

Opinion – Revisiting Paradiplomacy in the Context of COVID-19

Written by Mariano Alvarez and Nahuel Oddone

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MARIANO ALVAREZ AND NAHUEL ODDONE, AUG 5 2020

From a historical perspective, pandemics – as well as natural disasters – have impacted international development cooperation schemes, both to advance their creation or adaptation, and to question their own existence in terms of utility. COVID-19 does not seem to be the exception, since it has allowed a rapid reconfiguration of different forms of cooperation. Among them, the paradiplomacy of non-central governments. We can already observe South-North cooperation (for example, the support Cuba provided to Italy and other European countries) and South-South schemes (such as China's cooperation in global terms or the return of Cuban medical cooperation to Brazil). In turn, this cooperation has developed both from the central states and the non-central governments, through highlighting "old" twinning between cities or revitalizing the work of international networks.

In terms of decentralized cooperation, city networks consolidated their space, incorporating the emergency from their local perspective and proposing policies to design a recovery agenda. For example, UCLG and UN-Habitat developed "Live Learning Experiences #BeyondTheOutBreak", covering topics related to the pandemic such as social development, housing, street people, urban transport, local businesses, prevention of gender violence and intra-family, and LGBTIQ minorities, among others. Likewise, Mercociudades, Metropolis, ALAS, and C40, from different perspectives and approaches, have been organizing virtual activities that addressed the local dimension of the pandemic.

Consequently, COVID-19 is not only impacting cities, but also reconfiguring their networks. It is therefore necessary to rethink the categories of paradiplomacy analysis in the context of the pandemic and to start thinking about its future challenges. For this, the Network of Experts in Paradiplomacy and Territorial Internationalization (REPIT, Spanish Acronym) organized a virtual seminar, which included the participation of Javier Sánchez Cano and Esther Ponce Adame, to revisit paradiplomacy from a new perspective. As a result of this seminar, we present the following reflections.

First, it must be acknowledged that any present or future modification of city networks cannot be exclusively attributed to the pandemic. This is so because the paradiplomacy of cities was already immersed in a reflective process that is before the appearance of COVID-19. This process -according to the specialists- responds to at least two parallel issues. On the one hand, there were internal difficulties, reflected in the processes of national recentralization and problems related to the decrease in citizen trust. On the other, these questions were framed within the crisis of multilateralism, which was accompanied by a context of environmental, social and economic problems, among others. All this had led to the fact that, in many local governments, the international issues had been displaced from the agendas. In short, the pandemic found the municipal paradiplomacy in a moment of existential reassessment.

However, instead of boosting the recentralization process, the pandemic energized the actions of cities in search of quick responses. This, in turn, repromoted international articulation through networks. The work was particularly relevant in the case of countries with denialist leaders, where cities had to face not only the challenges of the pandemic but also the obstacles generated by the indifference of their central governments (this was, for example, the cases of Curitiba in Brazil and Los Angeles in the United States). In these cases, the paradiplomatic work and

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international networks have been a laudable and key support to allow mayors to dialogue and seek horizontal political solutions.

Therefore, the pandemic reinforced the need for a change in the approaches to paradiplomacy. Traditionally, paradiplomacy has been analyzed from the dimensions of transnationalism, interdependence, and globalization, thinking about how these phenomena opened the doors to cities to interact internationally. Currently, there is a need to redefine the problems from a local perspective, which does not mean to eliminate the old analysis variables, but rather to revisit them and, without a doubt, to incorporate new dimensions that affect the international cooperation system in general and paradiplomacy in particular.

The first variable is the local dimension of global problems, rather than the role of the local in the international arena. In other words, increasingly, paradiplomacy is less like traditional diplomacy and more like a local interpretation of global issues, from major international challenges such as Climate Change to the territorialisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this sense, paradiplomacy would not seek the global impact of the city's internationalization, but rather the municipal benefit of global solutions to local problems.

Another variable, which changes substantially, is travel resources. This is a rather operational dimension and derived from the need for an international presence and participation, but it represents an important budget item for many municipalities and a limitation for others. The use by networks of virtual platforms causes this variable to mutate to incorporate institutional capacities, such as internet connectivity. The virtualization of the international interaction highlighted that many paradiplomacy offices did not have adequate equipment and / or connectivity. In many Latin American territories, the “democratization of paradiplomacy” faces connectivity challenges.

Regarding the challenges that paradiplomacy is likely to face after the COVID-19 pandemic, Javier Sánchez Cano stressed that this crisis could further displace the international aspect in municipal agendas. Although cities will not compete directly with each other, they will have strong financing and resource needs for public services, generating substantial modifications in local political agendas. In this scenario, competition for financial resources will take place at the national level, which may displace priorities from the international to the national level, at least in the first stage. This situation can cause, in the medium term, a transfer towards the consolidation of a strong economic paradiplomacy, to attract investment to the territory.

On the other hand, after the pandemic, cities will have to be redesigned in areas such as habitability, based on a reconfiguration of public space. Here, decentralized cooperation (as has happened historically) will be able to find national and international champions to generate synergies through the exchange of good practices, capitalizing on learning processes.

During the REPIT's seminar, the challenges likely to be faced by city networks were also discussed. According to Esther Ponce Adame, even though COVID-19 has promoted greater participation of local governments through digital media, it is necessary to consider whether this will continue after the pandemic when face-to-face meetings take place again. At the same time, it must be analysed whether this greater participation has implied a modification in the behaviour of the cities and the networks themselves. That is, if a greater number of points of view and needs are being collected, or if the same conceptions continue to prevail as when there was less participation.

While it is true that COVID-19 has produced a different environment for the development of paradiplomacy, posing new challenges, it has not generated a radical change compared to previous situations. If paradiplomacy is called to continue developing and establishing its place in international relations, greater boldness and innovation will be necessary. In a significant number of municipalities, there is a management of networks and paradiplomacy in general that has become trivialized and routine, limiting it to administrative tasks. For example, the Sustainable Development Goals are monitored, but in a few cases, there are concrete proposals to achieve them. In this sense, the challenge is not new, but it faces a new window of opportunity, generated as a result of the changes that the post-pandemic scenario will require.

If the local dimension is called to occupy a relevant space in the international arena, it will depend on the effort and

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creativity of local actors. These should work both individually and collectively and not only in terms of governments but also by generating multiple alliances with other interest groups, which empower, complement and contribute to perfect paradiplomatic actions.

About the author:

Mariano Alvarez is an Associated Researcher of the Instituto de Estudios Internacionales at the University Arturo Prat (Chile), executive board member of the Red de Expertos en Paradiplomacia e Internacionalización Territorial (REPIT) and consultant for different international organizations. His most recent publications are “Gobernanza y desempeño exportador de los servicios modernos en América Latina y la India” (2020), “La creciente importancia de la paradiplomacia en América Latina: motivos para su abordaje académico y su vinculación con las fronteras” (2019), and “América Latina Global. Estudios regionales sobre paradiplomacia” (2019). He holds a PhD from the University of Leiden (Netherlands).

Nahuel Oddone is an Associate Research Fellow at UNU-CRIS and serves as Head of Promotion and Exchange of Regional Social Policies at the Social Institute of MERCOSUR. Previously, he has worked as Business Environment Advisor at the Regional Center for the Promotion of MSMEs (CENPROMYPE/SICA), and as a Coordinator of Value Chains Studies at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN-ECLAC), at their sub-regional headquarters in Mexico. Nahuel Oddone has a PhD in International Studies (University of the Basque Country/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea). He has authored, co-authored and co-edited 13 books.