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Decentralised international development aid from municipalities: Exploring its added value, challenges and implications for international social work

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Abstract

This study focuses on international development aid policies implemented by municipalities. By proposing a theoretical framework and addressing the Spanish context, it first explores the added value and the challenges involved with this kind of decentralised aid. Secondly, it discusses the implications in terms of the competencies required by social workers in order to leverage the potential of these aid policies.

The research draws on the qualitative analysis of documents, interviews and discussion groups. It concludes that international social workers need knowledge, values and skills in widely different aspects in order to overcome the challenges entailed in aid from municipalities.

Keywords:

Aid; social work; sustainable development; local government; competence; Spain.

Introduction

Academic literature and global professional networks recognise that social work has a key role in promoting global justice and sustainability through local contexts and practices (IASW et al., 2020; IFSW, 2021; Hawkins and Knox, 2014; Healy and Thomas, 2020). More recently, discussions have specifically highlighted the role of international social work in promoting the Global Agenda 2030 (IFSW, 2021; Palattiyil et al., 2019).

The increasing importance of international social work has fostered the debate on the need to improve specific competences for such work (Barner and Okech, 2013; Morgan, 2011). The literature affirms that social workers have to be equipped with specific knowledge, skills and values to address social justice from a global perspective through their local actions. Nevertheless, little empirical evidence exists outlining what these competences are (Palattiyil et al., 2019; Khan and Sussman, 2015).

In any case, international social work remains a complex concept that is associated with very different practices (Midgley, 2001; Mapp and Gatenio Gabel, 2019), although it is generally accepted that it “means those social work activities and concerns that transcend national and cultural boundaries” (Sanders and Pederson, 1984: xiv). However, the literature identifies various ways in which social workers engage in international issues (Healy and Thomas, 2020): they deal with domestic issues with an international dimension (for example, working with

refugees); they engage in international exchange of knowledge; they are involved in advocacy and debates at the global level; and they contribute to international development in development aid organisations. The latter area has been a crucial aspect of international social work since the origin of the concept (Strumm, 2020).

Literature on social work in international aid organisations addresses a number of issues, from humanitarian aid to advocacy, but essentially focuses on three kind of organisations: national aid agencies; the UN and other intergovernmental agencies; and international development NGOs, along with other entities from civil society that habitually collaborate with such agencies (Midgley, 2001; Kahn and Sussman, 2015; Mapp and Gatenio Gabel, 2019; Healy and Thomas, 2020).

Hence, the practice of international social work in aid deployed by regional and local governments — known as *decentralised* aid — remains unexplored. Like national and international bodies, a number of regions and municipalities of the Global North develop their own aid policies, in which social work and social workers play a relevant role. This aid is quantitatively much less important than aid deployed by national or international agencies, but the literature and global institutions have recognised its added value (Waeterloos and Renard, 2013; Alberdi, 2010); for example, it can more easily engage citizens and local stakeholders (Martínez, 2021; ECOSOC, 2018). Nevertheless, this added value needs to be explored in more depth, considering its specific contexts and challenges (Martínez, 2021).

Decentralised aid deployed by municipalities is particularly limited in quantitative terms (Schulpen et al., 2011) but may be of particular relevance for social work. Social workers are increasingly more important at the local level, given that municipalities have been deepening their involvement in social policies since the 1980s (Lyngstad, 2013; Kalaycı, 2021). This may involve an increasing importance of social workers in the aid policies deployed by municipalities, which seems particularly true in the cases of decentralised countries in which both development aid and social services are relevant competences for local governments. This is the case of Spain, where local development aid is relevant — at least if compared with other donor countries (Pérez, 2015) — and in which community social services are wholly managed by local entities (Pastor Seller, 2017). In fact, as several reports show (Unceta et al., 2012; FVS, 2021; FCCD, 2022), international aid policies from the local level are very frequently developed by social workers and/or by social services departments, often led by social workers.

That said, while some work has been carried out regarding the competencies needed for international social work in development aid practice (Khan and Sussman, 2015), no research

exists on the specific competencies required for social workers engaged in aid policies in municipalities. Considering this gap and the importance and particularities of this kind of aid, a specific exploration of these competencies becomes relevant.

From this standpoint, this study has two objectives: first, to explore the specific features and added value of development aid deployed by municipalities, as well as the challenges in making the most of these values; and second, to discuss the implications of this exploration in terms of the competencies needed for social workers in municipalities managing international development aid policies in order to leverage the potential of aid at this level.

To this end, the paper proposes a theoretical framework which identifies aspects in which aid from municipalities can provide added value, as well as the overall competencies needed in international social work. This framework is then applied to the Spanish context by using a qualitative strategy and by analysing strategic documents, in addition to six interviews and two discussion groups with stakeholders engaged in aid from municipalities.

The Spanish context is of particular relevance to this topic, [considering the characteristics of municipal organisation](#), the function of aid policies and the role of social workers in these policies at this level. Specifically, the study focuses on the case of municipalities in the Valencian Community (*País Valencià* or *Comunitat Valenciana*), one of the seventeen autonomous regions in Spain. The case is of particular interest due to the increasing political relevance of aid from municipalities, as illustrated by the Valencian International Aid Strategic Plan (Generalitat Valenciana, 2022).

The paper is structured as follows: the next section addresses the context of aid from municipalities in Spain; Section 3 defines the theoretical framework; Section 4 describes the methodology; and Section 5 first presents the results and discusses the objectives mentioned then makes some final considerations and suggests future avenues of research.

Context: International aid in Spanish municipalities and social work

The relevance of aid deployed by sub-national governments has significantly evolved since the 1980s (Schulpen et al., 2011; Unceta et al., 2012; OECD, 2018). In quantitative terms, it is still limited — representing only 2% of global aid (Pérez, 2018) — but it has consolidated its

importance, increasing by 13% since 2005 (Pérez, 2018). At the qualitative level, it is characterised by a discursive evolution in the search for its differential character (Martínez, 2021).

Decentralised aid presents significant differences between countries. Sub-national governments of thirteen of the thirty donor countries of the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD have their own aid policies (Pérez, 2018; OCDE, 2018). Some countries have a clear normative framework in this regard, such as Belgium, France or Spain (Copsey and Rowe, 2012; OECD, 2018). The quantitative importance differs, but it is usually greater in decentralised countries; for example, around 20% of total official aid in Austria is decentralised (Pérez, 2018), 10% in Spain (Oxfam Intermón, 2022), 7% in Belgium, while less than 0.03% in Japan and the UK (Pérez, 2018).

Regarding aid from municipalities, the situation is again diverse but mostly unknown. Quantitatively, it may represent a very limited part of total aid, from around 2.5 % in Spain to 1% in Austria (Oxfam, 2022; Schulpen et al., 2011). Motivations for developing aid policies may also differ between countries and municipalities, from developing city diplomacy (Kihlgren Grandi, 2020) to responding to the demands of local NGOs. The way it is managed also varies, but two instruments are essential in most cases: first, the use of technical cooperation — that is, developing projects for capacity building of municipalities and other local stakeholders, frequently by using city-to-city cooperation structures (Bontenbal, 2010); and second, the use of indirect cooperation through financing development NGOs.

The Spanish context illustrates this diversity. *It is characterised by significant institutional differences between municipalities depending on whether they are large or small, coastal or inland and within dense urban areas or not (Rodríguez, 2010). Nevertheless, autonomy, experience and some other general trends regarding municipal aid* can be identified (Pérez, 2018). Around 80% is used for financing NGOs, usually through public calls for projects. This financing essentially supports two kinds of projects: first, aid projects in countries in the Global South — usually with local organisations or municipalities as counterparts, and mostly for the provision of public services (FEMP, 2021); and second, development education projects — actions to raise awareness and understanding of global inequalities and our responsibilities in this regard. Direct aid is also used, particularly by bigger cities, who implement their own projects without the support of NGOs — usually involving technical cooperation or development education.

Partly due to fragmentation and financial limitations, Spanish municipalities have a long tradition of inter-municipal cooperation — as do other Western European countries — and of networking, from international to county level (Moreno, 2012, Rodríguez, 2010). Networks are generic or focused on fields such as participation (the Participatory Group has 45 Spanish members from a total of 72) or international aid. 9 regional aid funds exist in Spain, which gather municipalities in order to share learning and jointly develop aid projects, usually on technical cooperation and development education (CONFOCOS, 2021). They are particularly relevant for smaller municipalities, who have limited capacities.

Local cooperation operates in a context of rapid changes. The pandemic has emphasised the relevance of a series of key aspects for social workers and aid: the importance of community initiatives; understanding how the macro environment affects the micro; the need for cross-sectorial approaches (Fronek and Rotabi-Casares, 2022); and the necessity of addressing problems such as food security and health promotion at the local level (Peláez et al.). The Global Agenda of Social Work has also highlighted the key role of quality relationships and of networking (ICSW, IFSW and IASSW, 2020).

Theoretical framework.

Added value of development aid from municipalities

The literature specifically addressing aid from municipalities is limited and generally covers very broad ideas. Nevertheless, it identifies questions in various aspects regarding the added value offered by aid from this level.

First, regarding institutional aspects, several authors highlight that municipalities have *autonomy to articulate aid policies without interference or hidden agendas* (Gómez Gil, 2008; Unceta et al., 2011; Kihlgren Grandi, 2020). Due to local competences, aid policies at this level are generally removed from the strategic, diplomatic and commercial interests that frequently model development aid at other levels (Unceta et al., 2013; Kihlgren Grandi, 2020). In this way, municipalities can develop aid policies which are more genuinely based on solidarity.

Second, another institutional aspect is the ability to *more easily mainstream development aid policies* in public administration (La Mundial, 2020). Due to the aforementioned autonomy, municipalities are more likely to adopt a “whole-of-government approach” to development (Forster and Stokke, 1999). In other words, they mainstream aid policies in other departments, so donors adopt policies and political actions which support global justice and the guarantee of

rights in the South: for example, adopting policies of responsible public procurement or providing political support to those demanding or defending human-rights in Southern countries.

Third, most authors dealing with the subject mention that aid from municipalities may offer a clear added value given its *expertise and technical knowledge in certain areas which are crucial for development*, and which can be shared with stakeholders in the South — through technical cooperation, for example. These areas include urban planning, the supply of basic services, participation (Alberdi, 2010; La Mundial, 2020) and local transparency and accountability (Unceta et al., 2011; Alberdi, 2010).

Fourth, the literature considers that development aid from local governments can more easily *engage citizens* in its actions. As the local level is the most direct space for citizen participation and for the exercise of democratic responsibilities — including global ones — participation in aid policies at this level should be easier (Badia and Dalmases, 2001; Ruiz Seisdedos, 2008; Van Ewijk, 2008; OECD, 2018).

Fifth, and again regarding participation, due to the direct connection of municipal administrations with their regions, it is possible to engage *stakeholders who do not usually take part in aid actions*, but who are of key importance in the struggles for global justice; for example, local community groups and cooperatives, environmental movements, educational and sports centres, local unions, youth clubs [or migrant associations](#) (Van Ewijk, 2012; La Mundial, 2020). [Spanish decentralised aid has been very active in engaging migrant networks in aid policies — for example, by promoting partnerships with NGOs to run projects in countries of origin \(Lacomba and Royo, 2020\). The engagement of these kinds of stakeholders also applies to the participation of local counterparts in the South, as many are frequently disconnected from large-scale interventions funded by national and international agencies.](#)

Sixth, in connection with the previous two ideas, most authors concur that local governments can have *more direct and better quality relationships* with stakeholders engaged in aid actions. This relationship can be more horizontal and based on closeness, trust, shared values, reciprocity and mutual cooperation (Bontenbal, 2009; Nganje, 2015; Van Ewijk, 2012; La Mundial, 2020). These relationships involve, on the one hand, organisations that collaborate with the municipality to implement development aid policies — NGOs and other organisations which receive financial or other kind of support — and on the other hand, municipalities and other stakeholders in recipient countries with whom municipalities in the North create links (Badia and Dalmases, 2001; OECD, 2018; La Mundial, 2020).

Seventh, participation and relationships connect with the potential for *co-designing aid policies and actions*. The literature mentions that “cross-boundary collaboration through networks and partnerships provide arenas for creative, legitimate, and effective problem-solving co-creation at local level by the interaction of stakeholders (...) crucial for sustainable global development” (Ansell et al., 2022: 5), and that decentralised aid can be more bi-directional and innovative in its definition and implementation (Martínez, 2021). The aforementioned tradition of municipal collaboration is of key relevance for these processes.

Competencies for international social work in development aid in municipalities

In spite of the increasing amount of literature on international social work education and on social work education, very few studies address the capacities needed to improve social workers’ readiness for international work (Khan and Sussman, 2015), and there are no studies on the capacities required for working in decentralised aid.

This study draws on the limited literature on generic capacities for international social work, which essentially differentiates competencies or abilities between *knowledge*, *skills* and *values* (Gray and Fook, 2004; Khan and Sussman, 2015; Voss et al., 2017; Das and Rösner, 2022).

Concerning the *knowledge* required, authors mention general aspects such as knowledge of alternative paradigms beyond modernisation (Das and Rösner, 2022); knowledge of institutions, both within and outside the nation-state (Gray and Fook, 2004), including international treaties and conventions (Khan and Sussman, 2015); knowledge of human behaviour and social environment practice (Voss et al., 2017); or knowledge of social change from a holistic perspective (Khan and Sussman, 2015).

Regarding *values*, some of the general aspects mentioned are reflexivity (Khan and Sussman, 2015; Voss et al., 2017; Das and Rösner, 2022); respect and interest for advancing human rights and global justice, with a gender orientation (Khan and Sussman, 2015, Voss et al., 2017); cultural sensitivity, recognition and respect for differences (Gray and Fook, 2004; Khan and Sussman, 2015); and adhesion to the ethical principles of the social work profession, such as the construction of quality relationships (Voss et al., 2017) and empathy (Das and Rösner, 2022).

With respect to *skills*, the literature mentions widely different aspects, ranging from project management to relationship building or critical thinking; the anti-oppressive and critical practice of social work; the deconstruction of norms and asking critical questions (Das and Rösner, 2022); understanding and responding to changing and complex environments (Das and Rösner, 2022;

Voss et al., 2017); team building (Khan and Sussman, 2015); grant application and report writing (Khan and Sussman, 2015); international programme monitoring and evaluation (Khan and Sussman, 2015); communication with media and high-level officials (Khan and Sussman, 2015); research skills (Khan and Sussman, 2015; Voss et al., 2017); and applying critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgement practice (Voss et al., 2017). *As in other fields of social work and social services, the relevance of skills related to co-creation through networking and community engagement should also be emphasised (Toros et al., 2022).*

Methodology

The research is exploratory in nature; hence, it does not seek to make generalisations, but rather to identify and discuss relevant aspects of the topic. The methodology is purely qualitative and combines both inductive and deductive strategies.

Both primary and secondary data were gathered. Regarding the latter, an analysis was made of strategic aid plans from Valencian municipalities or networks of municipalities. Only four municipalities and one network produce these kinds of documents. The city of Valencia has two documents (a Plan for Development Aid and a specific plan for Development Education), so six documents were taken into account in total.

Regarding primary data, the results from two discussion groups and six interviews were taken into consideration. The groups were composed of different stakeholders engaged in aid from municipalities in order to promote exchange (see Table 1). Two broad topics were discussed: the value of aid from municipalities; and the instruments available, along with the challenges in implementing them in reality. The discussions were held in January 2021 and lasted approximately 55 minutes.

Table 1. Discussion groups composition: position and gender of participants. Source: prepared by the authors

[Insert Table 1]

This study used interviews with the staff of municipalities and with councillors in charge of aid policies and actions. They shared some aspects in common: being accessible; working in municipalities who continuously develop aid policies; and being social workers (in the case of officers) or the heads of aid departments with social workers (in the case of councillors). They

differed in their positions and in terms of the size of the municipalities in which they work (more information on the position, studies and gender of interviewees is provided in Table 2). They were asked about the approach to aid in their municipality; about the virtues, strengths and added value of this aid; and also about the challenges faced and the changes required. The interviews were undertaken between February and June 2022 and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

Table 2. Description of sample for interviews: position, studies and gender of interviewees. Source: prepared by the authors

[Insert Table 2]

A content analysis of secondary data and of transcriptions was conducted. Following Miles et al. (2014), the data analysis consisted of three activities: data reduction, data display and drawing results. For the data reduction, text from primary and secondary data were coded following a deductive strategy, applying the seven categories identified in the theoretical framework regarding aspects of added value of aid from municipalities. Pieces of text were also coded by considering whether they referred to a “specific dimension” (a subcategory) or to “a challenge” regarding these aspects.

The data were visualised in a matrix which included aspects of added value in the rows and “specific dimensions” and “challenges” in the columns. Cell entries consisted of the coded content of texts. This display made it possible to cluster the most frequently mentioned ideas in the cells and to inductively identify new (sub)categories (Miles et al., 2014). In this case, specific dimensions and challenges for each aspect were identified. Then, for these dimensions and challenges the competencies which may be relevant were identified, considering the three key areas of competencies established in the theoretical framework. This rationale structured the discussion of the results and conclusions — see Figure 1, at the end of next section. For the organisation and coding of texts and for building matrixes, the software NVIVO 12 was used.

The study conforms to internationally accepted ethical guidelines and to relevant professional ethical prescriptions, including the informed consent of participants.

Results and discussion

Reality and challenges for activating the added value of development aid from municipalities

In first place, regarding the *autonomy for articulating aid policies*, several participants in the group discussions affirmed that municipalities “are freer with regard to commercial, economic or political interests, to which central governments are more and more linked” (G.1.2). In this sense, aid from municipalities is characterised as being “genuinely solidary, since its very beginnings” (G.1.2). Various participants specify that aid should be an autonomous policy in itself, and not a “complement” of any other local policy. For example, the Valencia Strategic Plan on Development Cooperation (Ajuntament de València, 2019: 22) states that: “Aid from Valencia is conceived as a public policy which responds to the commitment of the city in the resolution of global development problems.” Moreover, for several participants, aid in fact “reinforces local autonomy”. Interestingly, several people indicated that this autonomy can be used to innovate, and that municipalities can respond to their financial limitations by articulating aid policies which are original, in comparison with those of other government levels.

Nevertheless, challenges emerge regarding this autonomy. Those most frequently mentioned in the documents, discussions and interviews are presented below. First, aid is not a political priority in most municipalities, so resources are generally limited and volatile — they change depending on the government in charge and the economic situation. Second, most municipalities lack personnel and/or technical capacities, as only a few Valencian cities have structures or experts exclusively dedicated to aid policies. In the majority of municipalities, public officers from other areas, generally social services, dedicate only part of their time to aid actions. These people usually lack specific training on aid. Third, the instruments and administrative procedures which are most frequently used in aid (such as project calls) are considered “long, very bureaucratic and rigid”, so they “really should be simplified” (G.1.3). This greatly limits the capacity for exercising autonomy and for innovation. This is why numerous participants stressed that “other possible instruments are under-used and should be explored” (G.1.4). Finally, there is no strategic planning or much reflection on aid policies, so they are “frequently limited to providing NGOs with financing” (G.1.2).

In second place, with regard to *mainstreaming development aid*, the discussions, interviews and documents emphasise this aspect. Valencia’s Aid Strategy states that “aid policy should not be considered as an isolated policy, but has to be mainstreamed and engage other municipal policies” (Ajuntament de València, 2019: 23). In fact, this city’s specific Strategy for Development Education focuses on engaging local services such as libraries and youth centres with development education actions (Ajuntament de València, 2020). In the interviews and discussion groups, participants specifically referred to two strategic means to mainstream aid: first, as one person summarised it, the local level is key in order to promote “responsible public

procurement, fair trade and sustainable consumption in cities” (G.1.3); second, municipalities should engage experts from different municipal departments to participate in technical aid actions, so they can help build capacities in local institutions in the South.

In practice, nevertheless, there is a very rigid compartmentalisation between local government areas, so it becomes difficult to mainstream policies. As several people mentioned, the increasing importance of Global Agenda 2030 has provided some assistance in this sense: “Agenda 2030 has been necessary to work in a transversal way [...] Now we say: No, no! Mobility affects tourism; urbanism affects tourism! The 2030 agenda is impossible to achieve if you work from a single department.” (E6). Nevertheless, municipal coordination spaces are limited and not very effective, as officers recognise. Moreover, it is recognised that areas of development aid have very limited influence, so it is difficult to mainstream aspects such as fair-trade public procurement.

In third place, *expertise and technical knowledge in certain key areas* is one of the most mentioned aspects. Interviewees and group participants stated that municipalities have experience in areas such as water management, urban planning, social services, local management procedures, etc. Interestingly, participants not only affirmed that they have this knowledge, but also that officers experience the same problems as local governments in the South (for example, they experience a permanent work overload and lack of resources), so they can empathise. For this reason, a number of people referred to the importance of technical cooperation and of engaging municipal experts in order to exchange knowledge with municipal officers in the South.

However, due to compartmentalisation, municipal officials rarely take part in aid policies. As an example, one interviewee, referring to a technical cooperation programme developed by a network of municipalities — in which local officers stay for a month in local institutions in the South in order to provide advice — mentioned that it is very difficult to engage experts of any area in the Programme, as they are not really interested or feel that it is dangerous or problematic.

In fourth place, with respect to the possibility of *engaging citizens more easily*, the participants made statements that are also found in the strategic documents, such as “municipalities are in close relation with the citizenry” (G.1.1), and how this can help when it comes to engaging citizens in aid actions. For example, it is easier to communicate the results of development projects financed by the municipality or undertake development education programmes that more easily connect local problems with global challenges.

Nevertheless, this engagement is difficult in practice, considering the reality of local governments. For example, Valencia's Aid Strategy explicitly mentions the limited local accountability and participation of the citizenry and the reduced capacity of the administration to communicate (Ajuntament de València, 2019). Moreover, some participants stated that, in any case, citizens are not really interested and do not really demand aid policies: "It would be impossible for a councillor to dramatically cut the budget for local music bands, but this can be easily done in the case of aid and finance for development NGOs" (G.2.2).

In fifth place, several people mentioned the added value of municipalities in engaging *stakeholders who do not usually take part in development aid actions*. Specifically, they referred to two groups which have been particularly prominent in the Spanish public sphere in recent years: environmental movements and feminist movements. Participants and interviewees affirmed that, given the relevance of these groups, they must be present in the aid sector in order to contribute their ideas and to connect local struggles for justice with global ones. People also referred to other stakeholders who are habitually absent, such as neighbourhood associations, local schools and migrants.

However, engaging these stakeholders is considered very challenging. Usually, only development NGOs who receive financing for projects are interested in aid policies. Some people mentioned that NGOs are in most cases the only organisations who take part in local participation spaces (such as the municipal development aid councils that some municipalities have): "There is a certain endogamic dynamic in these spaces." (G.1.4). It is difficult to attract the interest of other stakeholders, as the meetings of these councils are usually unappealing, very technical and focused on financial questions.

In sixth place, the potential for creating *more direct and quality relationships* between Northern and Southern stakeholders is considered to be one the most important virtues of aid from municipalities, which has to be leveraged. This applies both to the relationships of municipalities with the organisations they fund and to the relationships of municipalities with stakeholders in the South, especially with local authorities. People stressed two aspects of this reciprocity: "mutual learning" and "mutual exchange of experiences" (G.2.8). This entails the municipality receiving knowledge and experience both from the development NGOs, which are financed, and from the local authorities or other stakeholders in the South, who are the recipients of aid. It is also worth mentioning that most of those defending this argument considered that, in order for such reciprocity to emerge, it is crucial to create long-term relationships.

However, building quality relationships is complicated for local aid managers. Various reasons were mentioned in this regard. First, the relationships both with development NGOs and stakeholders in the South are mostly bureaucratic, excessively focused on monitoring and on financial aspects; therefore, they do not produce any substantial learning or quality exchanges. The nature of administrative procedures and instruments makes it difficult to be flexible and causes project management to be burdensome and demanding for development NGOs and for their partners in the South. Second, the approach to aid policies from municipalities (and all donors) frequently encourages competition rather than collaboration between stakeholders. For representatives of NGOs, this is clearly the case when it comes to calls for projects. Moreover, much to the regret of both NGOs and municipal officers, the duration of the projects which can be funded is short (usually one year), which makes it very difficult to sustain long term relationships.

Seventh, the potential for the *co-creation of policies and actions* was also mentioned, in two senses. The first concerns co-creation between municipalities in the North. Participants referred to statements also found in strategic documents regarding the importance of the Valencian Fund for Solidarity — the regional fund for aid, in which 131 municipalities take part — particularly for the smallest municipalities. The second involves co-creation with local partners in the South. In this sense, people essentially indicated the importance of sharing the ideation and implementation of aid projects — they do not refer aid policies in general. Constraints regarding co-creation were also mentioned, especially the limited capacity of municipalities regarding aid policies. In any case, this limitation seems to also be an incentive for networking and co-creation, particularly in the case of smaller cities.

Competencies needed for international social work from aid from municipalities

Considering the added value of aid policies and actions deployed by municipalities, as well as their challenges, it is possible to discuss the specific competencies which may be relevant for international social workers in this environment. The competencies discussed connect with and detail those mentioned in the theoretical framework.

Regarding the *knowledge* needed for international social work in municipalities, the discussions in the previous section highlight the need for competences related to knowledge of the local area, knowledge of institutions and holistic perspectives of social change. First, social workers should know about local problems and concerns, as well as their connections with global ones (for example, those involving unemployment, pollution or violence and their connections with

global process and with other local realities in the South), so they may mobilise citizens and local stakeholders by connecting with their realities and concerns. Second, discussions indicate the need for knowledge of local stakeholders (from environmental and feminist movements to neighbourhood, [migrant](#) and other local associations) and their interests and dynamics. Third, interdisciplinary knowledge is highly relevant, so social workers can converse with and engage other areas of municipalities in aid policies. Fourth, a deep knowledge of municipal institutions appears to be crucial, particularly knowledge of municipal policy instruments and procedures. [Considering the bureaucratic constraints of local administration, social workers should be aware of the existing room for manoeuvre in bureaucratic procedures in order to exploit the possibilities for innovation and flexibility, avoiding bureaucratisation. This includes knowledge of the best practices of other municipalities and professionals.](#) Finally, it seems relevant to know about project monitoring and evaluation approaches which are centred on learning and exchange — and not just on technical and financial control.

Regarding the *values* that should be at play in international social work when managing aid from municipalities, competences can be found which connect with aspects in the theoretical framework such as reflexivity, respect for differences, and other key ethical principles of the profession. First, it seems that social workers should recognise the value of other fields, disciplinary areas and stakeholders, beyond social work, development aid and the traditional stakeholders in these areas. This is relevant in order to promote multidisciplinary approaches and to mobilise different departments and kinds of stakeholders. Second, the values of dialogue, empathy, collaboration and trust, which are crucial for the construction of long-lasting and quality relationships, should be at play. This involves reflexivity and adaptation as key values in management, so policy instruments and bureaucratic procedures can be put at the service of quality relationships. [This includes building collaboration with local officers who ensure the compliance with procedures, so collaborative solutions to avoid bureaucratic constraints can be explored.](#)

Regarding the *skills* that international social workers in municipalities should have, the results point to specific competencies connected with most of the questions identified in the framework, from critical practice to communication with high-level officials. First, regarding critical practice and the deconstruction of norms, the discussions indicated the need for skills in managing administrative procedures and using bureaucratic instruments with creativity and flexibility, so they can be placed at the service of processes, relationships and learning. Second, abilities in mobilisation, persuasion, lobbying and advocacy seem crucial, so different stakeholders can be engaged, from local associations and other municipal officials to local

authorities — thereby being able to give more attention and continuity to municipal aid policies. Third, abilities of communication and dialogue are also relevant, involving interaction with different stakeholders and audiences, from social movements to local councillors and the wider public. *These abilities include facilitating the co-creation of policies and actions — sometimes with municipalities of very different characteristics and/or with other very diverse stakeholders. They also involve the* communication of aid policies and actions, connecting them with local awareness, problems, interests and demands, as well as with other priorities and actions of municipal policy. Finally, all this implies developing a strategic view and skills for strategic planning, so the endemic problem of lack of planning in municipal aid policies can be overcome.

Figure 1 summarises and connects the results discussed in this section.

Figure 1. Added value of municipal aid and implications for competencies for international social work

[Insert Figure 1]

Final remarks

This study has illustrated how the practice of development aid from municipalities is an underexplored space; however, as the Spanish context shows, it is also full of potential. It has a clear added value, considering its autonomy, the specific capacities of municipalities and its proximity to the citizenry and other stakeholders. Nevertheless, this potential suffers from a number of tensions and limitations of a very diverse nature, ranging from institutional to social, such as the lack of resources and expertise, the bureaucratisation of processes and relationships or the general disinterest of the citizenry regarding aid. Be that as it may, it would appear that most of these problems could be addressed to some extent if social workers developing aid policies and practices in municipalities were able to implement a number of competencies entailing various aspects of knowledge, values and skills.

Thus, this paper has revealed how a specific practice of international social work may leverage the potential of development aid policies from municipalities. In broader terms, this practice can help municipalities to fulfil their responsibilities towards global sustainable development more competently, and, at the same time, it can contribute to a more participatory, accountable, critical and democratic governance.

Considering the object and objectives of this study, its aims were exploratory in nature, and its limitations are evident from the results, given that they reveal the number of aspects which should be considered in order to understand and foster international social work in

development aid at the municipal level. New studies may focus on specific profiles of municipalities and on the precise aspects which have been presented here. For example, future research can focus on the complexities of mobilising stakeholders, of communicating and connecting with the citizenry or of aligning different municipal areas with sustainable development in the Global South — and how international social work can play a key role in all these questions. Alternatively, new exploratory research could reveal aspects of the object of study which were not presented in the proposed framework, nor unveiled through the cases and methodological strategy, by using alternative strategies such as data mining analysis.

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Table 1. Discussion groups composition: position and gender of participants. Source: prepared by the authors

Position of participant of group	Gender	Code
Discussion group 1		
Officer in a regional network of municipalities	Male	G.1.1
Officer in a specific network of municipalities for aid	Male	G.1.2
Representative of network of Valencian development NGOs	Male	G.1.3
Public officer in an aid department in a city of >500,000 inhabitants	Male	G.1.4
Aid expert and consultant	Female	G.1.5
Officer in an NGO in El Salvador	Female	G.1.6
Discussion group 2		
Officer in a Valencian NGO	Male	G.2.1
Officer in a Valencian NGO	Male	G.2.2
Officer in a network of Valencian development NGOs	Male	G.2.3
Member of a professional association of Social Workers	Female	G.2.4
University expert	Female	G.2.5
Public officer in aid and social services - city of 100,000–500,000 inhabitants	Male	G.2.6
Public officer in aid and social services - city of 10,000–100,000 inhabitants	Female	G.2.7
Public officer in aid and education – city of 10,000–100,000 inhabitants	Male	G.2.8

Source: Self-elaboration

Table 2. Description of sample for interviews: position, studies and gender of interviewees. Source: prepared by the authors.

Position of interviewee	Studies	Gender	Code
Public officer in an aid department - city of >500,000 inhabitants	Social Worker	Male	E1
Public officer in an aid, migration and social services department - city of 10,000–100,000 inhabitants	Social Worker	Male	E2
Public officer in an aid and social services department - city of 10,000–100,000 inhabitants	Social Worker	Male	E3
Councillor of aid and culture - city of 10,000–100,000 inhabitants	Education Studies	Female	E4
Councillor of aid - city of 10,000–100,000 inhabitants	Education Studies	Female	E5
Councillor of social wellbeing and aid - city of <2,500 inhabitants	Social Worker	Female	E6

Source: Self-elaboration