مجلة دفاتر المتوسط
ISSN:23535-035
EISNN: 2661-7439

المجلد : 08، العـدد: 01 ديسمبر(2025)، ص 63- 75

Euro-Mediterranean Decentralized Cooperation: A Theoretical Study

التعاون اللامركزي الأورومتوسطي: دراسة نظرية

ali chetibi[1]
جامعة 8 ماي 1945 قالمة (الجزائر)، chetibi.ali@univ-guelma.dz

Received: 29/12/2025 Accepted: 29/12/2025 Published:31/12/2025

Abstract:

Decentralized cooperation, both local and international, serves as an effective mechanism for developing and revitalizing collective action. It opens broader horizons for local communities to benefit from the experiences of their national and foreign counterparts in implementing economic, social, or cultural development projects of mutual interest or benefit.

Accordingly, this research paper aims to explore and analyze the state of Euro-Mediterranean decentralized cooperation by examining its development, assessing its progress, and identifying the main challenges hindering its promotion and its role in achieving the developmental goals of Euro-Mediterranean local communities.

Keywords: Decentralized cooperation, development, local communities, Mediterranean initiatives.

ملخص:

يُعد التعاون اللامركزي، على الصعيدين المحلي والدولي، آلية فعالة لتطوير العمل الجماعي وتنشيطه. فهو يفتح آفاقًا أوسع أمام الجماعات المحلية للاستفادة من خبرات نظيراتها الوطنية والأجنبية في تنفيذ مشاريع التنمية الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والثقافية ذات الاهتمام أو المنفعة المشتركة.

وبناء على ذلك، تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى استكشاف وتحليل واقع التعاون اللامركزي في منطقة البحر الأبيض المتوسط، وذلك من خلال دراسة تطوره، وتقييم التقدم المحرز فيه، وتحديد التحديات الرئيسية التي تعيق تعزيزه ودوره في تحقيق أهداف التنمية الجماعات المحلية في منطقة البحر الأبيض المتوسط.

كلمات مفتاحية: التعاون اللامركزي، التنمية، الجماعات المحلية، المبادرات المتوسطية.

1.Introduction:

The state's vast scale, coupled with its social, economic, and environmental challenges—including development disparities, resource allocation, unemployment, and social exclusion—has strained its ability to address these issues effectively. As a result, the state has increasingly relied on local actors such as municipalities and civil society institutions to devise solutions. This decentralization of responsibility has become even more critical in integrative and multilateral cooperation, where the growing complexity of shared tasks demands collaborative approaches.

In the Mediterranean Basin, the post-Cold War era has seen a surge in cooperative initiatives, beginning with the 1995 Barcelona Declaration, followed by the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), and the Union for the Mediterranean (2008). Acknowledging the vital role of decentralized cooperation, participating nations have prioritized empowering local communities to help meet developmental objectives and tackle regional challenges.

Numerous decentralized cooperation projects have been implemented across the Mediterranean, each differing in structure, stakeholders, goals, and outcomes. This diversity prompts a key question:

To what extent have cooperative initiatives in the Mediterranean space succeeded in achieving Euro-Mediterranean decentralized cooperation?

This central question gives rise to the following sub-questions:

- Why are the Mediterranean Basin countries interested in decentralized cooperation, and how has it evolved with the emergence of major Mediterranean initiatives?
- To what extent do the southern Mediterranean countries recognize decentralized cooperation?
- What are the main challenges hindering the progress of Euro-Mediterranean decentralized cooperation?

The study also seeks to test the following two hypotheses:

1. The more Mediterranean countries adhere to centralization, the less likely they are to benefit from decentralized cooperation in the region.
2. Supporting decentralized cooperation in southern countries leads to improved governance and promotes development.

To answer the main problem and its related sub-questions, the study is structured around the following components:

Axis One: Decentralized Cooperation – A Conceptual Study

- The Concept of Decentralized Cooperation
- The Stakeholders in Decentralized Cooperation
- Forms of Decentralized Cooperation

Axis Two: Euro-Mediterranean Decentralized Cooperation – Content and Practices

- The General Context of Cooperation and Partnership Initiatives in the Mediterranean Basin
- Decentralized Cooperation in Major Mediterranean Initiatives
- Challenges of Euro-Mediterranean Decentralized Cooperation

2. First Axis: Decentralized Cooperation – A Conceptual Study

Decentralized cooperation has gradually emerged on the international stage as one of the new and evolving concepts that is still in flux, yet to establish clear regulatory standards.

This form of cooperation first appeared in Europe after World War II, aiming to bring European nations closer together following the devastation of war. It specifically targeted regions bordering Eastern and Western Europe—areas that had been in conflict for years—to foster development and strengthen trust among their populations (e.g., France, Germany, and Italy). An example of this is the *United Cities* initiative. Over time, the concept gained traction and expanded, leading even the United States to adopt decentralized approaches (Al-Wardi, 2013).

2.1 The Concept of Decentralized Cooperation

Given that decentralized cooperation is a relatively modern concept, its definition varies between broad and narrow interpretations (Karim, 2012).

1.1.2 The Broad Concept of Decentralized Cooperation

This perspective is adopted by certain countries and multilateral organizations, recognizing all local actors as key players in decentralized cooperation. These actors include territorial entities (municipalities, regions, etc.), associations, local groups (NGOs), and production sector organizations (unions, cooperatives, etc.).

The European Union supports this approach, defining decentralized cooperation actors as *"independent, non-profit organizations comprising civil society bodies outside the government and public administration."* These entities may include NGOs, community-based organizations, representative associations, social partners (trade unions, professional associations), private sector groups, religious movements, and universities.

2.1.2 The Narrow Concept of Decentralized Cooperation

This interpretation limits decentralized cooperation actors to territorial entities (municipalities, regions, provinces, and their groupings). France adopts this view under its **February 6, 1992 law**, which grants French territorial authorities—regions, cities, or groups of municipalities—the right to *"enter into agreements with foreign territorial entities and their groupings, within their jurisdiction and in compliance with France's international commitments."*

Key Observations from These Definitions:

- The concept of decentralized cooperation is flexible, expanding or narrowing depending on a country's degree of decentralization.
- It is referred to by various terms, such as *"local government international action"* or *"municipal cooperation,"* but the most commonly used term remains **"international decentralized cooperation."**

Operational Definition of Decentralized Cooperation:
It is a modern form of international cooperation that emerges as an alternative or a complement to what was traditionally known as aid for development. This type of cooperation takes place among a variety of decentralized actors within different countries.

Decentralized cooperation is considered more advanced than traditional development aid, as it entails mutual assistance between the involved parties.

2.2. Actors in Decentralized Cooperation:

This cooperation involves a range of actors of different natures: (ʿAksah, 2015, p. 63)

- **Local authorities:** These are the most capable of engaging in cooperative relationships due to their organizational structure and the human and financial resources they acquire through taxation and central government support.

- **Civil society organizations:** These include associations and trade unions. They possess the ability to aggregate, represent, and defend various interests.

- **The private sector:** It is increasingly recognized as an actor in decentralized cooperation because of its financial capabilities that may contribute to development and the promotion of its image. However, this actor is not fully independent; rather, it remains a partner to local authorities.

- **Scientific and local institutions:** These are involved in utilizing their scientific expertise in conducting research and raising citizen awareness.

3.2. Forms of Decentralized Cooperation:

There are two main types: (*Guide to Decentralized Cooperation*, 2005, p. 8)

2.3.1 Twinning Agreements:

These agreements are based on a specific philosophy: for municipalities in the Global South to improve their methods of governance and administration, they must be twinned with municipalities in the North that have similar conditions and capabilities.

Twinning is an agreement between two decentralized entities that are similar in terms of population size, infrastructure, and administration, aiming for mutual assistance, the realization of common interests, and the improvement of living conditions.

2.3.2 Partnership Agreements:

Due to the limited outcomes of twinning, a shift was made toward partnership agreements, which aim to deepen cooperation among the involved parties through their collective contribution.

Advantages of Decentralized Cooperation:

Decentralized cooperation shares the benefits of decentralization itself, with additional advantages such as:

- **Better understanding and response to citizen needs:** It focuses on the essential needs of individuals—rather than the state's needs for militarization—addressing areas like water, environment, science, and electricity.

- **Preservation of shared cultural heritage:** It helps meet needs related to shared cultural heritage among the parties involved, thereby reducing hatred and animosity.

- **Integrated strengths of different sectors:** It combines the advantages of local authorities, civil society, and the private sector.

- **Efficient use of financial resources and corruption reduction.**

3. Second Axis: Euro-Mediterranean Decentralized Cooperation – Content and Practices

3.1 General Context of Mediterranean Cooperation and Partnership Initiatives:

The Mediterranean region possesses unique characteristics that have historically made it a space of both conflict and cooperation, not only for its inhabitants but also for external actors.

A first glance at the world map reveals the exceptional nature of the Mediterranean's location. The Mediterranean Sea is not merely a large geographical basin at the heart of the world; rather, it serves as a vast arena within the system of societies, where political, economic, and military interactions unfold.
This is evident through the historical development of Mediterranean

international relations. Over time, the region has gradually come to represent a distinct system—one that closely mirrors the global system—due to the

inherent connection and convergence between East and West. (*Samir & Faisal, n.d., p. 8*)

The **Mediterranean Sea** is essentially an inland sea with a single outlet to the west connecting it to the Atlantic Ocean—this outlet is only about 15 kilometers wide. On the eastern side, it was linked to the Red Sea through the **Suez Canal**, which was opened in **1869**. (*Mustafa, 2008*)

This geographical proximity and connectivity have historically turned the region into a center of **great cultural radiance**. The ease of contact, combined with the region's relatively small size, enabled its populations to remain in constant interaction and exchange. As a result, the Mediterranean basin gave birth to some of **the greatest civilizations in human history**, which contributed to the strengthening of **cooperative relations** among Mediterranean peoples. (*Mustafa, 2008*)

Despite the **intense colonial campaigns** launched by European powers against the Arab countries of the southern Mediterranean, these events paradoxically helped bring the two shores closer together. They facilitated **mutual enrichment** and exchange between the civilizations of the North and South, which also explains the development of **migration trends and social mobility** across the Mediterranean basin. (*Mustafa, 2008*)

2.3 **2.3.1 Decentralized Cooperation in Major Mediterranean Initiatives:**

There are three major and complementary initiatives in this regard:

1. The Barcelona Process (1995):

The **Barcelona Declaration of 1995**, in its third chapter concerning cooperation in social, cultural, and human fields, included a commitment to **promote cooperation between local and regional authorities**. Even before this, during the **Renewed Mediterranean Policy of 1990**, cities had already been recognized as active players in decentralized cooperation in the Mediterranean basin, particularly through the **MED URBS** program, which focused on cooperation between local authorities. Thus, the Barcelona Declaration marked a **key milestone** in recognizing the **actual role of regions and decentralized units** as influential forces in Euro-Mediterranean relations. (*Draft Report of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly on the*

Regional Dimension of the Union for the Mediterranean: Recommendations for the Future, 2011, p. 8)

Financial resources were allocated to support decentralized cooperation in sectors such as:

- **Environment**,
- **Development**,
- **Transport**,
- **Energy**, and **Communication**.

Examples include:

- **MED URBS** (city-to-city cooperation),
- **MED CAMPUS** (cooperation among universities and research centers),
- **MED MEDIA** (collaboration among audiovisual media institutions). (*Edina & Emmanuelle, 2010, p. 5*)

However, the **overall outcome** of cooperation—particularly **decentralized cooperation**—was limited due to several challenges:

- The **authoritarian control** exerted by regimes in the southern Mediterranean **prevented decentralized entities from participating meaningfully** in the cooperative initiatives.

- A series of **destabilizing events** in the southern Mediterranean, including the **September 11 attacks (2001)** and the **breakdown of the Middle East peace process**, led to a tightening of restrictions on the roles of decentralized units in the region.

2.3.2 The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP):

The primary objective of the **European Neighbourhood Policy (2004)** is to adopt a **gradual approach tailored to the specific needs and mechanisms of each partner country**. It aims to create a favorable environment for a wide range of reforms that would allow neighboring countries to align their laws and practices with those of the European Union, thus enhancing their potential for integration with EU policies and institutions.

Budgets were allocated to finance cooperation projects managed by **local and regional authorities**, as well as **other local actors** such as universities, trade unions, and NGOs, through the **Neighbourhood and Partnership Financial Instrument** (worth **€13 billion**). This instrument replaced the MEDA program that was part of the Barcelona Process.
Additionally, **city networks, local entities, and regional bodies** operating in the Euro-Mediterranean space played a significant role in generating and promoting projects and in **facilitating decentralized cooperation partnerships**.
(*Draft Report of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly on the Regional Dimension of the Union for the Mediterranean: Recommendations for the Future*, 2011, p. 4)

Despite these efforts, the **results of decentralized cooperation under this policy** remained **below expectations**, largely due to the **2004 EU enlargement**, which shifted attention away from the southern Mediterranean in favor of **Eastern Europe**. This shift led to a **reduction in the budget allocated** to supporting the roles of local and regional bodies in the Mediterranean region.

2.3.3 The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM):

What distinguishes the **Union for the Mediterranean** is its effort to **elevate the level of political dialogue** and introduce **new institutional structures** that allow for **greater participation by partner countries** in shaping and managing the cooperation process. The Union also adopted a **new working methodology** based on **concrete and flexible projects**.

This initiative offers a **more structured and institutionalized framework** for decentralized cooperation and seeks to encourage the participation of **local actors** from the **private sector and civil society**.
(*Draft Report of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly on the Regional Dimension of the Union for the Mediterranean: Recommendations for the Future*, 2011, p. 4)

In its **declaration dated November 4, 2008**, the **Union for the Mediterranean's Foreign Affairs Ministry** affirmed the need to support the launch of a dedicated project for **sustainable urban development**.

3.3 Challenges Facing Euro-Mediterranean Decentralized Cooperation:

Several **twinning agreements** have been concluded between municipalities in southern countries with each other (**South–South cooperation**)—for example,

Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Western Sahara—and with municipalities in the North, including **Bulgaria, Italy, Spain, and France**. However, **the impact of these twinning efforts has been limited**, often reduced to mere visits, **failing to achieve their intended goals**.

Decentralized cooperation in the Mediterranean is **most developed in the field of scientific research**, particularly through partnerships between **universities and research centers**, in addition to **training sessions, capacity-building programs, and financial aid**.
Nevertheless, despite the efforts made by Mediterranean states to advance decentralized cooperation with their regional neighbors, a number of **challenges** continue to hinder its progress. Decentralized cooperation remains **underdeveloped**, mainly due to the following factors:
(*Local and Regional Authorities in the New Mediterranean Governance*, 2008, pp. 19–20)

- **Southern countries' approach to decentralization** is more **administrative** than **political or economic** in nature;

- Many southern states are marked by **deep-rooted centralism** since independence, where the **state presents itself as the sole guarantor of national unity and provider of essential public services** (such as education, health, water, and security). As a result, **granting autonomy to regional units is often perceived as a threat** to national unity, especially given **social fragmentation and separatist tendencies**, particularly in fragile societies like Algeria;

- **Regional authorities lack the capacity** to play a significant role in development and sustainability due to insufficient **human resources, expertise, funding, and mobilization capabilities**. The **absence of technical means** leads local units to depend entirely on **state support**;

- **Weak democracy** and **widespread local-level corruption** in the southern Mediterranean;

- The **rentier nature** of many southern economies contributes to their **centralized structure** and makes them **less reliant on local government services or foreign aid**;

- Local authorities often **lack long-term investment planning**, partly due to a lack of expertise and also due to **political motivations**, with short-term projects being favored for visibility over sustainable development;

- The **Ministry of Interior** in these countries often plays a **dominant supervisory role** over regional bodies, which are frequently subject to **pre-approval for their decisions, even for routine actions**, such as replacing staff.
  (*Najlaa, 2008, p. 202*)

Despite the large budgets allocated for cooperation and partnership between the northern and southern Mediterranean countries, regions and cities benefit only marginally from these financial resources. Moreover, most of the programs agreed upon are rarely implemented in practice, due to significant differences among the participating countries, as well as the glaring gap between their official discourse and actual reform implementation.
(Draft Report of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly on the Regional Dimension of the Union for the Mediterranean: Recommendations for the Future, 2011, pp. 3–4)

Conclusion:

From the preceding analysis, we can draw the following conclusions:

The involvement of **regional units and civil society organizations** in cooperation among Mediterranean countries has become a notable trend in recent times. However, to date, **decentralized cooperation in the region remains limited** to **isolated operations and occasional, recent, and highly specific activities**, lacking in generalization and long-term continuity.

Despite the **lack of constitutional or legal recognition** for the role of local authorities in driving national development in some Mediterranean countries—**Algeria** being a prime example—the **European Union's programs** aimed at supporting and accompanying these entities have contributed to **granting them international recognition**. These programs have also helped to **reinforce their roles in the governance of cooperation and development** within the Mediterranean region. The political transformations witnessed by some Arab countries since the end of 2010 may further **empower decentralized units**, granting them greater legitimacy in exercising their mandates and advancing both **democratic transition** and **development processes** in the region.

Algeria should work to **strengthen decentralized cooperation** and the **international engagement of its local entities**, as they hold significant potential for addressing many of the current deficiencies hindering sustainable development. The central government's strategies in this domain should be grounded in a **clear theoretical and economic vision**—one that considers **internal and external challenges** while also taking into account the **structural characteristics of the Algerian economy**.

5. References List:

Guide to Decentralized Cooperation. (2005). Rabat: Publications of the Documentation Center for Local Authorities.

(2008). Local and regional authorities in the new Mediterranean governance. Marseille: Mediterranean Institute.

(2011). Draft of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly on the Regional Dimension of the Union for the Mediterranean: Recommendations for the Future. Agadir: Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly.

Chakkari Karim. (February 5, 2012). International Cooperation of Moroccan Territorial Collectivities: Between Theory and Practice. Retrieved May 30, 2025, from the Legal Sciences website: https://www.marocdroit.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%

Abbas El Ouardi. (November 7, 2013). Twinning and Territorial Economic Decision-Making in Morocco. Retrieved May 25, 2025, from Hespress: www.hespress.com/opinions/93290

Amin Samir and Yashir Faisal. (n.d.). The Mediterranean in the Contemporary World: A Study in Comparative Development. Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies.

Bouchami, Najla. (2008). The Municipal People's Assembly under the 80/90 Municipal Law: An Instrument of Democracy: Principle and Application.

Master's thesis in Public Law. Faculty of Economic, Commercial and Management Sciences, Constantine: Mentouri Brothers University.

Abderrahmane Aksa. (2015). Euro-Mediterranean Relations within the Framework of Decentralized Cooperation (Master's thesis). Faculty of Law and Political Science, M'Sila: Mohamed Boudiaf University.

Yenoun, Mustapha. (2008). The Security Issue in the Mediterranean Region. Algeria and Security in the Mediterranean: Reality and Prospects. Constantine: Mentouri University.

Edina, S., & Emmanuelle, M. (2010). La coopération décentralisée : un élan pour le développement culturel durable dans l'espace euro-méditerranéen. Développement durable et territoires, 1(1), 1-22.