



Localizing Sustainable Development

A Scottish Council on Global Affairs Insight

Why sub-state governments become increasingly engaged in international development cooperation

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About Us



The **Scottish Council** on **Global Affairs**

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The Scottish Council on Global Affairs (SCGA) is the first all-Scotland international relations institute providing a hub for collaborative policy-relevant research and a home for informed, non-partisan debate on all areas of international relations and global politics broadly defined.

The Founding Partners are:

- The University of Edinburgh
- The University of Glasgow
- The University of St Andrews

The Council provides a convening space to bring together the public, private and not-for-profit sectors

with civil society and academic expertise to encourage dialogue, debate and the dissemination of expertise on issues of global importance.

It looks to forge new relationships and deepen existing ties with universities and civil society in the rest of the United Kingdom as well as with centres of expertise in Europe and across the world.

“Our data reveal that over 70 European regions have established capacities for international development cooperation.”

03

Subnational development cooperation is widespread

We collected new [data](#) from 195 European regions drawing on official reports, websites, and interviews with government representatives. Our goal was to identify those regions that are active in international development cooperation. This includes efforts by the international community to alleviate poverty and reduce inequality in developing countries. More recently, development cooperation also seeks to tackle global challenges such as climate change, conflict and insecurity, and pandemics. The international community committed to address these challenges in the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) - a framework of 17 goals that guides national policymaking in both developing countries and developed countries.

Our data reveal that over 70 European regions have established capacities for international development cooperation. This is surprising and a much larger number than a focus on the ‘usual suspects’ - such as Bavaria, Catalonia, Flanders, or Scotland - would suggest.

We also show there is a wide variety of engagement modalities: some regions undertake [small-scale projects](#) through civil society organizations in a few low-income countries, in areas such as education, energy, health, and water, while others seek to engage more broadly and even contribute to [multilateral organizations](#) such as the Food and Agriculture Organization.

Joint Endeavours



04

Development cooperation as a joint endeavour across levels of government?

The dominant narrative for the growing involvement of actors beyond the nation-state in the SDG agenda is that a joint effort involving all these actors is required because of the scale of ambition enshrined in the SDGs. Sub-state governments, municipalities, and private actors - often involved through [public-private partnerships](#) - bring unique assets to the table that can help the international community respond more effectively to burgeoning development challenges.

For example, the German federal government and the sub-federal units (so-called Länder) have long [recognized](#) that development cooperation is a joint endeavor.

This involves implementation of policies devised by the national government, as well as autonomous policy roles in areas such as sustainable economic development, fair trade and sustainable consumption, development education, and twinning partnerships - to name a few.

Domestic Origins

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The domestic origins of sub-state development policymaking

A complementary argument for why sub-state governments engage in development cooperation is rooted in domestic politics. We argue that regions develop capacities for development cooperation to bolster claims for regional autonomy vis-à-vis the central government. Such claims can take various forms, ranging from a greater say in national-level policymaking, greater autonomy as an entity within the federal state, and full-fledged independence from the federal state.

Development cooperation is well-suited to advance these claims because it enhances the legitimacy of a region as a state-like entity through relationships with foreign states while also bolstering regional identity within the population through fostering a development policy with distinct characteristics.

Our statistical [analysis](#) suggests that regions are more likely to pursue development cooperation

where they have higher legal-administrative authority, distinctive cultural-linguistic traits, and a regionalist party involved in region-building efforts. This lends support to our argument that political motives - in addition to functional arguments about the need for partnerships to address the SDGs - are driving sub-state engagement in development cooperation.

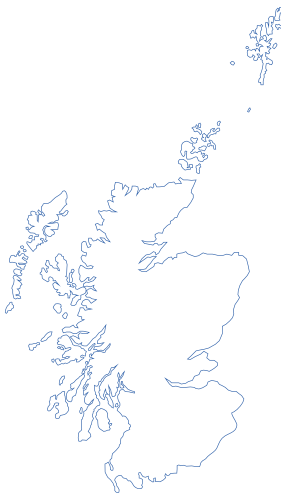
A closer look at sub-state development cooperation reports and our interviews with regional government elites corroborate this interpretation. Many regions emphasize how they 'do development differently' from their national-level counterparts.

Their engagement is motivated by global solidarity concerns and draws on promoting regional values and exporting regional strengths to help improve living standards overseas.

06. The Scottish Case

The Scottish case: progressive expansion of international development cooperation

06



Where does Scotland fall in our framework of analysis? We tell the fascinating story of how Scotland became an increasingly assertive subnational development cooperation provider in this [article](#).

In terms of legal-administrative authority, Scotland was an unlikely case to develop autonomous capacity for international development cooperation. Even after the 1998 Devolution Act, its powers to undertake autonomous foreign policies remained limited. In 2005, under the Labour Party leader Jack McConnell, the Scottish government initiated its development cooperation program.

However, it was the Scottish National Party under Alex Salmond that substantively scaled up the Scottish development program from 2007 and made it distinctively 'Scottish', in the context of a sustained drive toward independence. In fact, the Scottish case confirms that there needs to be a regionalist party that fosters cross-partisan consensus on development cooperation as a reflection of a domestic nation-building attempt.

The [2016 Scottish International Development Strategy](#) underpins this notion.

In this document, the Scottish government made commitments towards global citizenship and international solidarity and connected them with the domestic agenda. A line in the ministerial foreword, originally from First Minister Alex Salmond, captured the essence of the emerging rhetoric: "Scotland cannot act with credibility overseas if we are blind to inequality here at home. And our ambitions for a Fairer Scotland are undermined without global action to tackle poverty, promote prosperity and to tackle climate change".

Mirroring its domestic policy agenda, the Scottish government committed to fight against global poverty, inequality, and injustice. In this way, it established 'Scotland as a good global citizen' - a mantra that contrasted starkly with the emergent 'Global Britain' motive embraced by the UK government.

07. The Way Ahead

The way ahead: how to make sub-state development cooperation more effective

07

While sub-state development cooperation has the potential to fill critical gaps in the international development architecture, its rapid expansion also poses new challenges. Specifically, the small-scale nature of regional interventions raises concerns about aid fragmentation.

At the same time, significant budget increases are unlikely to find more support with taxpayers. Where regional policymakers want to increase aid budgets, they will face increased politicization of their aid programs. But increased politicization - because of its strong

emphasis on regional interest - risks undermining the unique promise of greater effectiveness embodied in this aid modality.

To uphold strong cross-partisan consensus on using regional taxpayer money for development overseas, sub-state governments must target a 'sweet spot' in which the varied interests of the regional constituency overlap.

Demonstrating the benefits at home, but also how regional aid makes a difference abroad, will be key in this endeavour.

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