

PLATFORM DIPLOMACY

Cooperation Infrastructures in a Multilateral Order

Research notes

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Cooperation Infrastructures in a Multilateral Order

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Executive Summary

Platform Diplomacy and Territorial Governance in a Changing World

This research booklet emerges from a growing awareness that the traditional architecture of multilateral cooperation—rooted in linear planning, state-to-state diplomacy, and project-based interventions—is increasingly inadequate in addressing the layered, interdependent challenges of today’s world. What is needed is not simply a reform of instruments, but a broader shift in how cooperation is conceived, organized, and enacted. This shift is already underway, driven by deep transformations in the technological, ecological, and geopolitical structure of the global system.

At the heart of this transformation lie three fundamental forces that are reshaping both the conditions and possibilities of international cooperation. The first is **digital technology**, which is no longer merely a communication tool but a relational infrastructure. It enables new forms of direct connectivity between territories, facilitates collaborative intelligence, and supports the emergence of distributed systems capable of acting jointly across distances. Critically, the digital also provides the technical foundation for more complex, adaptive production models—particularly those based on circular logic.

The second force is precisely **the circular model**, which introduces a profound rethinking of how value, resources, and responsibilities circulate within and across systems. Far from being just an alternative economic paradigm, circularity is becoming a structural necessity: a response to the reality of finite resources, environmental degradation, and the urgency to regenerate ecosystems rather than deplete them. Its complexity lies in the material feedback loops it generates—between matter, actors, knowledge, and infrastructures—and in its demand for new institutional arrangements capable of managing such interactions over time.

The third force is **the transition toward a multipolar world**, which reflects not only a redistribution of geopolitical power, but a systemic reconfiguration of how agency is exercised at global scale. The combination of digital interconnectivity and ecological interdependence reduces the functional centrality of traditional diplomatic actors and highlights the role of subnational and hybrid entities—cities, regions, universities, consortia, civic platforms—as legitimate and capable agents of cooperation. In this context, what begins to take form is a new mode of engagement: **platform diplomacy**. This is not diplomacy as symbolic representation or hierarchical negotiation, but as operational coordination among distributed systems, grounded in shared problems and territorial learning.

This booklet is structured around these three interwoven dynamics. We seek to understand how these transformations are reshaping the frameworks within which cooperation takes place—and how new institutional forms may better respond to today’s socio-technical conditions. **Part I** explores the architecture of contemporary cooperation, examining its actors, funding mechanisms, and operational logics in light of increasing complexity. **Part II** analyzes the growing disconnect between institutional apparatuses and real territories, and investigates how new forms of platform-based governance are emerging to re-align cooperation with systemic realities. **Part III** shifts to the strategic level, proposing concrete pathways for designing and implementing territorial cooperation infrastructures that are circular, digitally enabled, and diplomatically autonomous.

Taken together, the articles argue that we are witnessing the emergence of a new grammar of cooperation—one that requires moving beyond projects and beyond states, toward territorial platforms capable of functioning as **long-term public infrastructures** in a circular and multipolar world.

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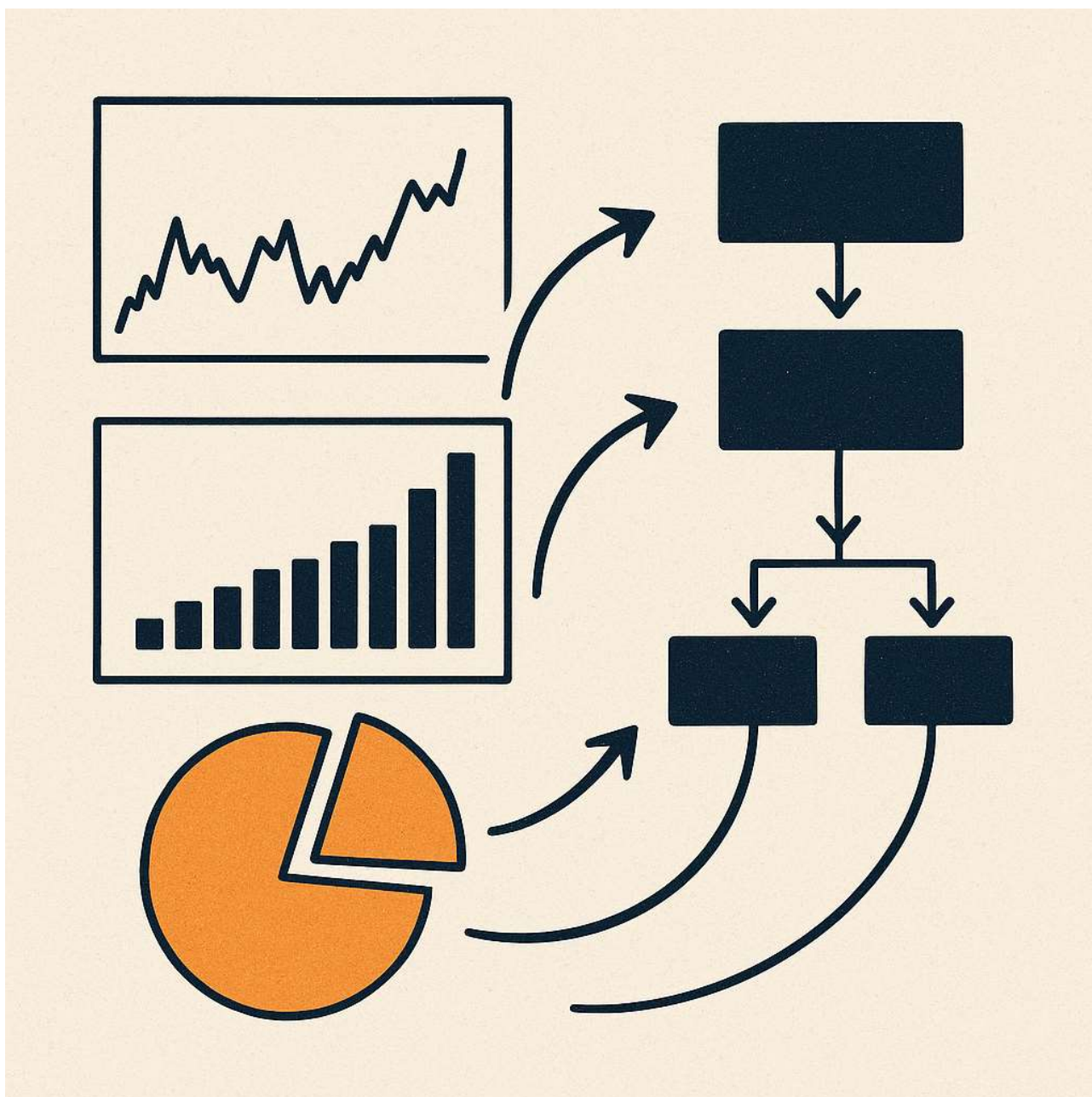
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Rethinking Cooperation Beyond the Project

Funding structures, actor dynamics, and the limits of linear development models

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Abstract

Project-based cooperation has long structured the dominant architecture of international development. Shaped by post-war geopolitics, institutional routines, and managerial imperatives, this model defines how problems are framed, how interventions are designed, and how success is measured. Rooted in linear planning, accountability tools, and technocratic rationality, the project format has proven highly adaptable—but also increasingly misaligned with the complex, systemic nature of today’s global challenges. This article traces the historical emergence and institutional consolidation of the project model, examining its theoretical foundations and operational diffusion across multilateral and bilateral cooperation systems. By analyzing its structural features and cognitive effects, we begin to identify the tensions it generates within evolving socio-technical and ecological contexts.

Introduction: The Formation of a Model

The institutional architecture of international cooperation that emerged after World War II was founded on an imperative of order, stability, and controlled reconstruction. The Bretton Woods institutions—the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank, 1944), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and later the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1965)—crystallized a vision of development as a linear process of modernization, facilitated by capital transfer, infrastructure investment, and technical assistance [1].

This vision found early expression in the Marshall Plan (1948–1952), where “the reconstruction of European economies was designed not only as economic recovery but as a geopolitical strategy to secure democratic capitalism” [2]. The Marshall Plan established the template: targeted funding, short-term programming, and standardized reporting. In the decades that followed, this model evolved into a full-fledged apparatus of development planning—structured around the project as its core unit of intervention.

Theoretical Justifications: Development as a Linear Process

The intellectual foundations of this architecture were laid by modernization theory. In particular, Walt Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960) framed development as a universal progression through discrete phases, from “traditional society” to “high mass consumption” [3]. The role of cooperation was to accelerate this trajectory, bridging structural gaps through foreign aid and institutional reform.

Projects became the instrument through which this acceleration could be managed: bounded in time, measurable in outputs, and replicable across contexts. The logic was one of linear causality: identify a constraint, apply a targeted intervention, and move the system to a higher stage. As Escobar later noted, “development discourse made it possible to conceptualize entire populations as problems to be solved through expert knowledge” [4].

This technocratic framing was reinforced by emerging schools of public administration and economics that viewed large-scale social transformation as a matter of planning, sequencing, and delivery. The project form, with its timelines, budgets, and evaluation metrics, aligned perfectly with these assumptions.

Institutionalization Through Donor Systems and Multilateral Agencies

From the 1960s onward, donor agencies and multilateral institutions progressively standardized project-based cooperation. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), and later the European Commission all developed formal tools for project management, including the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) and Project Cycle Management (PCM).

These tools did not merely facilitate coordination—they redefined what counted as legitimate knowledge and measurable success. As David Mosse observed, “projects are organized not only to deliver development but to produce the appearance of success, regardless of impact” [5].

Over time, cooperation became structured around calls for proposals, funding envelopes, thematic windows, and reporting templates. These procedures were replicated by UN agencies, regional development banks, and NGOs, leading to a proliferation of isolated interventions, each bounded by its own logic, documentation, and temporality.

Results-Based Logic and Accountability Regimes

The evolution of cooperation toward performance management culminated in the aid effectiveness agenda of the early 2000s. The Paris Declaration (2005), Accra Agenda for Action (2008), and Busan Partnership (2011) all reinforced a vision of cooperation based on “ownership,” “alignment,” and “results-based management”—yet still within the project paradigm.

Projects were expected to deliver predefined outputs according to time-bound indicators. Public sector reforms, institutional capacity building, service delivery, and even governance were now to be executed through externally funded project units, often operating parallel to state administrations.

As Booth and Unsworth warned, “the insistence on measurable short-term results systematically discourages engagement with complexity, politics, and real institutional change” [6].

Cognitive and Cultural Effects: Project Logic as Common Sense

Beyond its operational functions, the project has become a cognitive infrastructure. It shapes how development actors think, how institutions organize work, and how legitimacy is produced. Arturo Escobar argued that “the dominance of the development project form has produced a global culture of intervention, in which the language, tools, and expectations of external funding shape local realities” [4].

In many recipient countries, ministries and municipalities have adapted their operations to match donor cycles, with specialized Project Management Units (PMUs), consultancy-based staffing, and ad hoc governance. Universities and civil society organizations design their agendas around funding availability rather than endogenous strategies.

This leads to what some analysts call the projectization of the state: a fragmentation of public authority into temporally bounded interventions with no cumulative institutional learning.

Structural and Systemic Limits

While flexible in its replication, the project model reveals deep structural limits. It is poorly suited to long-term transformation, systems thinking, or circular feedback processes. Projects operate on assumptions of predictability, closure, and linearity, which are rarely present in real-world development dynamics.

Elinor Ostrom demonstrated that sustainable governance of commons depends on nested, polycentric institutions capable of adapting rules over time [7]. But projects, by design, cannot establish such institutions—they are meant to end.

Similarly, Schot and Steinmueller highlight that “transformative change requires coordination across domains, experimental learning, and redefinition of goals over time—not compliance with static indicators” [8].

Even when project outputs are delivered, they often fail to translate into structural outcomes. Clinics built without sustained health systems, digital platforms launched without local capability, or laws passed without enforcement mechanisms illustrate how output success masks systemic failure.

Conclusion: A Genealogy of Constraints

The project emerged from a specific post-war rationality: one that prioritized order, managerial control, and measurable intervention in the service of geopolitical and economic goals. Over time, it became embedded in the routines, languages, and metrics of international cooperation.

Understanding this trajectory is essential—not as a rejection of all project-based work, but as a recognition of its limitations when faced with contemporary challenges that are systemic, non-linear, and place-specific. The persistence of the project model reflects not only institutional inertia, but deeper epistemic structures about what development is and how it should be governed.

If cooperation is to evolve, it must re-engage with the institutions, histories, and materialities of the territories it claims to serve. That requires not just new tools, but a rethinking of the logic that governs how we intervene, learn, and relate.

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From Function to Fiction: Why Projects Don't Transform Territories

Organizational survival, fragmented governance, and the illusion of impact

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Abstract

Despite decades of investment in international development and cooperation projects, most initiatives fail to generate structural change in the territories they target. This article explores the institutional, organizational, and cognitive mechanisms that explain why project-based interventions often produce limited or symbolic outcomes. It argues that the persistence of projects reflects not their effectiveness, but their utility in sustaining organizations, navigating donor logics, and performing accountability rituals. Drawing on development sociology, organizational theory, and case-based evidence, we examine how cooperation projects become forms of institutional fiction—appearing transformative while reproducing fragmentation, short-termism, and superficial alignment.

Introduction: The Problem Behind the Outputs

International cooperation is filled with success stories—projects completed, workshops delivered, partnerships established, outputs documented. Yet across much of the Global South (and increasingly within European peripheries), these projects leave little lasting institutional, social, or economic transformation.

Hospitals are built without staff; innovation hubs lack ecosystems; laws are passed without enforcement capacity. The gap between what is declared and what is structurally changed is not accidental—it is systemic. As David Booth observes, “the development business has perfected the art of being active without being effective” [1].

To understand this paradox, we must look beyond project design to the deeper organizational and political structures that shape how cooperation is practiced.

1. Projects as Instruments of Organizational Survival

For many of the actors involved—local governments, NGOs, universities, agencies—the primary function of projects is not transformation, but survival. As funds from donors and competitive calls become essential for operational continuity, institutions adapt to funding cycles, shaping their agendas, staff, and narratives accordingly.

As Diane Stone points out, “project funding has transformed universities and think tanks into consultancy-like entities, oriented to short-term deliverables and performance indicators” [2]. Similarly, local governments may initiate projects not because they reflect territorial strategies, but because they offer access to investment, visibility, or political credit.

In this logic, the project becomes a strategic compromise: a vehicle to mobilize resources under externally defined conditions. The real objective is not to solve systemic problems, but to remain visible, fundable, and present in the cooperation ecosystem.

2. The Fragmented Architecture of Implementation

Cooperation systems are structurally fragmented. Projects are often implemented by ad hoc consortia, parallel units, or technical operators external to existing institutions. This creates duplication, weak coordination, and institutional discontinuity.

As Bebbington and McCourt show in their research on aid governance, “projects often set up systems that are unconnected to domestic administrations, undermining long-term capacity while overburdening limited managerial bandwidth” [3].

Even when integrated into public bodies, projects rarely align with internal procedures, financial systems, or career paths. Staff are hired on short-term contracts, knowledge is siloed in reports, and coordination happens only when demanded by donors.

The result is a cooperation architecture where each project becomes a closed circuit—self-referential, bounded, and largely disconnected from institutional or territorial learning.

3. The Performance of Impact

The project economy also generates powerful incentives for performative success. Donors demand evidence of impact; implementing agencies respond by producing outputs that are easily measured but weakly connected to transformation.

As Eyben and Guijt argue, “impact becomes a spectacle, with actors curating indicators, stories, and visuals to demonstrate relevance” [4]. The problem is not falsification, but selective representation. Reports emphasize deliverables; complexity and failure are relegated to annexes—if mentioned at all.

The project thus becomes a fictional construct: a space where real efforts are undertaken, but framed in ways that obscure structural limitations, political conflict, or institutional inertia. Evaluation becomes a ritual of closure, not an instrument of change.

4. Epistemic Capture and Strategic Cynicism

A further dimension is epistemic. Over time, institutions and actors adapt not only their procedures but their language and problem definitions to fit the project grammar. What doesn’t fit—emergent issues, contentious priorities, or long-term uncertainty—is excluded from proposals or reframed in acceptable terms.

James Ferguson called this the “anti-politics machine”: a system that “renders political and social tensions as technical problems to be solved by neutral interventions” [5]. But this depoliticization is now widely recognized and sometimes strategically accepted by actors in the field.

What emerges is a form of strategic cynicism: actors know the limits of the project model, but continue to engage with it because there are few alternatives. Projects are written to win, not to solve; implemented to comply, not to evolve. The result is a cooperation system where form trumps substance and reproduction overrides reflection.

5. Lost Opportunity for Institutional Learning

Perhaps the most damaging effect of this dynamic is the erosion of institutional memory and learning. Since projects are time-bound, knowledge is often lost at the end of the cycle. Lessons learned are poorly integrated; staff turnover is high; documentation is underused or inaccessible.

In many contexts, the same problems are diagnosed repeatedly, with minor variations in terminology. Each project begins from scratch, claiming novelty while ignoring decades of experience. As Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews write, “development projects often pretend that no one has ever tried to do this before” [6].

This ignorance is not natural—it is produced by a system that rewards execution over reflection, novelty over continuity, and outputs over relationships.

Conclusion: The Project as a Fictional Infrastructure

The project model persists not because it delivers transformation, but because it satisfies a series of systemic needs: funding flows, institutional positioning, political credit, and symbolic legitimacy. It is a form of institutional fiction—partially real, partially performed—enacted by rational actors within a constrained system.

This does not mean that all projects fail, nor that those involved lack commitment. But it does mean that, as currently structured, the project system is not designed to produce deep, cumulative, territorial change. Its logic of fragmentation, performance, and bounded timeframes works against the very complexity it claims to address.

Any serious attempt to reform cooperation must begin by acknowledging this fiction—not to condemn actors, but to reveal the structural forces that shape their options. Only then can we imagine alternatives that are not only more honest, but more capable of transformation.

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Global Shift, Territorial Crisis

Digital infrastructures, ecological limits and the Mediterranean as a system in transition

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Abstract

The postwar architecture of global cooperation is undergoing a deep reconfiguration, driven by three interlinked transformations: digital infrastructure expansion, ecological constraints, and geopolitical multipolarity. This article situates the Mediterranean region within this global transition, identifying it as both a frontline of systemic crisis and a potential site of institutional innovation. Far from being a peripheral arena, the Mediterranean now reflects the broader contradictions of a model of development based on linear extraction, territorial disconnection, and geopolitical segmentation. The article traces the historical trajectory of cooperation in the region, examines current vulnerabilities and fragmentation, and suggests that new territorial governance strategies are needed to address a reality shaped by interconnected risks and distributed capacities.

Introduction: Cooperation in a Disrupted World

The classical model of international cooperation—based on stable donor–recipient relations, centralized institutions, and project-based interventions—was born in a world of geopolitical order, state-centric development, and resource abundance. That world no longer exists. Today, cooperation unfolds in a scenario

of systemic transition, where the institutional, material, and technological foundations of development are being reconfigured.

The Mediterranean exemplifies this shift. Once a geopolitical buffer and development periphery, it is now a site of overlapping crises: climate vulnerability, migration pressure, resource degradation, democratic erosion, and digital asymmetry. As a boundary space between Europe, MENA, and Africa, the region highlights the fractures of a model based on disconnection between economies, knowledge, and ecological systems.

To understand the implications for cooperation, we must analyze three intersecting forces that define the current landscape: digital infrastructures as new enablers of power and asymmetry; ecological constraints as systemic limits to growth; and the Mediterranean as a strategic interface in the emerging multipolar order.

Digital Infrastructures and Territorial Disarticulation

The digital transformation is reshaping not only economies but also the architecture of global influence. Control over platforms, data, and infrastructure now defines strategic advantage. As Srnicek notes, “platforms are not neutral intermediaries; they are extractive infrastructures that reorganize entire sectors” [1].

In the Mediterranean, this asymmetry is visible in the uneven distribution of connectivity, data centers, cloud services, and digital sovereignty. North–South divides in digital infrastructure reinforce structural dependencies. Countries in North Africa and the Levant are often forced to adopt imported platforms, standards, and architectures, with limited capacity to design or govern them.

This disarticulates territories from digital value chains. As Taylor and Broeders argue, “data infrastructures produce new forms of spatial marginalization, where sovereignty is partial and externalized” [2]. Meanwhile, digital development cooperation remains fragmented and focused on superficial access (e.g., broadband penetration, e-government) rather than territorial capability-building.

Ecological Constraints and the End of Linear Development

The Mediterranean is a hotspot of ecological vulnerability. According to the IPCC and the Union for the Mediterranean, the region is warming 20% faster than the global average, facing declining water availability, biodiversity loss, and increased risk of systemic drought [3]. These dynamics challenge the viability of development models based on linear growth, export agriculture, fossil fuel extraction, and urban sprawl.

Yet cooperation frameworks continue to promote these same models, often under greenwashed labels like “sustainable modernization.” Development banks fund infrastructure disconnected from ecological carrying capacity, while adaptation strategies remain sectoral and project-bound.

As Raworth argues, “we are entering the doughnut era, where development must operate between social foundations and ecological ceilings” [4]. This demands a shift from productivity to resilience, from extraction to regeneration, from export-led growth to territorial circularity.

The Mediterranean is emblematic: it faces systemic limits—water stress, coastal erosion, energy fragility—without the governance tools to respond at the appropriate scale.

A Multipolar and Fragmented Geopolitical Space

The post-1945 order was defined by bipolar and then unipolar structures of influence. Today, we are witnessing the rise of a multipolar order in which regional powers—Turkey, Egypt, Gulf countries, the EU—compete and cooperate in unstable configurations.

The Mediterranean sits at the intersection of these realignments. Traditional powers (France, Italy, the EU) face declining legitimacy; meanwhile, China invests through infrastructure diplomacy, and Gulf states fund religious, economic, and media networks. Migration, energy interdependence, and security concerns further complicate relations.

This pluralization of power has not produced a new cooperative architecture. Rather, it has led to fragmented diplomacy, where projects are aligned with shifting strategic interests rather than territorial needs. Regional institutions such as the Union for the Mediterranean remain weak, with limited capacity to define shared strategies or coordinate interventions.

As Achcar observes, “the Arab Mediterranean is caught between global dependency and internal fragmentation, lacking an integrative project” [5].

The Mediterranean as a System in Transition

Taken together, these dynamics—digital disarticulation, ecological constraint, geopolitical fragmentation—reveal the Mediterranean as a system in transition. It is not merely a geographical zone, but a contested space of redefinition, where the old development grammar no longer works, and new forms of cooperation have yet to emerge.

Yet this crisis also creates space for institutional experimentation. New forms of territorial diplomacy, digital commons, regenerative economies, and cross-border platforms are beginning to emerge from below. Examples include inter-municipal cooperation, living labs, and grassroots networks for water governance and agroecology.

These remain marginal—but they reveal a possible shift from project logics to systemic strategies: not isolated interventions, but infrastructures of coordination, learning, and mutualization across borders.

Conclusion: Cooperation in a World of Limits

The era of cooperation as linear expansion, external funding, and technical fixes is over. In the Mediterranean, this reality is no longer theoretical—it is material, ecological, and territorial. The region embodies the limits of an exhausted model and the urgency of inventing new forms of distributed, embedded, and circular cooperation.

Rather than treating the Mediterranean as a problem to manage, cooperation actors must recognize it as a prototype space for systemic transition. This demands a rethinking of scales, instruments, and institutions—toward a model where digital infrastructure enables autonomy, ecological intelligence shapes development, and territorial actors regain strategic agency.

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RE-EMBEDDING GOVERNANCE

Re-embedding Governance

The structural disconnection between bureaucracies and real territories

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Abstract

The institutional architecture of development cooperation often operates without meaningful connection to the territories it seeks to transform. Despite discourse on localization, inclusion, and place-based policy, cooperation systems remain governed by bureaucracies that function through standardized procedures,

exogenous agendas, and abstract geographies. This article explores the structural disconnection between administrative apparatuses and real territories, drawing on theories of territorial governance, state restructuring, and institutional isomorphism. It argues that the failure to embed cooperation in specific territorial ecologies results not only in inefficiency but in a deeper erosion of sovereignty, democratic capacity, and systemic learning.

Introduction: A Crisis of Anchoring

Contemporary development governance is marked by a paradox: while claiming to support local development, it increasingly detaches from the places it addresses. Projects are formulated in capital cities or donor headquarters, filtered through calls for proposals and selection committees, and implemented by technical units operating in isolation from broader territorial institutions.

As Jessop and Brenner argue, “the rescaling of statehood under globalization has decentered the national and the local alike, replacing them with functional governance regimes decoupled from territory” [1]. What emerges is a form of placeless governance: spatially indifferent, procedurally rigid, and operationally fragmented.

This disconnection is not accidental. It results from a specific historical evolution of public administration, cooperation financing, and political economy, which this article seeks to unpack.

The Rise of Abstract Bureaucracy

Modern bureaucracies emerged to ensure neutrality, predictability, and legal-rational legitimacy in state action. Weber’s classical model emphasized impersonality, hierarchy, and formalized procedures as guarantees of equity and efficiency. But in international cooperation, these same traits have been amplified and abstracted, producing institutions that function according to internal codes rather than territorial feedback.

Pierre and Peters note that “public governance increasingly prioritizes vertical accountability to funders and political principals over horizontal responsiveness to local publics” [2]. In multilateral cooperation, this tendency is reinforced by the pressure to standardize: calls must be comparable, evaluation must be ‘objective,’ and procedures must minimize discretion.

The result is a logic of isomorphic compliance—where form prevails over context, and innovation is punished unless legible to external auditors.

Institutional Isomorphism and Managerial Templates

The concept of institutional isomorphism, developed by DiMaggio and Powell, explains how organizations across sectors begin to resemble each other not because of efficiency, but due to shared pressures: coercive (from funders), mimetic (to appear legitimate), and normative (from professional standards) [3].

This dynamic is particularly evident in development cooperation. Ministries, universities, NGOs, and municipalities adopt similar formats, procedures, and jargon to compete for international funding. Territorial specificities are reduced to background sections in project proposals. Complex local dynamics are flattened into stakeholder matrices and risk registers.

As Tania Murray Li notes, “development projects construct ‘target populations’ as blank slates, ready for intervention, rather than as historical subjects embedded in political relations” [4]. Territory becomes a container, not a system.

Territorial Governance: The Missing Layer

The literature on territorial governance highlights the importance of embedded institutions, multi-actor coordination, and spatially anchored strategies for development. As Barca argued in his report for the EU, “effective development requires place-based policy that mobilizes endogenous potential and addresses spatial injustice” [5].

Yet most cooperation systems lack a territorial governance layer. Projects are managed vertically, with little integration across sectors, scales, or time horizons. Local governments are often bypassed or instrumentalized; universities are treated as training providers, not knowledge anchors; civil society is included as a checkbox.

This undermines the capacity for territorial intelligence—the ability to read systemic dynamics, coordinate across domains, and generate long-term learning. Without this layer, cooperation becomes serial, fragmented, and reversible.

Bureaucratic Politics and the Governance of Visibility

A further distortion comes from the political economy of bureaucracies themselves. Institutions often compete not to solve problems, but to survive, grow, and increase their visibility within the funding ecosystem.

James Scott, in *Seeing Like a State*, described how administrative rationality leads to simplification: “officials attempt to make a complex reality legible by reducing it to categories they can control” [6]. In cooperation, this leads to the prioritization of what can be counted over what matters. Territories are valued for their absorptive capacity, not for their systemic needs.

As Olivier de Sardan observes, “governance in aid contexts often becomes a theatre of compliance, where actors simulate alignment to protocols while pursuing divergent logics” [7]. This decoupling deepens the gap between governance as performance and governance as transformation.

Disconnection as Structural Condition

The disconnection between bureaucracies and territories is not a temporary dysfunction—it is a structural feature of the system. It reflects deeper contradictions between the logic of funding flows and the logic of place-based development. The more standardized, competitive, and audit-driven cooperation becomes, the harder it is to design institutions that are territorially rooted, inclusive, and adaptive.

This affects not only outcomes, but democratic legitimacy. As Wagenaar and Healey argue, “when governance becomes disembedded from place, it loses its capacity to generate trust, deliberation, and long-term commitment” [8].

Without anchoring in real territories, cooperation risks becoming a technical ritual—efficient in procedure, but disconnected from substance.

Conclusion: Toward Re-embedding Governance

Reconnecting governance to territory is not a matter of decentralization alone. It requires new institutional forms: hybrid, embedded, participatory, and learning-oriented. It demands that cooperation systems recognize territory not as a backdrop, but as a living system—historical, ecological, cognitive, and political.

As long as bureaucracies remain placeless, their capacity to support systemic transformation will remain limited. Re-embedding governance means designing institutions that can think, feel, and act with the places they claim to serve.

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Territorial Platforms as Commons

Living labs, circular hubs and the institutional infrastructure of transformation

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Abstract

As the limits of project-based and top-down cooperation become increasingly evident, new forms of territorial organization are emerging that reframe development as a systemic, place-based and participatory process. This article explores the concept of territorial platforms—living labs, circular hubs, and multi-actor nodes—as commons: self-organized infrastructures that support long-term collaboration, learning, and institutional innovation. Drawing on Elinor Ostrom’s theory of the commons and recent literature on territorial governance, we argue that such platforms are not merely technical tools or policy instruments, but foundational institutions that embed cooperation in real ecosystems. They enable territories to move beyond fragmentation and managerialism, offering a democratic and resilient infrastructure for transformation.

Introduction: From Intervention to Institution

Most development initiatives remain episodic, externally driven, and decoupled from local systems. What is missing is not another project, but institutional infrastructure—spaces that persist across funding cycles, accumulate knowledge, enable coordination, and build collective agency.

Territorial platforms—such as living labs, circular economy hubs, and innovation consortia—have begun to fill this gap. But their role is often misunderstood: seen as experimental or peripheral, they are rarely recognized as commons, that is, as shared institutions enabling self-organization around common resources, capabilities, and goals.

This article seeks to reframe territorial platforms as commons, drawing on Ostrom’s seminal insights into the governance of collective goods and the institutional preconditions for sustainability.

What Are Territorial Platforms?

Territorial platforms are hybrid institutions—operational spaces that combine actors from public institutions, civil society, academia, and the private sector to address systemic challenges in a specific territory. Unlike conventional projects, they are:

- Permanent or open-ended, not tied to short funding cycles;
- Multi-functional, integrating research, policy, innovation, and services;
- Co-governed, with shared responsibility among diverse actors;
- Situated, embedded in local ecologies and needs.

Examples include FabLabs for circular manufacturing, local energy communities, agroecological clusters, or social innovation consortia. They often emerge at the intersection of grassroots action and institutional recognition.

As Hajer and Wagenaar argue, such sites are “arenas of co-production” where knowledge, rules, and capacities are collectively shaped [1].

Ostrom’s Theory of the Commons: Governance Without the State

Elinor Ostrom challenged the idea that only states or markets could govern shared resources efficiently. In *Governing the Commons* (1990), she demonstrated that local communities could sustainably manage complex systems—like forests, irrigation, or fisheries—through self-organized rules, monitoring, and adaptive governance [2].

She identified eight core design principles for successful commons, including:

- Clearly defined boundaries;
- Collective-choice arrangements;
- Monitoring and graduated sanctions;
- Conflict-resolution mechanisms;
- Nested enterprises for complex systems.

These principles are not just applicable to natural resource management—they offer a framework for thinking about institutional design in complex, interdependent systems, such as territorial innovation or circular economy platforms.

As Ostrom put it, “effective governance requires institutions that can evolve with their environments and maintain trust among participants” [2].

Platforms as Commons: Operationalizing Ostrom in Territorial Cooperation

Territorial platforms meet many of Ostrom’s criteria:

- They define territorial boundaries (a city, region, or bioregion) and often include mapping of actors, resources, and capacities;
- They rely on shared rules and co-governance, developed through charters, protocols, or MOUs;
- Monitoring and evaluation are internalized through peer learning, deliberation, and indicators defined by the community itself;
- Conflicts are resolved via negotiation rather than escalation or external arbitration;
- They often nest in wider systems (regional clusters, transnational networks, municipal alliances).

Platforms as commons differ fundamentally from projects: they are not linear interventions, but institutions of coordination and learning, designed to persist, adapt, and evolve.

As Huron observes in her study of urban commons, “the commons is not a resource, but a social relation enacted through shared governance” [3].

The Strategic Value of Commons-Based Platforms

Recognizing territorial platforms as commons has strategic implications:

- Resilience: Platforms that are co-owned and co-managed are more likely to endure and adapt during crises, compared to externally funded projects.

- **Autonomy:** They reduce dependency on donor cycles, enabling endogenous agenda-setting and investment.
- **Democratization:** Commons-based platforms institutionalize participation, breaking the monopoly of state or market actors.
- **Learning:** They accumulate territorial knowledge, embedding memory, evaluation, and experimentation into daily operations.

These attributes are particularly relevant in the context of circular economy, energy transition, and digital governance—domains that require cross-sectoral integration and long-term commitment.

As Bauwens et al. argue, “commons-based institutions offer an infrastructural layer for socio-technical transitions, distinct from both state planning and corporate strategy” [4].

Challenges and Institutional Fragility

Despite their promise, many territorial platforms remain fragile. Their governance structures are often informal; legal status is ambiguous; funding is precarious. Without institutional recognition and long-term support, their potential remains under-realized.

Moreover, public institutions may instrumentalize platforms as project delivery tools, undermining their autonomy and co-governance. Or conversely, they may be co-opted by elite actors or market logics, eroding their commons orientation.

To function as true commons, platforms need institutional ecology: supportive policies, legal frameworks, dedicated finance, and cognitive recognition from the broader governance system.

As Ostrom emphasized, “rules are never enough; what matters is the capacity of participants to monitor, adapt, and enforce them through trust and mutual commitment” [2].

Conclusion: Toward a Commons-Based Infrastructure for Cooperation

Reframing territorial platforms as commons shifts the focus of cooperation from short-term outputs to long-term institution-building. It recognizes that transformation requires not only technology or investment, but places and processes where collective intelligence can be cultivated and sustained.

In a world marked by complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence, commons-based platforms offer a promising infrastructure for distributed, resilient, and democratic cooperation. They are not supplementary—they are foundational.

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Territorial Nodes as Infrastructures of Functional Diplomacy

Reimagining diplomacy for regenerative development and distributed agency

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of territorial nodes as infrastructures of functional diplomacy—an alternative to the state-centric, ceremonial, and often ineffective models of international cooperation. In a world defined by complexity, fragmentation, and ecological urgency, territorial platforms are evolving into strategic agents of transnational cooperation. Far from being mere intermediaries for development projects, they serve as infrastructures that stabilize missions, coordinate diverse actors, and represent territories in

networks of global relevance. Drawing on literature in subnational diplomacy, institutional design, and territorial governance, the article situates these nodes as key instruments for a distributed, regenerative, and systemic diplomacy.

Introduction: Diplomacy as Infrastructure

Classical diplomacy emerged within the state system of Westphalian sovereignty, built on fixed borders, exclusive authority, and bilateral relations. But the 21st century has destabilized this architecture. “We live in a world where problems are global, but the capacity to act is local and fragmented” [1]. Traditional diplomacy—anchored in ministries, embassies, and symbolic rituals—struggles to engage with issues like energy transition, climate adaptation, or circular resource management, which are functional rather than geopolitical in nature.

A new model is emerging: functional diplomacy, conducted not through speeches and summits, but through platforms, infrastructures, and shared systems. In this model, territorial nodes—living labs, innovation hubs, circular clusters—serve as the institutional base for diplomacy, rooted in practice and problem-solving. As Slaughter puts it, “*global governance increasingly takes place in decentralized networks, not hierarchical negotiations*” [2].

From State Sovereignty to Functional Capacity

The shift from representation to functionality is not merely procedural—it redefines who can legitimately act in the international arena. According to Cornago, “*functional diplomacy does not rely on political recognition, but on the relevance of actors to the issues at stake*” [3]. This opens space for cities, regions, and consortia to act as diplomatic agents on the basis of what they know and what they can do—not who they are constitutionally.

Ostrom’s theory of *polycentric governance* supports this evolution. She argued that “*complex systems require multiple overlapping centers of decision-making, coordinated through mutual adjustment rather than hierarchy*” [4]. Territorial nodes are precisely such centers: bounded, semi-autonomous, and embedded in real ecosystems. They respond to real problems with real solutions—thus earning legitimacy.

This form of diplomacy is not soft by nature; it is *soft in form but strategic in substance*. It involves real resources, standards, technologies, and missions.

Territorial Nodes as Infrastructures of Agency

The notion of a “territorial node” refers to an institutional configuration that includes multiple actors (public, private, civic, academic), oriented toward a shared mission (e.g., local energy transition), and endowed with both technical and relational capacities. These nodes are infrastructural because:

- they stabilize cooperation across cycles of funding and politics;
- they aggregate competencies and translate them into action;
- they mediate between global flows and local priorities.

As Keating observes, “regions become international actors when they develop institutional capacity, not when they are granted formal diplomatic status” [5]. In this sense, territorial nodes function as platforms of operational sovereignty, capable of negotiating, co-designing, and scaling policies beyond their administrative borders.

Diplomacy by Building, Not Signing

Unlike traditional diplomacy, which revolves around treaties and declarations, functional diplomacy is exercised through the construction of shared systems: data infrastructures, regulatory pilots, learning platforms, circular logistics, trans-local exchanges.

Mazzucato and Kattel stress the importance of institutions that are “*mission-oriented, flexible, and capable of experimentation*” [6]. Territorial nodes embody this logic. Their diplomacy is enacted through projects that persist and systems that interact, not through abstract agreements.

Recent examples include:

- The cross-border consortium of energy communities in the Alpine region;
- Mediterranean living labs for circular water systems;
- Twin-platforms for public procurement innovation between Nordic and Southern regions.

All of these cases bypass state-to-state diplomacy, yet generate binding effects, joint investment, and normative convergence. As Rodriguez-Pose notes, “*territories that build their own strategic infrastructures acquire soft power—not as representation, but as influence*” [7].

Institutional and Financial Compatibility

A key strength of territorial nodes lies in their ability to bridge structural and competitive funding regimes. While traditional diplomacy remains disconnected from implementation, territorial diplomacy is financially embedded. As Barca outlines, development effectiveness depends on “*place-based institutions that integrate investment streams with mission-oriented action*” [8]. Nodes can combine:

- Structural funds (e.g. European cohesion policy) for organizational stability;
- Competitive calls (e.g. Horizon Europe, Interreg NEXT MED) for innovation and scaling;
- Local investment for anchoring and legitimacy.

This multiscale alignment turns platforms into financial interfaces: not project recipients, but territorial orchestrators.

Conclusion: Nodes as Agents of Systemic Diplomacy

Territorial nodes are not just governance tools—they are diplomatic actors of a new kind. They operate at the frontier between development and cooperation, enabling the emergence of distributed diplomatic agency rooted in systems, missions, and territories.

This model does not eliminate traditional diplomacy, but extends and grounds it. Where embassies mediate symbols, nodes mediate systems. Where treaties declare intention, platforms build capability. Where ministries define strategies, territorial consortia execute them—in place, in time, and in cooperation.

In the age of interdependence and crisis, sovereignty no longer resides in isolation, but in coordination. Functional diplomacy, enacted through territorial infrastructures, is not a theoretical possibility—it is already a necessity.

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From Agreements to Ecosystems: Platform Diplomacy

Reimagining cooperation as a regenerative, distributed, and territorial diplomacy

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Abstract

This article explores the emergence of a new diplomatic grammar based on territorial ecosystems and cooperative platforms, rather than intergovernmental rituals and formal agreements. As traditional diplomacy struggles to respond to complex and territorially embedded challenges such as climate change, resource circularity, and technological dependency, new actors—cities, regions, universities, and consortia—are forging a form of diplomacy that is distributed, functional, and regenerative. We define this as platform diplomacy: a system of trans-territorial relations rooted in shared infrastructures, missions, and common goods. Drawing on recent scholarship in international relations, governance studies, and innovation ecosystems, we argue that platform diplomacy represents a paradigm shift: from symbolic statecraft to infrastructure-based cooperation. This model not only complements but redefines the boundaries of legitimate international action.

Introduction: A Crisis of Form, Not Just of Content

In recent decades, the procedural architecture of international cooperation has remained surprisingly static. High-level summits, memoranda of understanding, bilateral agreements, and diplomatic declarations continue to dominate the formal landscape of diplomacy. Yet their effectiveness in addressing real-world problems has steadily declined. As Nancy Fraser notes, “the arena of formal politics is increasingly disconnected from the institutional sites where consequential decisions are actually made” [1].

Nowhere is this disconnect more evident than in the field of cooperation. While intergovernmental mechanisms proliferate, their capacity to produce durable transformation is undermined by fragmentation, time-limited mandates, and ritualized negotiations. What emerges instead is a façade of coordination that obscures the absence of systemic integration. This is particularly visible in the domain of development cooperation, where “the reproduction of project-based rituals often replaces structural change” [2].

In response, new forms of diplomacy are emerging—not from foreign ministries, but from platforms rooted in place, sustained by ecosystems of actors, and organized around functional challenges. These forms do not seek to bypass the state, but rather to reconfigure the modalities of cooperation in a world where complexity is territorial, not abstract.

1. The Decline of Intergovernmental Rituals

Intergovernmental cooperation has historically operated through symbolic acts: state visits, joint declarations, official communiqués. These rituals have value in codifying intention, affirming legitimacy, and signaling alignment. But their limits are increasingly clear in the face of problems that are:

- Technologically complex (e.g. critical materials, AI governance),
- Spatially distributed (e.g. transboundary water systems, climate impacts),
- Institutionally fragmented (e.g. energy transition, food resilience).

As Slaughter writes, “the old international order—based on treaties and top-down authority—is being replaced by a new order based on networks, performance, and coordination among sub-state actors” [3].

This decline is not a matter of political will, but of structural misalignment: the traditional tools of diplomacy were built for an industrial, linear world, not for the distributed, circular, and platform-based reality of the 21st century.

2. Defining Platform Diplomacy

In this context, we define platform diplomacy as the capacity of territorial ecosystems to engage in international cooperation through the creation, governance, and maintenance of shared infrastructures. These platforms are not simply digital—they are institutional, technological, and social. They enable:

- Joint problem-solving across territories;
- Interoperability of systems and standards;
- Shared governance of circular value chains;
- Durable cooperation anchored in missions, not mandates.

Unlike traditional diplomacy, which often relies on symbolic alignment, platform diplomacy is operational and iterative. As Ostrom's theory of commons governance reminds us, "durable cooperation requires rules-in-use, mutual monitoring, and adaptive governance" [4]. Platforms embody these conditions by structuring relations not through declarations, but through co-production.

In other words, platform diplomacy does not announce cooperation—it builds it.

3. Territories as Diplomatic Agents

A central feature of platform diplomacy is the redistribution of diplomatic agency. In this model, diplomacy is not monopolized by states, but exercised by:

- Municipal governments engaging in joint resilience planning;
- Regional clusters coordinating innovation agendas;
- University consortia building interoperable research infrastructure;
- Civic tech platforms enabling cross-border participation.

These actors are not passive recipients of global agendas; they are normative co-creators of cooperation. As Tavares notes in his work on paradiplomacy, "subnational units engage in diplomacy not only to represent themselves, but to shape the frameworks within which global problems are addressed" [5].

This transformation parallels the rise of distributed sovereignty—the idea that multiple, overlapping authorities can coexist and coordinate in systems that are polycentric rather than hierarchical. It is precisely this architecture that enables cooperation to scale without losing context.

4. Ecosystems Over Agreements

Traditional diplomacy produces agreements. Platform diplomacy produces ecosystems.

The difference is substantial. Agreements are finite, often static, and dependent on political cycles. Ecosystems, by contrast, are resilient through adaptation. They evolve, learn, absorb shocks, and regenerate.

For example, the cross-border platform on Mediterranean water circularity—combining municipalities, research centers, and SMEs—has produced more enduring outcomes than several water-related declarations signed at regional summits. Its effectiveness lies not in formal recognition, but in functional embedding: shared data protocols, co-funded infrastructures, and a governance model that links local action to international goals.

In the language of systems theory, platforms internalize feedback loops—a feature absent from linear agreements. As Capra and Luisi explain, "sustainability arises from the integration of pattern, process, and structure in systems that self-organize" [6]. Platform diplomacy enables precisely this integration.

5. Toward a Regenerative Diplomatic Grammar

Ultimately, platform diplomacy represents not just a shift in who acts diplomatically, but a transformation in the grammar of diplomacy itself. Its key features include:

- Territorial grounding rather than abstraction;
- Relational governance instead of hierarchy;
- Infrastructure-building rather than symbolic consensus;
- Circular value instead of linear transfer.

This grammar is especially suited to the goals of regenerative development, which require not only resource efficiency, but institutional resilience, knowledge co-creation, and iterative design.

Where traditional diplomacy speaks of sovereignty, platform diplomacy speaks of capability. Where traditional diplomacy is defined by protocol, platform diplomacy is defined by shared architectures.

Conclusion: Platforms as Diplomatic Infrastructure

The future of diplomacy will not be written in declarations, but encoded in platforms. As geopolitical turbulence increases and multilateralism fragments, the ability of territories to organize their own cooperation systems will define their strategic position. Platform diplomacy is not a derivative form of international relations—it is an infrastructural one.

It offers a way to embed diplomacy in the material, institutional, and ecological realities of cooperation. And in doing so, it reclaims diplomacy as a tool for transformation, not just for representation.

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