

# “Experiencing Decentralised Cooperation for Peace”

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## **Introduction: “The role of local authorities in international development cooperation, trans-border cooperation and international relations”.**

Due to historical<sup>2</sup> and geographical<sup>3</sup> reasons Italy has developed in the last thirty years a strong policy of “territorial proximity”. This means that every local authority has recognised the particular interests and advantages of their presence “at the borders”. After the Second World War, while governments were still dealing with international politics and the results of the peace agreements, people who lived in certain neighbouring countries began to have peaceful relations with the citizens across the border. For example, northeast of Italy interacted with Yugoslavian citizens from Slovenia. Even after the fall of Enver Oxa’s regime, people from Puglia have had strong economic ties to Albania. Some towns in southern Italy have been involved in cross-Mediterranean relationships. In the last decade, Italy’s policy of proximity has prompted the European Union to make it a priority to develop trans-border programme. These initiatives help local authorities and civil society of neighbouring countries to cooperate in fields of common interest. In Italy, this mutual cooperation is felt as a necessary policy for local authorities, particularly since a change in the Italian Constitution granted them more autonomy. Among the many tasks that can be addressed autonomously by regions, provinces and municipalities is a very important one: international relations. Today, every local authority is free to have relations with any other local authority and, in some cases<sup>4</sup>, with foreign Governments. While the non-governmental cooperation has developed in a central way, by means of NGOs financed by the ministry, a new dimension of cooperation policy has risen in the last ten years and is called “decentralised cooperation”. It involves new actors besides the traditional NGOs.

## **Actors of Decentralised Cooperation. The idea of “*territorio*” in the Italian tradition: Institutions, Civil Society and Business.**

Given this background, Italy’s local authorities developed a strong partnership with civil society in all areas related to social affairs, cultural life and solidarity. This kind of partnership is called “subsidiary role” and it means that civil society can play the role usually played by the Institutions on their behalf. It means that, on one hand, CSOs have to be capable enough to offer a quality contribution to the social life in the targeted territory, and, on the other hand, the institutions must keep their role of determining and monitoring social actions. As a final step in the overall cycle of activities, the evaluation process is vital, as is transforming good practises into policies. This also happens in the field of international cooperation, where different programmes promoting and supporting actions by civil society helpful to foreign countries are developed and conducted directly by local authorities. In such cases, local authorities often set priorities and determine actions, both in term of countries (identifying them) and activities (areas to offer support) but a degree of autonomy is left to the civil society organisations and to the beneficiaries themselves.

As the concept of “subsidiary role” continues its evolution, economic actors are now considered fundamental to international cooperation. In the past, it appeared that international solidarity was deeply divided by for-profit organisations, and only nonprofits were able to conduct serious and

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<sup>2</sup> Until 1861 Italian territory was divided into several independent States. During the middle age (1000 – 1250) with exception of Vatican State, the towns of northern and central Italy were independent States (Comuni).

<sup>3</sup> Consider that some Regions are bilingual near the borders (Valle d’Aosta with France, Alto Adige with Tyrol, Friuli with Slovenia).

<sup>4</sup> To be regulated by Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

honest development-cooperation programmes in developing countries. Several experiences demonstrated that this assessment was wrong, for it hinged on two factors: first, that civil society organisations and local authorities have little capacity to move considerable funds related to international cooperation. Even if they set up the means to obtain governmental or international funds, they could only receive “special” funding and not fixed and regular financing. As a result of this, even if they could face an emergency and handle the restoration of normal life in post-disaster or post-conflict areas, they could not transform the economical life of the beneficiary country without establishing a long-term, healthy economy. Such a process, if continuous and not temporary, must be supported by skills and expertises that only economical actors can furnish. Second, if we want to transform cooperation from a “top-down” model (where we can distinguish a donor and a beneficiary) into a cooperation between peers, we must project future relations that are not based on solidarity and aid but on mutual economic, social and cultural exchanges. In such a scenario it is impossible not to consider economical actors as fundamental. As a result of this new approach, the Italian concept of “territorio” has been transformed into an idea of citizenship. Mixing the different objectives and methods of the three main stakeholders of the territory (local authorities, civil society and economic actors) new integrated interventions were found and experimented during the past ten years.

### **The experience of the “Coordination of Local Authorities for Peace and Human Rights” and other similar Italian/International networks.**

Based on this new concept of citizenship, local authorities see their role in society as not merely administrative but also as bearing responsibility to create well-being, social justice and human security. Since the 1950s and 60s, some of these responsibilities were handled well by several excellent politicians and still serve as examples for newer generations of administrators. Giorgio La Pira (major of Florence, 1951-58) is a good example. The basis of his political activity was the value of peace. Similarly Aldo Capitini (anti-fascist and pedagogue) launched the first March for Peace Peruse-Assisi in 1961, it continues to take place every two years. Tonino Bello (president of the “Pax Christi” movement) promoted, along with fellow politicians, local authorities and civil society the “500 to Sarajevo” march against the siege on Sarajevo during the Bosnian war.

Looking back on these experiences and given their political position, it is not surprising that Italy, since the 1980s, has been operating the National Coordination of Local Authorities for Peace and Human Rights. Additionally Italy operates Association of Local Democracy Agencies (based in Geneva, with executive offices in Vicenza), and many others international networks involving local authorities for international development, democratisation and peacebuilding.

**Ferrara and the promotion of Human Rights and Peace Processes in the Mediterranean Area.** The municipality of Ferrara, launched the project “Ferrara, Town for Peace” as a framework for all the activities, programmes, events that take place within the town, or for those promoted and financed by the town. Among several projects are “Dialogues of Peace in Cyprus” and an education programme in Romania. The Province of Ferrara is supporting the project in Cyprus and it is member of a working group on development cooperation within the “National Coordination of Local Agenda 21”. It is also member of the national network of local authorities supporting the Institutions of Saharawi People. Both municipal and provincial administrations have been involved in the Balkan during and after the war. They actively support the creation of a Civilian Peace Corps and the growth of a non-violence culture within the society.