

# CAN DECENTRALISED COOPERATION BETWEEN GLOBAL NORTH AND GLOBAL SOUTH CITIES BE RECIPROCAL AND DEMOCRATIC ?



*Grenoble - France*



*Sfax - Tunisie*



MASTER URBANISME ET AMÉNAGEMENT PARCOURS  
TRANSFORMATIVE URBAN STUDIES  
INSTITUT D'URBANISME ET DE GÉOGRAPHIE ALPINE

# DECENTRALIZED COOPERATION

As *urbanistes*, we focus on cities and therefore on the local scale. Thus, we are convinced that it is local actors and communities that have the levers to implement changes and transformations toward a desirable future. We emphasize local governance and the right of the citizen to co-decide on actions in their living spaces.

We wish to extend that vision to cooperation and therefore through the intermediary of decentralized cooperation.



**Decentralized cooperation** refers to all relations or partnerships between decentralized administrations or institutions. (French law)

**Decentralisation** is usually referred to as the transfer of powers from central government to **local elected** in lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy.

# WHERE WE COME FROM



## FOCUS ON NORTH AND SOUTH COOPERATIONS

We have a special interest in the Global South and North cooperation as it is one of our master program's pillars. This interest comes from our very diverse geographical, cultural and professional backgrounds.

# OUR REFLECTION

As we study and are involved in cooperation between Global North and Global South cities, we have noticed several aspects we want to question.

First, the reciprocity between cities in these cooperation processes, considering power dynamics and potential dominance effects.

Secondly, we want to analyze the democratic processes through participation and representation.

We are going to use the example of a cooperation we were part of last year between Grenoble and Sfax in Tunisia as a case study to question reciprocity and democracy in decentralized north & south cooperations.

We use **Global North** and **Global South** terms as used by the United Nations: these terms denote a method of grouping countries based on their defining characteristics concerning socioeconomics and politics.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

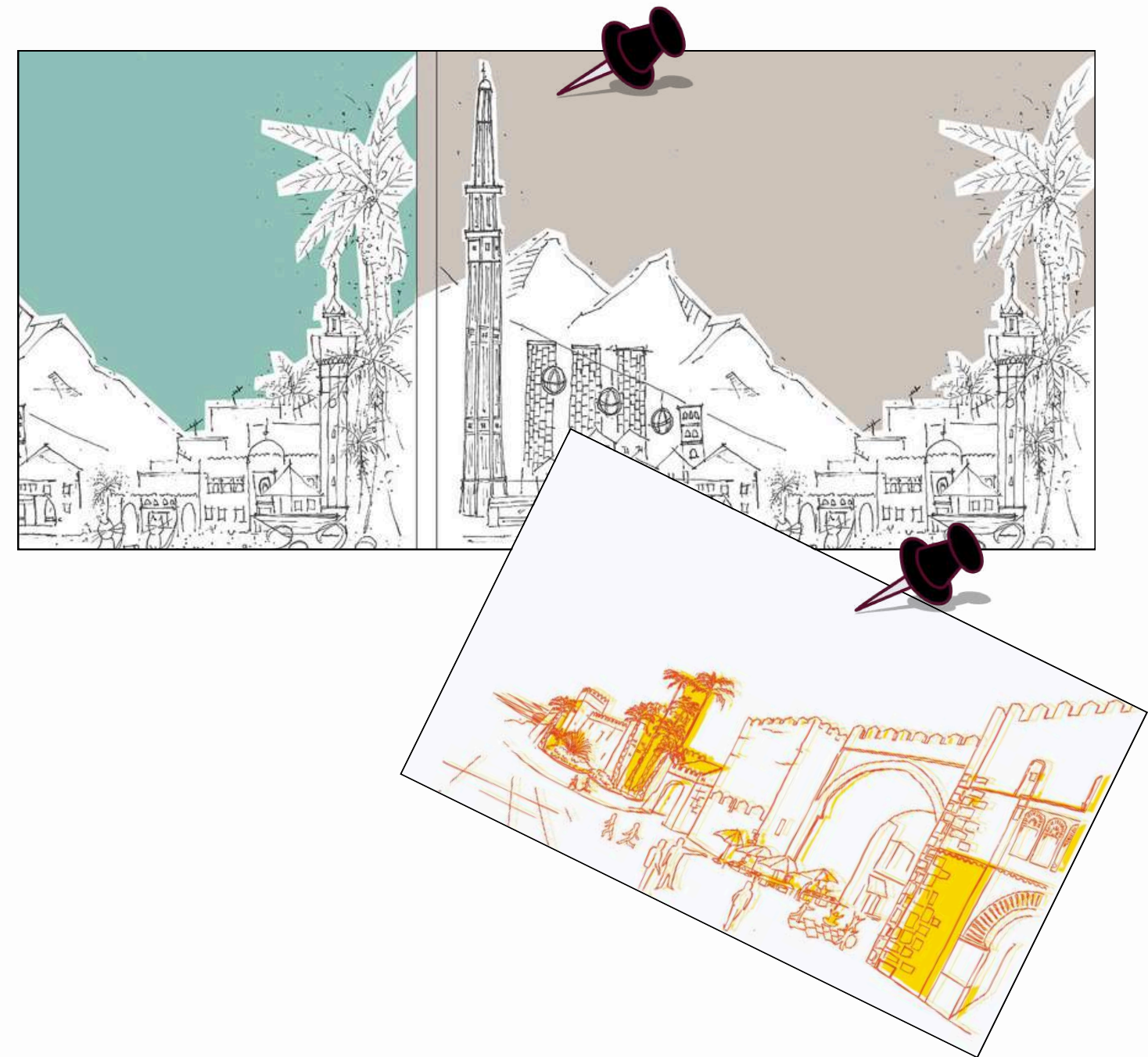
06	Case studie presentation
08	Reciprocity in decentralized cooperation
08	Theory of the gift (Mauss)
09	Partnerships
10	Democracy in decentralized cooperation
10	Participation
12	Multi-stakeholders
13	Discussion questions

# OUR CASE STUDY : SFAX - GRENOBLE COOPERATION BETWEEN TWO UNIVERSITIES

Since 2012, international cooperation workshops in urban planning between Grenoble (France) and Sfax (Tunisia) have been a central part of project teaching for students of the Masters in Transformative Urban Studies at the Institut d'Urbanisme et Géographie Alpine.

- The workshop is based on decentralized cooperation
- Students respond to an assignment involving urban expertise and territorial planning
- Each workshop results in the formation of working groups that collaborate with several Sfaxian partners

Due to the current political situation in Tunisia, cooperation is continuing without the municipality and mainly with the University of Sfax.



# RECIPROCITY IN DECENTRALIZED COOPERATION PROJECTS

## THE GIFT THEORY (MAUSS, 1923): TOWARDS RECIPROCITY IN COOPERATION PROJECTS

**Definition:** the quality or state of being reciprocal: mutual dependence, action, or influence.

- Reciprocity is a way to think beyond development aid between North and South.

For Marcel Mauss, **gift-giving** is a form of social contract, based on reciprocity.

### **Twin city arrangement before:**

- During WW2 the goal was to reconcile the countries of Europe (Weber, 1997)
- Help the Global South reach the same level of development as northern countries

### **Twin city arrangement now - Contemporary decentralized cooperation:**

- The idea of reciprocity to break from old dynamics of domination
- Can sometimes be reduced to a simple gift-giving cooperation

Following the logic of “old-fashioned” paternalistic cooperation, the need for something in return becomes a reflex.

What dominates is the need for each partner to contribute to a healthy, balanced relationship. The notions of fairness and mutual benefit come to the fore. In other words, it's all about reciprocity, a major characteristic of a partnership.



## RECIPROCITY IN SFAX-GRENOBLE COOPERATION

Both countries are hosting workshops and welcoming students:

- In Tunisia: Grenoble University (students and researchers) brings expertise to Tunisia. Capitalizing on knowledge through collaborative work with the University of Sfax (students and researchers).
- In Grenoble: knowledge is brought back from the workshop in Tunisia and exhibited in France through a cultural event. Tunisian students also bring their expertise to an urban planning workshop in Grenoble.

What hinders reciprocity?

- Time mismatch and involvement in the workshop between Tunisians (part-time and voluntary) and Grenoble residents (full-time and compulsory)
- Asymmetrical relations (language barrier)

## HOW DO WE BUILD A **PARTNERSHIP** BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH ?

**Definition:** a relationship resembling a legal partnership and usually involving close cooperation between parties having specified and joint rights and responsibilities.

A good partnership must:

- share authority / be on more or less equal footing power-wise
- have a joint investment of resources
- result in mutual benefits
- share risk, responsibility, and accountability.

Decentralized cooperation partnerships are set within a relatively long-term timeframe, with the goal of ensuring sustainability.

The relationships between organizations involve mutual influence, though not necessarily of equal magnitude. These partnerships connect partner communities with distinct characteristics and are embedded in an exchange system that is sometimes asymmetric. Between Global North and South cities, existing socioeconomic realities and power dynamics need to be taken into account and treated carefully.

Inviting and receiving partner parties are also services that can be assimilated into gifts.



### PARTNERSHIP IN URBAN STUDIES: SFAX-GRENOBLE COOPERATION

- A partnership was established 12 years ago, reflecting a commitment to long-term collaboration.
- Work themes are renewed annually and jointly defined by the two universities.
- Unequal exchanges:
  - The French travel to the field in Tunisia, while few Tunisians can come to France, leading to an imbalance in exchanges.
  - Sfaxian students are not involved in defining the themes in advance.
- A consistently coordinated effort between the two universities: professors from both institutions actively contribute to the projects, from their conception to their implementation in the field.
- An unequal sharing of research outcomes, limited to France.



# DEMOCRACY IN DECENTRALIZED COOPERATION PROJECTS

## CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

WHY SHOULD THE PRINCIPLE OF DEMOCRACY BE QUESTIONED IN NORTH/SOUTH COOPERATION ?

'**Democracy** is government of the people, by the people, for the people'. - Abraham Lincoln

- People's sovereignty
- Separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers
- Equality in the face of the law
- Guarantee of fundamental freedoms of conscience, opinion, the press, and assembly
- Power alternation

Supporting local democracy and improving the lives of local communities. Decentralization is intended to create space and opportunities for citizens and residents to participate in local decision-making processes and to influence policy direction at local and central levels.

From an urban perspective, democracy is linked to “the right to the city” or “le droit à la ville” (H. Lefebvre). The radical approach formulated by Henri Lefebvre in 1968 criticized the lack of inclusion of residents in the production of urban spaces.

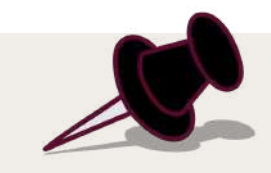
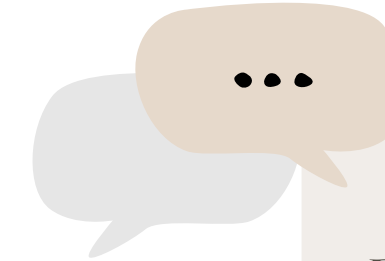
**The right to the city** manifests itself as a higher form of rights: the right to freedom, to individualization within socialization, to housing, and to living. The right to work and the right to appropriation are part of the right to the city.

According to our vision, democracy is directly linked to the citizen participation and inclusion in urban transformation project.

**What is participation** → Redistribution of power between actors (authority + residents). This strategy allows people to participate in the decision-making process on the goals, the policies put in place, and the project.

**What is the ladder of participation** → A tool created by S.Arnstein (1969), the participation ladder is a tool for grading the level of participation of citizens in a project. It's divided into 8 levels going from manipulation to total citizen control. Here are some examples of the levels:

- **Non-participation** → "Non-participation" is a category regrouping "manipulation" and "therapy". There is no redistribution of power. The authority "educates" the population.
- **Symbolic cooperation** → Allows citizens to be heard. They do not have the power to ensure that their opinions are taken into account by those in power.
- **Effective citizen control:** → Residents are decision-makers in terms of management. They have decision-making power over the project's purpose.



## DEMOCRACY IN SFAX - GRENOBLE URBAN STUDIES COOPERATION

This cooperation is a decentralized cooperation including investment of local population and authorities. That being said, some difficulties persisted :

**Inequality of knowledge on the subject:** We intensely prepared the workshop before coming to Sfax, but, since this work was optional for the local students, and they had less time to prepare it, we didn't have the same level of knowledge on the matter. Participation requires the personal commitment of the local students.

Once we overcame the technical difficulties such as time management and the different academic backgrounds, the exchanges between students were mutually enriching.

### A sustainable partnership?

Since 2019, local democracy in Tunisia is in difficulty. City councils are no longer elected but nominated by the state. It raises the question of the weakening of the local government, and therefore the whole partnership.

# MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COOPERATION

## WHY ARE MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS NEEDED FOR DEMOCRACY?

The involvement of multiple stakeholders with their multiple perspectives makes consensus-building possible. This allows the fulfillment of the democratic principles of transparency, pluralism, and accountability. Democracies involve empowering civil society to achieve the maximum output and multi-stakeholders, with different kinds of collaborations and resource sharing, could assist in achieving that.

### Actors who can be involved :

#### **Public (state-oriented or decentralized authorities)**

- Municipalities

#### **Not for Profit (non-state)**

- Community-based organization
- Non-Governmental organizations
- Environmental Groups
- Research-based institutions (Universities, Think tanks)
- Not-for-profit media entities

#### **Profit Oriented (non-state-oriented)**

- Private organization.
- SME's (Small and medium-based enterprises.)



## MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COOPERATION IN SFAX-GRENOBLE URBAN STUDIES COOPERATION

- Cooperation between the two **municipalities** and at the request of the city of Sfax.
- Cooperation between the two **universities**, with participation from urban planners in Grenoble and cartographers from Sfax.
- Collaboration between **professors** who work together to assist us with the methodology and the research theme.
- Cooperation between **students** working together on the ground.
- Participation of **civil society** actors in the research and production of our work.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## HOW CAN TRUST BE BUILT / MAINTAINED?

### RECIPROCITY

*Operates on a level across cooperating entities*

- In situations where the cooperation is not **mutually beneficial** ("**gift exchange**"), how do we ensure that supposedly "gifted" one-way aid is not charged with **political expectation** (e.g., neocolonialism, neoliberal economic exploitation, cultural dominance)?
  - Is this type of aid a bad thing or not? (e.g. reparations)

### DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

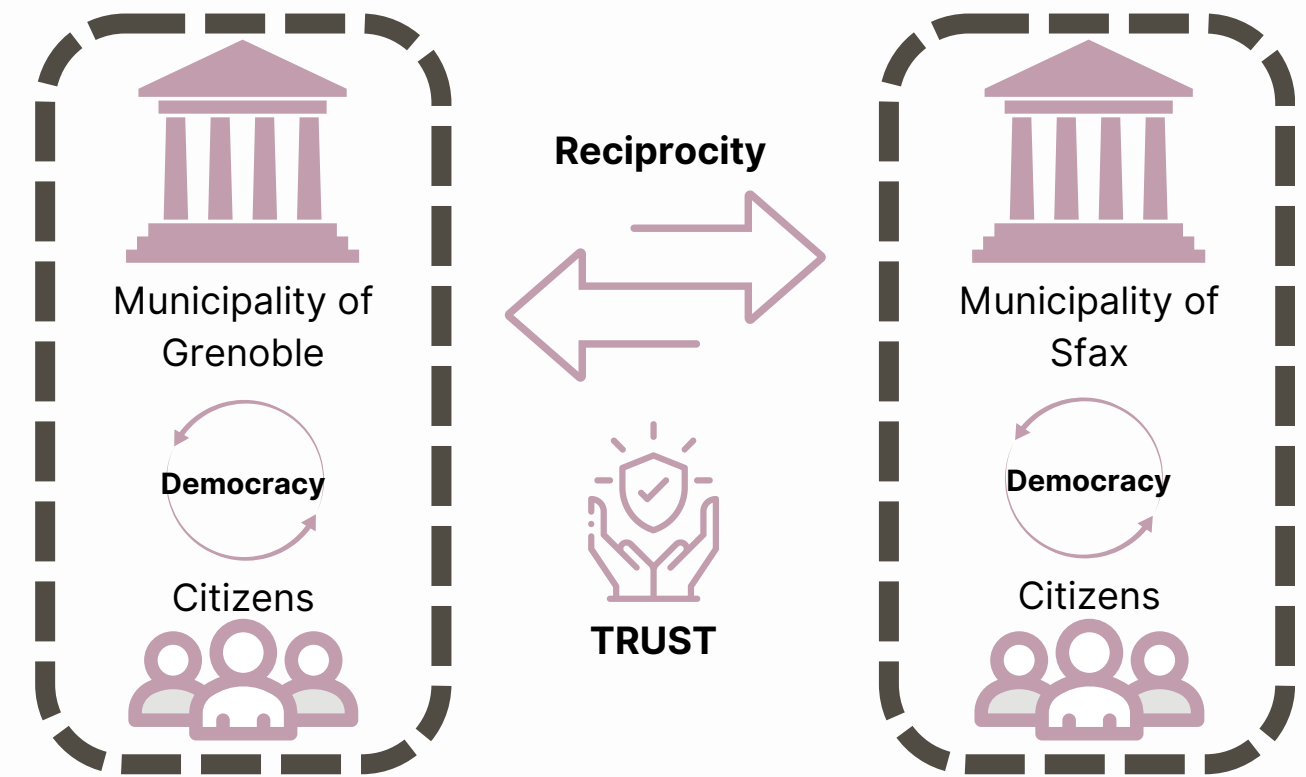
*Operates on the level between each entity and its local citizens*

#### **Citizen Participation**

- Cultural and political context differences make difficult the transfer of citizen participation methodologies - how to make cooperation work across these different axes?
- Is citizen participation the best form of decision-making, given the large amount of time this requires?
- How to ensure that in practice the participatory practices are truly democratic and socially inclusive across all citizen demographics? (students and experts vs all local residents)

#### **Multi-Stakeholder Participation**

- How do we align the multiple political interests of diverse stakeholders?
- How can trust between both parties be long-lasting, given the ongoing challenges with international mobility ?



# SOURCES

Arnstein, S. (1969) "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," Journal of the American Planning Association, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 216-224.

Frank, F., & Smith, A. (2020). The Partnership Handbook.

Lefebvre, H. (1967). Le droit à la ville. L'Homme et la société, 6(1), 29-35.  
[Lefebvre, H. \(1967\). Le droit à la ville. L'Homme et la société, 6\(1\), 29-35.  
https://doi.org/10.3406/homso.1967.1063](https://doi.org/10.3406/homso.1967.1063)

Mauss, M. (1923). Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques. L'Année Sociologique, seconde série, 1923-1924.

Ogandaga, G. (2015). La coopération Nord-Sud : don ou partenariat ? Biennale internationale de l'éducation, de la formation et des pratiques professionnelles, CNAM Paris, Jun 2015, Paris, France.

Roux, J.-M. (2024). Le temps change-t-il quelque chose à l'affaire ? Carnets de géographes, 18. [Lefebvre, H. \(1967\). Le droit à la ville. L'Homme et la société, 6\(1\), 29-35.  
https://doi.org/10.3406/homso.1967.1063](https://doi.org/10.3406/homso.1967.1063)

UN. (2008, juillet). Contribution of Decentralized Cooperation to Decentralization in Africa.



Balcazar, L. (2024, juin 6). Democracy and multi-stakeholder partnerships—Partnerships2030 Democracy & MSP. Partnerships2030.

<https://partnerschaften2030.de/en/democracy-and-msp/>

Grenoble-Sfax. (s. d.). Coopérer : Grenoble-Sfax. Consulté 20 janvier 2025, à l'adresse <https://grenoblesfax.hypotheses.org/2023-2024>

Lichtenberger, Y. (2010). Ce qui circule entre nous, Donner, recevoir, rendre, J.T. Godbout. Sociologie du travail [En ligne], Vol. 52 - n° 2 | Avril-Juin 2010, mis en ligne le 24 janvier 2019, consulté le 18 janvier 2025.