

SDGs Localization in the Context of Euro-Mediterranean Relations: Obstacles and Options for Local and Regional Authorities

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COVID 19, Sustainable Development Goals and Local and Regional Authorities in the Mediterranean

The Barcelona Process turns 25 at a time when COVID 19 is putting a strain on the responsiveness of governments, the resistance of economic systems and the resilience of populations almost all over the world. The Mediterranean – which has always been a place of intersections – is among the worst affected areas, with Spain, France and Italy leading the ranking for the spread of the virus and number of deaths. On the southern shore, the consequences of confinement and the closure of the main economic activities are already affecting the living conditions of the most vulnerable groups of the population such as youth, women and households in conditions of poverty and social exclusion.

The COVID 19 crisis has highlighted the importance of the territory as the spatial dimension above which – in the end – the negative effects of social, epidemiological and environmental phenomena are discharged. In this scenario of urgency and uncertainty, the first responses in terms of public policies came from local and regional authorities¹ (LRAs). In fact, once central governments closed their borders, promulgated the various confinement decrees and

concentrated resources in domestic health systems, the first interventions on the ground were aimed at regulating social and economic interactions on a community scale, starting with urban mobility, commercial activities, social assistance and education, with particular attention to primary schools.

The pandemic has helped to reinvigorate the debate on the present and future of policies for human development and sustainability. A debate focused, in the short term, on mitigating the immediate effects of the pandemic; and, in the medium-long term, aimed at re-adapting the various global agendas (the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda, to name but a few relevant cases). One of the most authoritative voices, Jeffery Sachs immediately reaffirmed how the SDGs and the Six Transformations still constitute the path towards more sustainable and resilient societies in the post-COVID 19 era (Sachs et al., 2019; Sachs et al., 2020). The European Union (EU), in an unprecedented effort of collective action, has been able to overcome the resistance of the “frugals,” approving a recovery fund – the Next Generation EU – for a total value of 750 billion euros devoted mainly to accelerating the digital and green transitions. In the Mediterranean area, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), in a statement by its Secretary General Nasser Kamel,² finally reiterated how the promotion of local, regional and circular economies still represents the best way out of the crisis in order to create fairer, more sustainable, gender-sensitive and youth-centred societies.

¹ The vocabulary is often contested and the literature and official documents present different terms, such as local and regional authorities (LRAs), local and regional governments (LRGs), sub-national authorities (SNAs) or sub-state authorities (SSAs). In this text the reference is mainly to regional, supra-local and local governments meant as public organizations with (some) degree of autonomy and control over (some) salient policy areas.

² <https://ufmsecretariat.org/covid-19-what-next-mediterranean/> (Consulted 10/09/2020)

It is honestly difficult to speculate whether the “new normal” will represent an opportunity for governments and citizens to move forward towards the fulfillment of these agendas. Or, if the severity of the crisis will be such as to frustrate the achievement of the SDGs. In 2019, the Mediterranean Countries Edition of the Sustainable Development Report indicated that, four years after the adoption of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, no Mediterranean country was on track to achieve all the goals. The average value of the SDG Index (71.4) placed the region in around 49th position in the world ranking. For 2020, no notable improvements are expected.

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It is in light of these debates that it is interesting to question how the cities and regions of the three shores of the Mediterranean can contribute to the implementation of SDGs, to the recovery from the negative effects of COVID 19 and, ultimately, to the improvement of the living conditions of over 500 million people. Rather than offering a definitive answer to these questions, this article presents some thoughts on the present and future of LRAs' involvement in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, in the context of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The main idea is that the new narrative of the SDGs – with its emphasis on governance and localization – can contribute to taking a step beyond the classical rhetoric by providing LRAs with applicable guidelines for action.

The Barcelona Process Today: A Review from the Perspective of Local and Regional Authorities

Much has changed since November 1995 when, in Barcelona, the governments of the then EU Member States and the Mediterranean countries set up the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). The basic

idea was to export the model of European liberal democracy based on the free market to the Arab Mediterranean, accompanying it with considerable flows of financing and technical assistance. The hope regarding the positive effects of international trade and globalization was so widespread at the time that the most optimistic participants were convinced that these phenomena would lead to the modernization and democratization of the northern Mediterranean countries, thus contributing to the geopolitical stability of the area.

25 years later, evaluations and judgments about the outcomes achieved by the EMP are mixed. Firstly, economic integration has not occurred at the expected speed, and the indicators do not show the much desired convergence between the economic systems of the three shores of the Mediterranean (Ayadi, 2020). In the Maghreb, for example, recent political instability and continuing tensions between Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia continue to frustrate any progress towards real integration. The situation in the eastern Mediterranean (Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria, as well as Greece and Cyprus) continues to be dominated by a series of irreducible frictions, which not only limit integration options, but also undermine the very stability of the area. In the field of politics and democratization processes, there is no evident, significant progress in the quality of the institutions, governments and public administrations of the countries involved. In 2011, the eruption of the Arab Spring made it clear that there is a large portion of the population in the southern Mediterranean who still live in conditions of poverty and social exclusion, who feel excluded from public and political life and who have lost trust in the public institutions of their own countries. A frankly negative scenario to strengthen the bond between governors and governed; and a favourable environment, instead, for the emergence of populisms.

A critical look at the international context therefore seems to indicate that it will not be easy to give new impetus to relations between Europe and the territories of the north and east of the Mediterranean. The historical arc of Euro-Mediterranean relations shows, in fact, a marked change of philosophy, characterized in recent years by the re-nationalization of the foreign policies of the central states and by the prevalence of bilateral dynamics over the original multi-

lateral accent of the Barcelona Process (Woertz and Soler i Lecha, 2020). If in the early 2000s, in the old continent, the Member States seemed to have reached an agreement on the Europeanization of their foreign policies in favour of a multilateral approximation to the Mediterranean area, the prevailing concept today is that of “selective” or “differentiated” bilateralism (Fernández-Molina, 2019). The EU is in fact willing to reward “good scholars” (Morocco and Tunisia), but not to extend the same privileges (in terms of available funds, commercial openness and mobility) to those countries that do not accept conditionality (Libya and Algeria).

All this obviously has a transcendental impact on the possibilities of cooperation between the territories of the three shores of the Mediterranean. In the absence of a context of peace, political stability and the rule of law, it is evident that horizontal cooperation between LRAs faces sometimes insurmountable obstacles (Chmielewska, et al., 2019). Despite the presence of these difficulties, in the last two decades the territorial emphasis of the Euro-Mediterranean dynamics has grown strongly, contributing to endowing the first rhetorical references to the involvement of the LRAs – already present in the 1995 Barcelona Declaration – with content. The establishment of the Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) in 2010, the reformulation of the Neighbourhood Policy in 2015 and a greater sensitivity of the UfM to local policies – not least the approval of an urban strategy in 2017 – are indeed positive signs that confirm a renewed and growing interest in the territorial dimension of the EMP.

The Mediterranean is, today, an area crossed by numerous experiences of cooperation between the territories of the three shores. Pending the definition of an integral macro-regional strategy (if it ever comes), the LRAs – as well as civil society, NGOs, businesses, chambers of commerce and universities – are actively cooperating in key areas such as the sustainable use of water and agricultural resources, strategic urban planning, local economic development, education and culture and the reduction of inequalities. In the multilateral framework of European policies to-

wards the Mediterranean, there is currently a series of sectoral and thematic strategies and initiatives which, although not always in a coordinated manner, are proposing alternative models of governance. Through an active role of the LRAs, some of these experiences are implementing concrete interventions, as in the case of the West Med Initiative, the Blue Med Initiative, the macro-regional strategy³ for the Eastern Mediterranean (EUSAIR) or – if we go down to the level of European funding instruments – the INTERREG programmes centred on cross-border cooperation or the programmes within the context of the Neighborhood Policy. Other experiences, on the other hand, are of more recent creation, such as the MedCoopAlliance, a network of networks created in 2019 which, by marrying a clearly multilevel approach, brings together some of the most active organizations in the Mediterranean context, such as the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR), the network of cities Med Cities, Arco Latino (a network of local supramunicipal authorities) and two Euroregions (the Adriatic Ionian Euroregion and the Pyrenees Mediterranean Euroregion).

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Within the framework of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, and thanks to a trend that has emerged in recent years – and which some define as paradiplomacy, track II diplomacy or regional and municipal diplomacy – there is also a significant presence of international organizations and networks of public and non-public actors operating in the Mediterrane-

³ Currently, the 5+5 Dialogue encompasses four macro-regional strategies, including three involving EU Mediterranean countries (France, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia and Greece) as well as non-EU Mediterranean countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro): the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (adopted in 2010), the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (2014), and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (2015).

an.⁴ Basically, the goal of these organizations is to find a space for action that can complement the action of national governments, the EU and international organizations in order to help design and implement development strategies, programmes and projects that are more aligned with the interests and preferences of local communities. In this renewed context of the external action of LRAs it is worth mentioning the efforts dedicated to decentralized cooperation, understood as the external development finance and co-operation provided by LRAs in support of partner authorities to achieve development goals (OECD, 2019; Fernández de Losada and Calvete Moreno, 2018).

The New Narrative of Sustainable Development between Governance and Localization

If it is true that the Mediterranean continues to be fragmented around old and unresolved issues, the new narrative arising from the approval of the 2030 Agenda represents a turning point for rethinking the role of the LRAs in the context of current Euro-Mediterranean relations. By eliminating the inelegant distinction between development and underdevelopment, and placing emphasis on the need to adapt the implementation of the 17 SDGs to different territorial contexts, the 2030 Agenda has in fact highlighted two fundamental aspects. The first of these is the need, when designing and implementing strategies for sustainability, to combine different (and sometimes contrasting) governance models on the ground; the second contribution – through the concept of localization – is a renewed emphasis on the central role of RLGs in the territorialization of public policies for development.

Unlike past global efforts that largely relied on top-down and market-based approaches, the 2030 Agenda relies on “governance through goals” (Biermann, 2018). Characterized by weak and non-binding intergovernmental arrangements, this approach

enshrines a dual process that must combine shared universal principles with differentiated territorial contexts. This dual nature is fully recognized in the “common but differentiated governance approach” (Meuleman, 2018). Basically, what is common is a set of universal principles, normatively recognized as “good governance” elements, such as:

- a) the integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions across sectors and policy domains (policy coherence);
- b) the institutional coordination among levels of government (vertical dimension of the Multilevel Governance Approach)
- c) the engagement and the participation of main stakeholders (horizontal dimension of MLG),
- d) the inclusion of the principles of transparency, accountability and monitoring for evaluation in public service delivery.

Nevertheless, since territories differ regarding their initial positions, governance styles and preferences, common and universal principles must be translated in a “differentiated” way when being implemented at the national, regional and local level. This dual dimension opens the avenue for combining different governance styles successfully “on the ground,” depending on the available opportunities (and limitations) posed by a specific territory and its policy actors. More importantly, within this framework, apparently contrasting approaches (e.g., bottom-up versus top-down modes, cooperative versus market-oriented methods, (strong) leadership versus (decentralized) ownership) are not contradictory but, rather, mutually reinforcing.

The second concept that can help to give new impetus to Euro-Mediterranean relations is that of localization. Basically, localizing means “taking into account sub-national contexts in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets, to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress.”⁵ Localization calls for “whole-of-govern-

⁴ Only to quote some relevant examples, we make reference here to: The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), the Brussel-based network of EUROCITIES, Metropolis, Med Cities, ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, C40 Global Climate Leadership Group, Arab Towns Organization (ATO), Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI).

⁵ Statement adopted by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments at the Local and Regional Authorities Forum, in the HLPF of June 2018

ment” and “whole-of-society” approaches as well as a territorial approach to local development. In the first case, it emphasizes the need to frame policy-making processes in a more integrated way, involving all government levels and members of society (UCLG, 2019). Secondly, localization recognizes local development as an endogenous and spatially integrated phenomenon, conferring primary responsibility for its planning, managing and financing to local authorities (OECD, 2020).

Relegating LRAs to the mere execution of policies decided elsewhere reduces policy legitimacy and, instead, increases the probability of implementation failures

Under the localization framework, cities and regions become key actors in the implementation of the SDGs. Firstly, as public service providers, LRAs are directly involved in many SDG-related policy sectors (particularly SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17). The localization of the SDGs supports the definition of innovative governance schemes needed to seriously tackle contemporary challenges such as urbanization, climate change mitigation and adaptation, equal access to education and digital transition. Secondly, LRAs are public entities with legal mandates and prescribed responsibilities for their citizens. Unlike interest groups, advocacy coalition or NGOs, RLGs are – usually – democratically elected authorities that advocate for the interests of all citizens in their jurisdiction. Their inclusion in the definition and implementation of the local strategy for sustainable development can notably increase democratic legitimacy and stakeholders’ ownership and commitment.

Thirdly, and finally, from a governance perspective, the definition of integrated and coherent policy frameworks requires high levels of institutional coordination, functioning spaces for effective stakeholder participation and greater attention to local data for monitoring and evaluation. The involvement of LRAs in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is not only justified by their extant policy responsi-

bilities in sectors concerning SDGs but also because their relative position within all the other public administrations grants them a comparative advantage to set localized policy processes that favour policy effectiveness and legitimacy (Granados and Noferini, 2020).

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It is not among the intentions of this article to convince readers that the implementation of the SDGs and the localization of the 2030 Agenda can constitute the revitalizing balm of Euro-Mediterranean relations. The Mediterranean area is extremely complex and there are numerous conflicting signals that can push in both directions: towards more optimistic or more pessimistic outlooks. In the end, viewing the glass as half full and not half empty is often a matter of attitude. During these 25 years, hundreds of initiatives, from large-scale international projects to local initiatives, have served to shape several – sometimes overlapping – networks of cooperation among public actors at different levels of government. Some of these experiences have proven the feasibility of cooperation mechanisms between the territories of the three shores of the Mediterranean. Others have been clearly unsuccessful.

Today, multilateral and bilateral institutional frameworks, shared agendas and strategies, toolboxes and roadmaps are at the disposal of public actors who populate the Mediterranean area. In their rhetoric, many of these agendas aspire to be transformative by calling for policy shift and paradigm change. Some institutional limitations and obstacles at all levels (supranational, national and local) are, however, likely to reduce the chances for paradigm change within a reasonable time in the Mediterranean.

Firstly, if much has been achieved regarding the implementation stage of policy processes for sustainability, the role of LRAs in the upstream stage of global decision-making is still weak, mainly consultative and, often, scarcely influential. A quick glance at the functioning of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation displays, for example, how many of the initia-

tives and strategies activated in the EMP framework still maintain a fundamentally intergovernmental nature, by excluding the LRAs from the definition of the interventions and the choice of thematic priorities. Unfortunately, relegating LRAs to the mere execution of policies decided elsewhere reduces policy legitimacy and, instead, increases the probability of implementation failures.

Secondly, beyond academic texts and rhetorical statements, multilevel governance is not a package of tools that can be applied everywhere. On the contrary, it requires a broad political consensus, some degree of autonomy at the different levels of government, administrative and technical capacity and a cooperative political culture. In traditionally centralized institutional contexts, the definition of collaborative and innovative governance models requires long-term adaptation, commitment and time (sometimes longer than electoral cycles). In the Mediterranean, multilevel processes often stall, fail and are even reversed without producing expected outcomes because of the lack of some of the above-mentioned (enabling) conditions. In these contexts, policy innovation is far from being effective.

Thirdly, and relative to the achievement of policy coherence across sectors and levels of government, although many national governments are increasingly recognizing the role of LRAs in the negotiation of domestic policies, there are very few cases of vertically integrated and inclusive institutions. “Whole-of-government” approaches in the Mediterranean usually serve as inter-agency or inter-ministerial collaborations rather than as integrated models of shared decision-making. In these contexts, vertical relations are still dominated by the central government, and the participation of LRAs (with some exceptions) is mainly adaptive – if not passive. Regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, for example, although more and more Mediterranean states participate in the process of National Voluntary Review, the reception of local and regional positions in a national document is extremely poor.

Finally, from the local perspective, it still remains to be asked how many LRAs are currently prepared to assume political leadership and lead the transformation towards integrated, coherent, multilevel and multi-actor development strategies; how many

LRAs are administratively and institutionally equipped to include sound and effective stakeholder participation in the definition of local strategies; and how many LRAs own data collection systems that allow their policy makers to make informed and more effective decisions. Even the northern shore of the Mediterranean, which is populated by LRAs with a high degree of autonomy (political, fiscal and administrative), still presents pronounced territorial asymmetries. Many small and medium-sized municipalities in Spain, Italy and Greece do not own sufficient resources to design, implement and evaluate integrated, coherent and effective strategies in all sectors of sustainability. In the southern Mediterranean, decentralization is often seen as risky by ruling elites who are afraid that it might result in the weakening of their interests (Noha El-Mikawy, 2020). Many of the decentralization reforms constitutionally approved in recent years have remained incomplete. Without a real deepening in such processes – and in the absence of LRAs with political, fiscal and administrative autonomy and economic resources – it is evident that the creation of spaces of shared governance is doomed to failure. When, for example, budgetary resources are insufficient or limited, LRAs might establish shared and innovative financial instruments in order to guarantee the execution of the interventions. However, fiscal innovation is, in many cases, limited by institutional/constitutional settings that prevent LRAs from modifying state-based fiscal instruments.

Many of these obstacles are not directly imputable to LRAs. They depend on international and domestic factors such as a momentum in favour of decentralization processes, a greater sensitivity from central governments towards more participatory decision-making models and – overall – the relative powers between different domestic actors (elites, political parties, interest groups and lobbies) within each national context. Under these circumstances, LRAs have two possibilities: to maintain a passive attitude and wait for some window of opportunity to be opened; or anticipate the change and be ready for when the times are more propitious. The new narrative introduced by the 2030 Agenda and the existing experiences in the context of Euro-Mediterranean relations – if interpreted correctly – already indicate part of the path to follow. To act or not to act is, as always, a matter of political will.

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