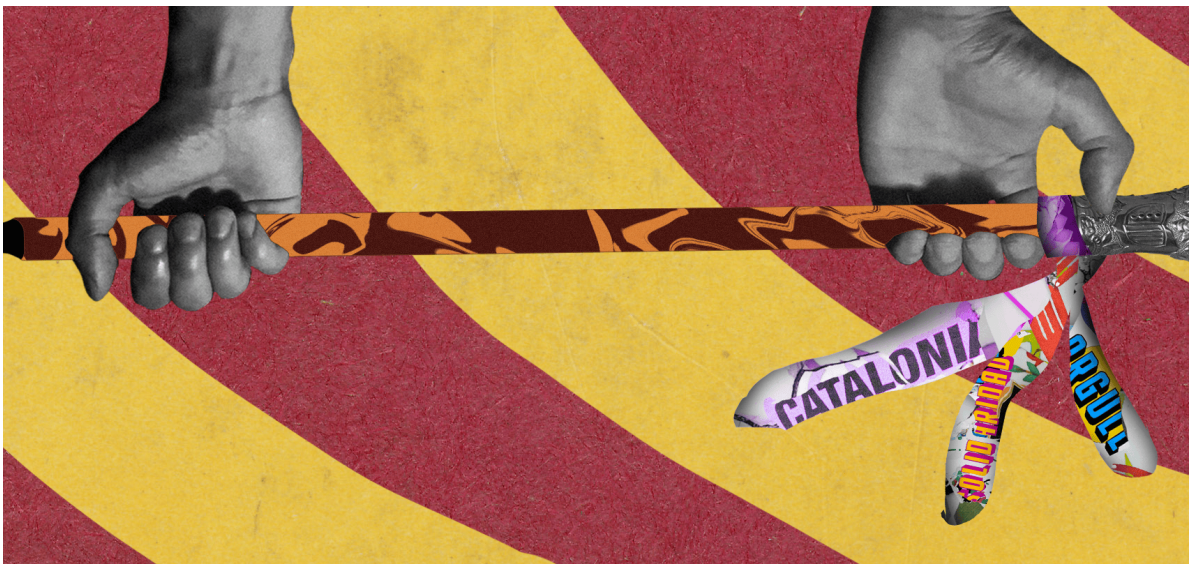
CATALAN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

The Importance of Solidarity in Challenging Times

Isidre Pineda



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Catalonia has always been a great country of solidarity, especially from its towns and cities. Municipal cooperation started back in the early 1980s, when a group of entities started collecting signatures to ask the Spanish state to comply with the United Nations recommendation to allocate 0.7% of GDP to international cooperation. The success of that campaign at the social level led a group of city councils to meet in July 1986 in Salt (Catalonia) to create the Catalan Fund for Development Cooperation (FCCD).

The idea of grouping different city councils in the same space or entity was innovative in Catalonia and beyond; it was the first “Fund” that promoted decentralized cooperation throughout Spain. Later, in 1995, the FCCD promoted the creation of the Confederation of Cooperation and Solidarity Funds together with Basque, Valencian, Mallorcan or Galician municipalities, among others. Shortly after, in 1996, the FCCD opened an office in Managua that it maintains to this day and that acts as a regional point of reference in Central America. Especially during the first years, it was a response to the many brotherhoods that different Catalan municipalities formed with towns and cities in Nicaragua. Many of them still persist and have established bonds of friendship between populations, but in recent years Catalan municipalism has begun to prioritize more strongly the central African area, thus targeting Senegal as the country where the FCCD channels more resources today –and home to the second regional office–. In fact, in 35 years of history, the Catalan Fund has worked in a changing world that has become increasingly complex, but since then, it has

become a leading municipal organization made up of more than 300 Catalan city councils, organizations and entities; supra-municipalities that share the ideal of building a more just global order.

Project funding

This somewhat romantic idea translates to a concrete budget allocation for development cooperation actions that support various peoples in some of the planet's most disadvantaged countries. For more than 30 years, we've funded thousands of projects and responded to hundreds of humanitarian emergencies all over the world, building economies of scale and generating knowledge from municipal practices. In this context, we have a steadfast mission: to promote, defend and contribute to improving development cooperation throughout Catalan municipalism, with our sights set firmly on the horizon of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

In our 30+ years of experience, the Catalan Fund has seen Catalan society grow and evolve with new concerns and different needs, and its councils and local administrations expand to provide an increasing array of services to the citizenry. In this sense, the Fund's members have come to see it, first and foremost, as a valuable tool for channelling development cooperation policies, benefiting from its experience and a level of agility that surpasses the capabilities of a public sector that coexists with a growing and worrying level of bureaucratisation. Furthermore, the fact that it connects so many local councils and administrations makes it possible to create meeting points and joint ventures through a network of supporting municipalities.

> For more than 30 years, the Catalan Fund for Development Cooperation made it possible to create meeting points and joint projects through an essential network of supporting municipalities

It's important to acknowledge that the municipal world tends to be one of the most undervalued, despite the impact of local public policies. Subsidiarity, as a basic principle of political science, is and should always be the golden rule of public administration. That's why we need to allocate resources and support Catalan councils, we need to trust them to carry out tasks as diverse and complex as the municipalities do. From close-up, talking about municipal foreign policy and development cooperation councils may seem at odds with more locally-focused policies. Do we really need courageous councils to promote development cooperation projects in the middle of the twenty-first century? The answer is a clear and resounding: yes!

The role of city councils

Having more room to manoeuvre, councils are far less enslaved to the far-reaching economic policies and state interests that influence global foreign action. Thus, a Mayor can express their sincere and possibly more objective opinion on historical conflicts, such as those in Western Sahara or Palestine, without fear of the angry reprisals or retaliation that powerful states, such as Morocco or Israel, might expect were they to do the same.

Municipal cooperation is, therefore, one of the most honest and steadfast varieties, and perhaps one of the purest and most ideological from the point of view of public administration. It's clear, however, that when aligned with the policies of the national administration, the transformative potential on the ground increases exponentially, and for this reason it's always better when the two sides of the coin are working together.

Charitable municipalism likes to work in the field, with the people, with the local administrations and its counterparts in southern countries. Indeed, the motto of mayors has always been that of identifying needs and finding ways to meet them, often creatively due to the budgetary pressures that forever restrict councils. This essence of municipalism is what permeates the cooperation councils and arguably ends up becoming their biggest strongpoint.

Solidarity fever still has some way to go before it spreads to the numerous other towns and cities, which, once again and with understandable trepidation, find themselves staring down the barrel of a new socio-economic crisis brought about by the pandemic.

We need to be consistent and not make the same mistakes we made as a society a decade ago. If, back then, we sacrificed young people to scandalous youth unemployment rates and neglected to prevent an unacceptable exodus of talent that we still haven't managed to reverse, today we must prioritise development cooperation budgets and use solidarity actions as an instrument to combat the global crisis. It will take willpower and political determination to prioritise the abovementioned '0.7%' milestone as a vaccine for the "look after your own first" mantra touted by a populism that is far too simplistic for towns and cities that are home to people from dozens of different nationalities and origins. Populism does nothing but isolate us and drive us towards an individualistic, xenophobic society that closes its eyes to the complexities of the global world.

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Therefore, one of the biggest challenges for future development cooperation will be finding the key to explaining its importance to the countries and communities we assist. Development cooperation must become an attractive proposition from a political point of view and even be wielded to extract electoral return. If we succeed, we will do so in

knowing that Catalan society, as a whole, has become more open and empathetic than we ever thought we could be. Conceivably, this is because we can relate to the numerous injustices we see in the world and, in many cases, as Catalans, we consider ourselves to be the victims of our own long-forgotten injustice.

The COVID-19 response

In this context, the responses given in an opinion poll published in early 2021 by the Catalan Development Cooperation Fund [1] put into hard data what until recently was merely a perception: more than 80% of Catalans believe the response to the pandemic must be global and 7 out of 10 agree with earmarking resources for international cooperation. The data, made public in the midst of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, confirms the public's expectations and confidence in the sector, but it doesn't stop there.

When asked whether "the pandemic affects disadvantaged countries more?", the answer wasclear: 3 out of 4 Catalans think it does. When asked whether the right to asylum should be guaranteed?, a majority (56%) of Catalans felt that it is a right Spain should guarantee and safeguard for people who are forced to migrate.

It's also true that 45% of the respondents believe society is not sufficiently aware of development cooperation issues, and as much as their adherence to the idea of development cooperation is firm, only just over a third of Catalonia's population (35%) is specifically aware of the commitment made by economically advanced countries to allocate 0.7% of GDP to development cooperation. It is, therefore, imperative that we continue our efforts to raise awareness around this issue from a broader and, above all, more cross-cutting perspective.

Cooperation and Human Rights

Global action also faces many challenges that the world of cooperation has been grappling with for years. While being committed to defending human rights is simply a matter of necessity, the Catalan Fund's forums and meetings often play host to debates and discussions on whether we should extend our development assistance to countries or states that violate fundamental rights. My honest opinion is that cooperation is needed wherever there are inequalities. That said, we mustn't lose sight of the complex realities at play in each scenario, and we shouldn't shy away from ethical issues or close our critical eye. And it would be too easy to negate the responsibility that befalls an institution with values like the one I represent and be guided exclusively by ideological or conceptual purity. Particularly because those who would suffer the consequences, as always, would be the most vulnerable people who benefit the most from direct cooperation action. I truly believe that we, as administrations, cannot allow that to happen and that we must push forward with our efforts to turn dialogue and local governance into an engine for transformation.

For all that we're living in challenging times, we must also be courageous in the face of adversity. And this I say precisely at the moment we, as a society, begin to leave behind

(and not without considerable effort) a pandemic that had implications for us all. Now is the time to reaffirm our commitment to overcoming the crisis through increased global development. Nevertheless, let us not deceive ourselves: even this approach may contain an element of selfishness on behalf of our fortunate society; the fact that we will not be safe until the world is safe has been brought into sharp focus.

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But I'd also like to make a resolute appeal in this regard: the success of the post-pandemic future will depend on empathy and solidarity, whether extended through the municipalism represented by the Catalan Development Cooperation Fund or the national administration represented by the Government of Catalonia. Unfortunately, even then, we'll still be a long way from solving all the problems in the world (if only), but we will undoubtedly be closer to the global justice we all aspire to and pursue.

REFERENCES

1 — Survey on the Catalan population's approach to international cooperation in the context of the current crisis (2021). Catalan Fund for Development Cooperation. Available online.



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