severely limits its ability to expand while maintaining constant oversight of projects.

This internal strengthening is also a prerequisite for accessing larger funding. One stakeholder notes that there is "not yet the possibility of accessing major donors such as the AFD due to a lack of human resources": this observation highlights a potentially vicious cycle—the lack of resources prevents access to the funding that would specifically enable the acquisition of those resources. A strengthened secretariat could play a pivotal role in this process.

Diversifying Funding: The Climate Approach as a Lever

The issue of funding cuts across all the areas for further exploration mentioned. AVCOI relies heavily on support from AIMF, and several local stakeholders question the long-term sustainability of this model. Diversifying funding sources therefore appears to be imperative, and several stakeholders identify climate change as a particularly promising entry point. Island cities in the Indian Ocean are among the territories most vulnerable to the effects of climate change (rising sea levels, cyclones, coastal erosion) and, as such, have strong legitimacy to access funds dedicated to climate adaptation.

"The ability to mobilize climate funds and support members in the transition" is explicitly cited as an important theme for the network. This focus would enable AVCOI to combine two objectives: supporting its members in adapting to the effects of climate change and, through these projects, diversifying its capacity for action and its funding model.

What Cities Are Doing Without Calling It That: Toward a Diplomacy of Indian Ocean Cities?

A concept absent from the lexicon, yet a very real practice

City diplomacy (understood as the ability of local governments to express themselves and take action on the international stage, to forge relationships with foreign actors, and to advocate collective positions beyond national borders on major geopolitical issues of the day, including matters of war and peace) is a concept that has not yet become established in the vocabulary of AVCOI stakeholders. Yet the practices it describes are very much present, often without being explicitly identified as such.

The association's own history illustrates the importance of these practices. Having emerged from advocacy—collectively defending the interests of Indian Ocean island cities vis-à-vis governments and donors—it refocused on concrete projects in response to the feeling that *“things were going in circles.”* This shift from advocacy to projects does not represent an abandonment of the diplomatic dimension, but rather a transformation of its form: the diplomacy of cities also plays out in training sessions, field visits, and exchanges among technical experts. This trajectory aligns with what Benjamin Barber theorizes in **What If Mayors Ruled the World?**: cities are developing a form of pragmatic transnational governance, characterized by a discourse of proximity and technical expertise, and more oriented toward solving concrete, shared problems than nation-states are.⁽¹⁶⁾ AVCOI fits into this framework, even if its members do not yet spontaneously use the term.

There is, however, a potential pitfall, candidly pointed out by some stakeholders: *“It goes too far sometimes,”* when the desire to be seen as an elected official takes precedence over the network's collective goals. Although this is not systematic and this dynamic does not appear to have taken hold within the network, the experts interviewed identify a risk of shifting from “city diplomacy” to “mayor diplomacy”—an individual approach tied to personal ambitions.

Climate Change as the Focus of a Renewed Advocacy Effort

While the refocusing on concrete projects has pushed the strictly diplomatic dimension of the network into the background, several stakeholders are now outlining a desired return to advocacy, but on renewed thematic grounds. Rising sea levels, climate change, and waste management are all issues on which the island cities of the Indian Ocean share a specific and legitimate vulnerability that they can highlight on the international stage. **“A commitment to advocating on issues related to rising sea levels in the context of island life”** is explicitly described by several interviewees as a desirable—even necessary—goal for the network.

This ambition aligns with the overall trajectory of cities' climate diplomacy, which has become significantly more structured since the Paris Agreement (2015) and the commitments made in forums such as the C40 and ICLEI. Island cities in the Global South, which are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, have a particular legitimacy to speak with a collective voice on these issues—a legitimacy that AVCOI could bring to the forefront. This shift from internal technical cooperation to technical cooperation complemented by outward-facing climate advocacy would represent a major evolution for the network: no longer merely exchanging information among members, but speaking with one voice to international actors on issues that threaten the very existence of some of these island territories.

16. Barber, B. R. (2018). What if mayors ruled the world? The City and the Nation-State: International and Strategic Review, No. 112(4), 85–94. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ris.112.0085>

Faced with a central government that is slow to effectively transfer authority and resources, Malagasy cities find in AVCOI a space to form a bloc and defend local interests—such as vulnerability to climate change—which struggle to gain traction in national arenas. *“Beyond mere willingness, participating in AVCOI is a matter of commitment,”* summarizes one of our interviewees, emphasizing that membership entails a responsibility that goes beyond a calculation of self-interest.

on human connections as on institutional mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

The Malagasy cities in AVCOI are part of a network that, despite limited resources, produces real and lasting effects on their practices, visibility, and capacity for collective action. This study sought to analyze the conditions, outcomes, and prospects of this cooperation, from the political and institutional context that shapes it to the future visions outlined by its members.

Cooperation within AVCOI takes place within a framework structurally constrained : a Malagasy decentralization system that exists in law but has not been fully implemented into, limited financial resources, and a central government whose involvement in development cooperation is largely a interdependence than open opposition. It is within these margins that the cities build build their commitments, and this is precisely what makes the network’s informal bonds so crucial. “AVCOI is a family”: this phrase, heard repeatedly during fieldwork, says something essential about what holds the network together. The interpersonal relationships between elected officials and staff, the trust built over the course of meetings, and the example of cooperation between Vacoas Phoenix and Antsirabe—which has intensified thanks to the network—are all elements that show that cohesion rests as much

This aspect is a strength, even if it also creates vulnerabilities: dependence on individuals makes knowledge transfer incomplete, and changes in governance sometimes require the process of explanation to start over.

for the coming years may be less about creating new mechanisms than about equipping existing ones with the means to endure over the long term

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Despite these constraints, AVCOI produces remarkable results: training, exchanges of best practices, opportunities for further cooperation, and the dissemination of knowledge even beyond the member cities. Its main contribution is often intangible—knowledge, contacts, legitimacy, and visibility—and serves as a springboard toward more active participation on the regional and international stage. The remaining challenges do not stem from a lack of knowledge but from the uneven capacity to translate that knowledge into public action: a challenge that, as Fornasier points out, is not unique to Madagascar but is also present in major European networks. The network's diversity—in size, resources, and levels of decentralization—shapes cooperation without hindering it, and the flow of knowledge is not solely top-down: certain cities in the Global South also serve as models.

The approaches identified by the stakeholders all point toward the same goal: strengthening the mechanisms that enable dialogue to translate into sustainable action. Enhancing the flow of information, establishing targeted working groups, opening up to other local stakeholders, strengthening the secretariat, and diversifying funding sources toward climate funds: these are all avenues that point to an AVCOI in transition, seeking to move from a cooperative network to a partnership framework based on reciprocity. In this sense, the cities of the Indian Ocean are already participating—often without explicitly calling it that—in a form of city diplomacy, and the challenge

Conclusion

This study was built around a seemingly simple question: [how do cities build, structure, and perceive their international cooperation and its evolution?](#) As the research progressed, this question proved to be more complex and nuanced than it initially appeared, requiring us to look beyond the usual indicators to identify what truly sustains cooperation over the long term.

The results of the quantitative analysis first paint a picture of a landscape in flux. The number of partnerships established has grown steadily since the 1950s, with a marked acceleration beginning in the 2000s. Twinning arrangements and cooperation agreements coexist without one supplanting the other, reflecting a historical evolution in which new forms of cooperation are added to older ones without replacing them. The geography of partnerships remains dominated by the North-South dynamic and the Francophone world, but the data suggest a slow increase in South-South partnerships since 2015. Thematically, culture and technical cooperation remain the two most prevalent pillars in active partnerships, while climate—the top stated priority on international agendas—still struggles to translate into fully operational cooperation. [This gap between stated ambition and the reality of partnerships is one of the survey's clearest findings.](#)

The two case studies then serve to illustrate and nuance these overall trends from distinct perspectives. In Benin, the study of the cities of Cotonou and Ouidah shows that decentralized cooperation is both a learning experience and a challenge in terms of implementation. The density of a city's partnership network says nothing about the effectiveness of its cooperation: a twinning arrangement can retain strong symbolic and diplomatic value without producing concrete effects on local policies. This is why it is important to distinguish between three levels—formal relationships, active cooperation, and productive cooperation—and to recognize that most Beninese partnerships fall more within the first two categories. This observation does not invalidate cooperation; rather, it broadens its definition: the exchange of best practices, the establishment of connections between cities, and the sharing of experiences are forms of effectiveness in their own right. Culture plays a central strategic role in this regard, particularly in Ouidah, which leverages its heritage related to the transatlantic slave trade as a tool for urban diplomacy and tourism development. Finally, in both cases, the international activities of municipalities do not unfold autonomously: they depend on the support of intermediary actors—the ANCB, embassies, and the AIMF—without whom many partnerships would never have come to fruition.

In Madagascar, the AVCOI study sheds light on a different form of cooperation: one built through a network among local governments facing common challenges stemming from their shared geographical space. The network yields results, starting with training, the transfer of best practices, and increased visibility on the regional stage, even though the translation of these gains into sustainable public actions remains uneven depending on each member's capacity. What the Malagasy case highlights is that the cohesion of a cooperation network relies as much on human connections as on institutional mechanisms. The trust built over the course of meetings, the interpersonal relationships between elected officials and technical staff, and the shared sense of facing common challenges: it is these informal dimensions that make concrete cooperation possible, and their structural fragility—when a mayor changes or a technical staff member leaves—reveals just how much the capitalization of these achievements remains an unresolved challenge.

Three cross-cutting lessons emerge from this body of work. The first is that decentralized cooperation cannot be evaluated based solely on formal indicators. What brings cooperation to life are human connections, trust built over time, and the ability to transform an exchange into concrete learning. The second lesson concerns the indispensable role of intermediary actors. Whether it is the AIMF, the ANCB, embassies, or the GIZ, the case studies show that local governments do not build their partnerships on their own. Strengthening these spaces for intermediation appears to be a more effective lever for action than simply increasing direct funding. The third lesson concerns the persistent gap between stated ambitions and operational reality, observable both in quantitative data and in the two field studies: the challenge is not so much to formulate new priorities as it is to have the institutional, financial, and human resources to implement them.

This study identifies avenues for action. It calls for a shift in perspective: away from the production of agreements and toward the conditions that enable these agreements to produce lasting effects in local communities. It also calls for considering support for local governments not only in terms of funding or project engineering, but also in terms of access to networks, capacity building, and targeted networking. Finally, it confirms that the climate issue represents both a shared vulnerability and an opportunity to collectively raise our voices on the international stage: not by creating new mechanisms, but by equipping existing ones with the means to endure over the long term.

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|Appendices

Methodological Methodological

I. 1) Type of Partnership

The type of partnership was specified in Question 1 for each international partnership reported by the responding local governments. The question offered three options: twinning, cooperation agreement, and “other,” with the latter category accompanied by a free-text field to specify the nature of the partnership.

The count therefore covers the reported partnerships, not the responding local governments. Each applicable partnership was coded according to the type(s) indicated in the response. When the “other” field specified a distinct form of partnership—such as a memorandum of understanding, a friendship pact, or a specific agreement—it was counted in the “other” category.

I. 2) Criteria for Selecting Partners: Construction of Categories

The criteria for selecting partners were collected via an open-ended question, without a predefined list.

Thematic coding was carried out in two stages.

- First, a cursory review of all responses identified recurring lexical fields: similarity, funding, culture, political will, reciprocity, geography, and civil society.
- In the second stage, each response was coded according to the underlying logic of each mentioned criterion: “cultural affinities,” “common language,” and “Francophonie” thus fall under the same category, while “transfer of know-how” and “shared culture” were distinguished.

Since several responses simultaneously cited criteria falling under two or three different categories, the total number of occurrences exceeds the number of respondents. The categories therefore reflect multiple criteria per city, not exclusive respondents per category. Four responses that were too vague to be reliably coded (formulated in terms of general values) were excluded from the count and noted in a footnote.

I. 3) Regarding the creation of graphs illustrating trends in the formation of partnerships:

Cities were asked to specify the year in which their partnerships began. These dates were grouped into 10-year or 5-year periods to allow for a graphical representation of partnership trends over a decade or five years.

I. 4) Does this cooperative relationship between two cities involve other socioeconomic actors in your region?

The involvement of other socioeconomic actors was recorded via a list of sectors to check, supplemented by a free-text field. Respondents who checked at least one sector were categorized as involving other actors ("yes"), while those who did not check any sectors were categorized as not doing so ("no"). Each sector checked per partnership counts as one occurrence.

II. 1) How has your city's cooperation evolved over the past ten years?

Changes in international cooperation over the past ten years were assessed through an open-ended question with no predefined list of answers, although the question provided three illustrative examples: an increase in the number of partners, strengthened ties with long-standing partners, and an increase in the number of projects.

Thematic coding was carried out in two stages:

Initially, a cursory review of all the responses helped identify recurring trends: quantitative growth in the number of partners, intensification of projects, consolidation of existing relationships, stability, suspension of activities, transformation of the cooperation model, and contrasting developments.

Next, each response was coded according to the underlying dynamic described: "increase in the number of partners" and "new partnerships" thus fall into the same category. Furthermore, since the term "partners" was used by respondents to refer to diverse entities (sister cities, bilateral cooperation agencies, multilateral organizations, networks of local governments, NGOs, private actors), the coding focused on the reported dynamics rather than on the nature of the entities involved.

Since several responses simultaneously described dynamics falling into two different categories (for example, an increase in the number of partners accompanied by the suspension of certain cooperation initiatives), the total number of occurrences exceeds the number of respondents. The categories therefore reflect multiple dynamics per city, not exclusive respondents per category. Six responses that were left blank or indicated a lack of cooperation were marked as "no information provided" or "not applicable" and excluded from the thematic count.

II. 1) A partnership that does not end—or almost never ends: the termination of sister-city relationships

The question called for a binary yes/no answer, accompanied, if applicable, by details on the city and date; the count is therefore straightforward. Two responses that did not allow for the conclusion of a formal termination of twinning but indicated a suspension or reconfiguration of cooperation were placed in a separate analytical category, "ambiguous cases," rather than forced into the binary grid, in order to accurately reflect the complexity of these cases.

II. 2) In recent history (the last 5, 10, or 20+ years, if applicable), have there been any local, national, or international events that have led to a change in your international policy?

Events that led to a change in local governments' international policies were collected via an open-ended question, without a predefined list of answers.

Thematic coding was carried out in two stages.

First, a cursory review of all responses identified the major categories of recurring events: political instability and armed conflicts, natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, decentralization reforms and national institutional changes, adherence to international agendas related to the SDGs or climate change, participation in international networks and forums, and internal political developments or changes in local policy direction.

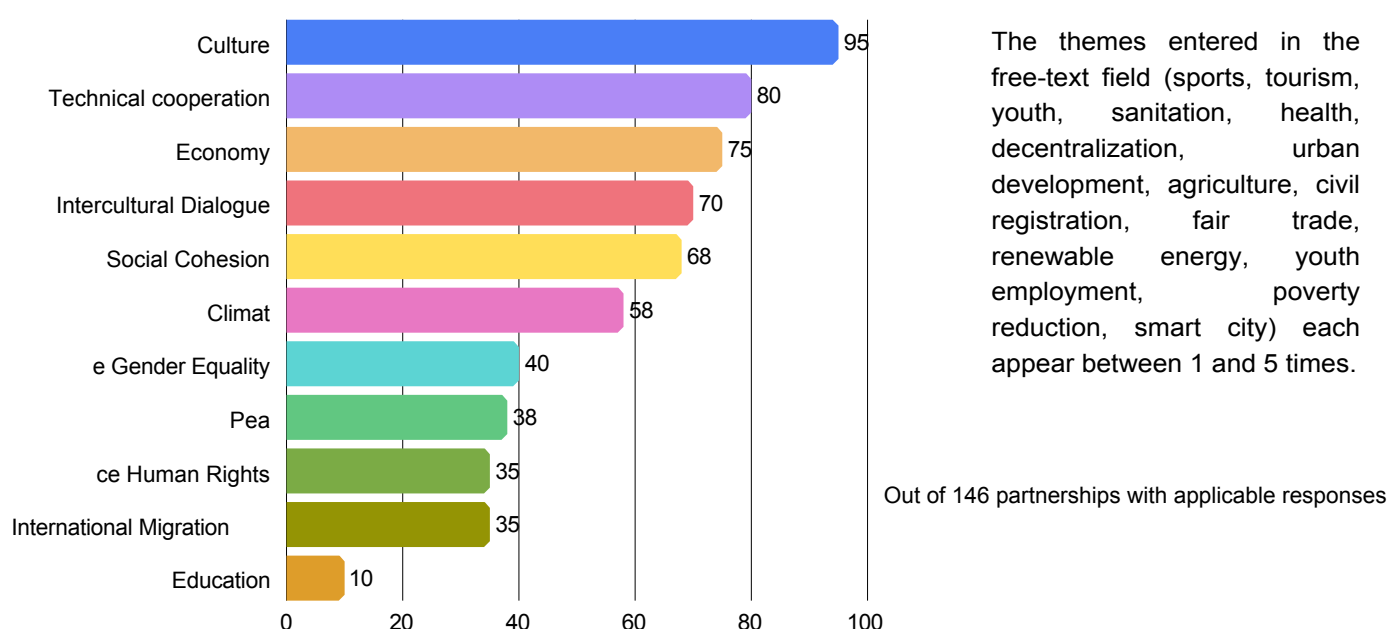
Next, each response was coded according to the nature of the event described. Furthermore, since the events cited had potentially ambivalent effects on cooperation (the same type of event could lead to the breakdown of a partnership in one community and the creation of a new one in another), the coding focused on the nature of the reported event rather than its impact, which was not always explicitly stated by the respondents.

Indeed, the events cited can have positive impacts on cooperation, such as the creation of new solidarity twinning arrangements following the war in Ukraine, the development of broader partnerships thanks to the emergence of more committed elected officials, membership in new international networks and programs, or decentralization reforms that have strengthened local governments' capacities and international appeal. They can also lead to negative impacts, such as the breakdown of long-standing partnerships due to armed conflicts, a slowdown in exchanges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a reduction in international funding resulting from domestic political instability, or a deterioration in the security situation that makes it difficult to implement projects.

Since several responses simultaneously described events falling into two or more different categories (for example, a local government citing both the COVID-19 pandemic and a national decentralization reform), the total number of occurrences exceeds the number of respondents. The categories therefore reflect multiple events per city, not exclusive respondents per category. Eighteen blank responses—those explicitly stating the absence of significant events or answering in the negative—were marked as missing or not applicable and excluded from the thematic count.

II. 3) Themes: Classification and Word Cloud

The themes were collected via a closed list of checkboxes, supplemented by a free-text field. Each checkbox selected by a partnership counts as one occurrence. Responses in the free-text field were coded according to the same principle: one mention equals one occurrence to make them comparable to the standardized themes. The total number of occurrences exceeds the number of partnerships, as each partnership could select multiple themes simultaneously.



II. 3) What are the priorities on your international agenda?

The topics were collected using a closed list of checkboxes, supplemented by a free-text field.

Each box checked per partnership counts as one occurrence. Responses in the open-ended field were listed separately and categorized as “Other.” The total number of occurrences exceeds the number of respondents, as each respondent could check multiple topics simultaneously.

III. 2) Networks of Affiliation: A Predominantly Generalist Focus, with Specific Themes Expanding at Uneven Rates

The networks were classified based on a distinction between generalist networks—whose purpose is representation and local governance without an exclusive focus—and specific networks, built around a particular issue or territorial profile.

In cases where only one network was cited for a given theme (such as the AIVP for port cities), it was included in the “economic development” category rather than constituting a separate category, in accordance with the principle that a category with a single entry is not analytically relevant in a comparative visualization.

Networks cited in an uncertain or approximate manner were counted at their minimum value.

Five cities that did not provide any usable responses were excluded, bringing the calculation base to 48 municipalities.

III.1) Optional question for umbrella organizations:

Are there any forums for dialogue and cooperation between the national government and local authorities in your country regarding international cooperation?

This was an open-ended and optional question, intended primarily for umbrella organizations. Non-responses were therefore not interpreted as an absence of such forums, but were treated separately.

Coding was based on the specific mechanisms mentioned in the responses. Ministries, national directorates, and central government agencies were grouped under the category “ministerial oversight and specialized national directorates.” National associations of municipalities, associations of mayors, and unions of local governments were coded as “umbrella organizations and national networks of local governments.” Councils, commissions, committees, platforms, forums, or consultation frameworks were grouped under “formalized consultation frameworks.” Finally, decentralized services or regional technical directorates were coded separately when they appeared as local administrative intermediaries.

Since a single response may mention multiple mechanisms, the categories are not mutually exclusive, and the total number of occurrences may exceed the number of respondents.

III.3) Do you have a department dedicated to international relations? If so, please specify its size, organization, and coordination with other departments.

The question combined a closed-ended, yes/no question with an optional detail regarding the department's size. Responses were first tallied based on whether or not a dedicated international relations department existed. Subsequently, local governments that answered in the affirmative were classified according to the reported size of the department: 1 person, 2 to 5 people, 5 to 10 people, or more than 10 people. Incomplete or missing responses were excluded from the calculation of department size.

IV.1) Funding for cooperation initiatives: city/local government, province/region, central government, European Union, international organization, public donor, development bank, private funds, NGOs, others.

Funding sources were collected via a list of checkboxes supplemented by an “other” field .” Each funding source checked or mentioned was counted as one occurrence. Since a single cooperation project may draw on multiple funding sources, the total number of occurrences exceeds the number of partnerships. The results should therefore be interpreted as the frequency with which funding sources were cited, rather than as mutually exclusive categories of partnerships.

IV.1) Are there funding instruments in your country dedicated to decentralized cooperation?

The question offered several response options: national funds, calls for projects reserved for decentralized cooperation, instruments such as “1% for water” or “solidarity cents,” as well as an “other” field. Each instrument mentioned was counted as one occurrence. Since a single local government could cite multiple instruments, the total number of occurrences may exceed the number of respondents. Responses indicating the absence of such instruments or providing no usable information were coded separately.

V. 1) Would you say that your city influences other cities or regional networks by sharing its best practices (policies, governance, expertise, know-how)?

The question combined a closed-ended question with an optional field for examples. Initially, responses were categorized according to the four options provided: “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “somewhat disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” This first level measures local governments’ perception of their ability to influence others through the dissemination of best practices.

Next, the examples provided were subject to thematic coding. A broad review of the responses identified recurring themes of best practices: networking, outreach, support for other local governments, local governance, participation, planning, the environment, climate, economic development, social inclusion, digital technology, taxation, administrative modernization, and culture.

Each response was then coded according to the mentioned category or categories of best practices. Since a single response could fall into multiple categories, the total number of occurrences exceeds the number of respondents. The categories therefore do not measure specific local governments, but rather the various areas in which cities report exerting influence.

V. 2) Are there one or more cities that you have used as examples in implementing your initiatives? If so, please name the city and the public policy.

Respondents may select multiple categories: a single response may be coded under several categories. Only responses mentioning an identifiable public policy were coded by theme.

The question asked local governments to indicate whether they had used one or more cities as examples in implementing their actions, specifying, if applicable, the city and the relevant public policy. It was therefore an open-ended question with no predefined list of public policies.

The thematic coding was carried out in two stages. First, a review of the usable responses identified the most frequently cited public policy areas: environment, climate, water, sanitation, waste, circular economy, local governance, participation, land-use planning, culture, education, social cohesion, urban planning, digital technology, taxation, economic development, tourism, and mobility.

In the second stage, each response was coded according to the public policy mentioned, rather than the city cited. When a response mentioned multiple areas, it was coded into multiple categories. The categories therefore reflect multiple references per respondent, rather than exclusive respondents per category. Only responses mentioning an identifiable public policy were coded thematically; blank, negative, or overly vague responses were excluded from the thematic count.