

International Action of Local and Regional Governments and Local Development in Cameroon: What Articulation Between the Local and National Levels of Foreign Policy in the Age of Interdependence?

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ABSTRACT

This research analyses the contribution of the International Action of Local and Regional Governments (AICT) to local development in Cameroonian cities in light of the evolution of interdependence between the State and local and regional governments in the field of foreign policy. In a context shaped by globalisation, decentralisation and the growing prominence of sub-state actors, the study moves beyond a narrow understanding of decentralised cooperation to approach AICT as a reconfiguring public policy arena encompassing international partnerships, city networks, co-development and territorial outreach strategies. Drawing on the theory of complex interdependence and the socio-historical approach to public policy, the research adopts a qualitative methodology combining documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews conducted with national support institutions and officials responsible for international action in the cities of Yaoundé, Douala, Bafoussam, Bangangté and Dschang. The findings show that AICT contributes to local development through the mobilisation of human, technical and financial resources, the strengthening of institutional capacities and the improvement of certain local public services. However, its impact remains uneven and limited because of the predominance of implicit interdependence between the State and local and regional governments, characterised by insufficient institutional, financial and strategic support. The study nevertheless identifies a gradual shift towards explicit interdependence, driven in part by the growing involvement of new actors, particularly the diaspora and international organisations. This dynamic promotes the diversification of international action and creates opportunities for multi-level governance oriented towards local development. The effectiveness of AICT therefore depends not only on strengthening the structural and operational capacities of cities, but also on improving the mechanisms of interdependence that shape their relationship with foreign policy. Establishing multi-level governance of foreign policy is consequently essential to making AICT a sustainable lever for local development and for enhancing Cameroon's international standing.

Keywords: AICT, implicit interdependence, explicit interdependence, foreign policy, decentralised cooperation

INTRODUCTION

Decentralised cooperation has emerged in the Cameroonian context since independence as the dominant form of the International Action of Local and Regional Governments (AICT)¹. It was initially driven by European local authorities which, in a spirit of solidarity, contributed to embedding the practice within the local development process in Cameroon through a development-aid approach.² It was, however, with the Franco-Cameroonian convention on decentralised cooperation that the State first involved its local authorities in its international development cooperation process.³ Yet it was not until the decentralisation laws of 2004 and, more

¹ "L'Action Internationale des Collectivités Territoriales" (AICT) is an expression developed in the French context. In this study, we retain the acronym AICT, even though it does not correspond to the English translation.

² Martine BONDO & M. Martin BALIKWISHA NYONYO, La coopération décentralisée dans l'espace francophone, Projet de rapport de la commission des affaires parlementaires, Session de l'APF, document n°12, Abidjan 9-13 juillet 2013, p.4

³ See Framework Convention on Franco-Cameroonian Decentralized Cooperation, Rennes, 20 November 1990.

recently, the 2019 General Code that the State officially recognised the authority of local governments to act internationally.⁴ However, local governments have limited autonomy in this area. They face shortcomings in financial, human, operational and strategic resources that constrain the effectiveness of their international projection. This situation reflects insufficient cooperation between the local and national levels in the field of foreign policy. Through a centralising approach, the State still appears to underestimate the positive returns of effective involvement of its Decentralized Territorial Authorities (CTDs)⁵ on the international stage. Indeed, there is no formal process for sharing the State's diplomatic and operational resources with local governments to facilitate their international projection. The State focuses on supervisory control, which sometimes hampers cities' decentralised cooperation through excessive procedures and administrative blockages. This contributes, in part, to limiting the dynamism of the international action of Cameroonian cities.

Moreover, globalisation and the sustainable development paradigm are opening up new prospects for Cameroonian local and regional governments. Whereas in the past they were regarded as agents of the State's international cooperation, they now appear as full-fledged actors on the international stage.⁶ Their international involvement, far from conflicting with State foreign policy, complements it. As global problems become increasingly complex, the involvement of a multitude of relevant actors, and particularly local actors (cities and local governments), in seeking solutions has become imperative. This is all the more so because the United Nations (UN) encourages local actors to participate in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.⁷ This evolution of global governance has two consequences: the diversification of cities' international action, with decentralised cooperation expanding and gaining visibility; and the emergence of actors other than local and regional governments, notably diasporas, businesses, civil society and International Organisations (IOs), which create opportunities for the internationalisation of CTDs. These actors strengthen the autonomy of their international action, which is gradually moving beyond the State's mediating role and control without necessarily conflicting with its foreign policy. The growing involvement of new actors, particularly IOs, sometimes requires the State to adopt a multi-level governance perspective in its foreign policy.⁸

Likewise, these developments have accentuated the limitations of decentralised cooperation. Whereas it once adequately explained the involvement of CTDs on the international stage, it now appears limited because not only has the practice shifted from a classical solidarity-based aid paradigm towards a more economic paradigm that is reshaping it, but decentralised cooperation has also expanded to other forms of internationalisation that complement it.⁹ These include city diplomacy and participation in international programmes, which are gaining increasing importance. The following figure illustrates a heterogeneous field of sub-state international relations, or AICT, comprising internationalisation practices with a number of distinctive features. This diversity of concepts used to describe the international involvement of local and regional governments reflects the conceptualisation challenges associated with an emerging field of International Relations. In this study, we have chosen the concept of AICT to describe this involvement because it provides a comprehensive approach capable of encompassing all forms of internationalisation by local and regional governments.¹⁰

⁴Law No. 2004 of 22 July 2004 on decentralization in Cameroon. It provided for the general recognition of the international competence of CTDs. It was subsequently repealed by Law No. 2019/024 of 24 December 2019 establishing the General Code of Decentralized Local and Regional Authorities (CGCTD).

⁵ In this research, we maintain that acronym which is from the French translation: "*Collectivités Territoriales Décentralisées*" (CTD). We use the concept of CTDs interchangeably with that of cities, insofar as our research focuses on local authorities that have urban characteristics. This is because most decentralized cooperation projects are undertaken by local authorities with an urban or semi-urban base.

⁶Bertrand GALLET, "La coopération décentralisée. L'émergence des collectivités et autorités territoriales sur la scène internationale", Editions Bruylant, Bruxelles, AFRI 2001, volume II, p. 383

⁷Simon Letonturier & Michèle Pasteur, *Agir en coopération pour un développement local durable et inclusif*, Assemblée des départements de France, Paris, sans date, p.27.

⁸ Bertrand GALLET, *Op.cit.*, p.385

⁹Bruno BOIDIN & Abdelkader DJEFLAT, « Présentation. Mutations et questions autour de la coopération décentralisée », *Dans Mondes en développement* 2016/3 (n°175), Éditions De Boeck Supérieur, p.9

¹⁰Bruno BOIDIN & Abdelkader DJEFLAT, « Présentation. Mutations et questions autour de la coopération décentralisée », *Dans Mondes en développement* 2016/3 (n°175), Éditions De Boeck Supérieur, p.9

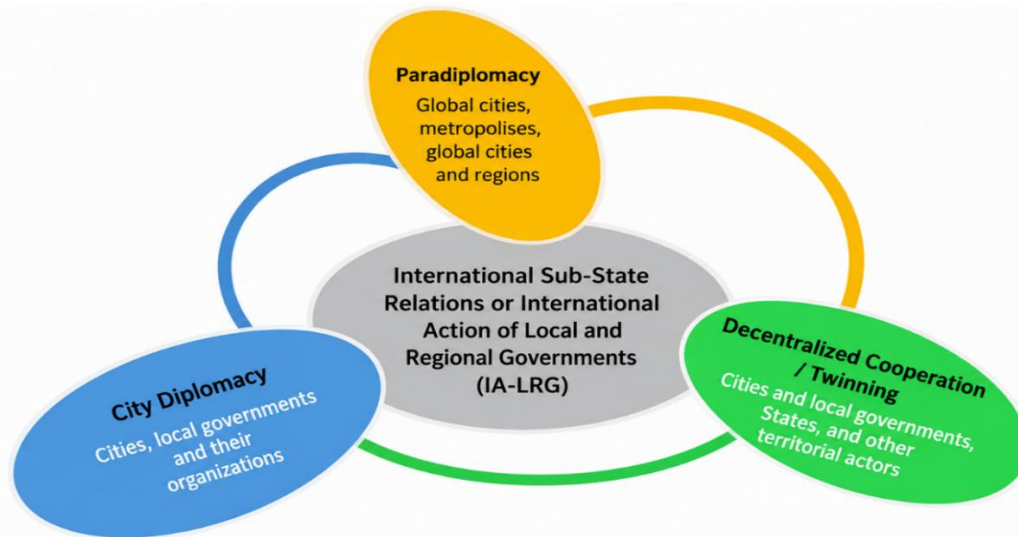


Figure 1. Key Concepts of the International Action of Local and Regional Governments (the author)

Although these three concepts are regularly used to characterise AICT, they nevertheless differ in terms of the scale of action, objectives, actors involved, and so forth. The following table highlights these distinctions:

Table 1. Distinguishing the key concepts of the International Action of Local and Regional Governments (author)¹

	PARADIPLOMACY	DECENTRALISED COOPERATION	CITY DIPLOMACY
ACTORS	Major metropolitan areas and regions	Local and regional governments in their diversity, States, local actors and development partners	International city organisations, national associations of local governments, cities and local governments
EMERGENCE	1980	1989	2008
LEVEL OF AUTONOMY	Very high	Limited	Very high
SCALE OF ACTION	Autonomous diplomatic action, sometimes independent of national foreign policy	Development cooperation actions subordinate to States.	Collective global diplomatic action by cities and local governments
OBJECTIVES	Greater autonomy of major metropolitan areas and regions in international relations (capacity to influence international policy).	Delivery of ODA through North–South development cooperation by local and regional governments	Recognition of cities and local governments as actors in International Relations (collective action in conflict resolution)
APPROACH	Anglo-Saxon approach	European approach	Mixed or comprehensive approach

In Cameroon, this evolution in the internationalisation practices of local and regional governments is still poorly integrated by both State and local actors involved in decentralised cooperation. The internationalisation of cities remains largely dominated by twinning arrangements, although some local governments stand out through more diversified practices.¹¹ Despite the 2019 reform of the decentralisation process, the legislature introduced no

¹¹ The 2004 decrees, repealed by the 2019 General Code of Decentralized Local Authorities (CTDs), created confusion between decentralized cooperation, international cooperation, inter-municipal cooperation, and partnership. This situation has made the concept increasingly difficult for stakeholders to understand. The international engagement of local authorities, originally conceptualized within the French context, is currently undergoing significant transformations. A new terminology has emerged to reflect the diversification

reform of decentralised cooperation, even though the concept no longer adequately describes the involvement of cities on the international stage and obscures other forms of internationalisation. This has created semantic confusion that complicates the international involvement of local governments. In the 2004 and 2019 legal texts, the legislature conflates decentralised cooperation, inter-municipal cooperation and partnership. The 2020 Decree on the organisation and functioning of CICOD also introduces the concept of External Action of Local and Regional Governments (AECT). This reflects not only the difficulties of adapting a practice conceptualised outside the Cameroonian context, but also the need to rethink decentralised cooperation towards International Action of Local and Regional Governments (AICT), which better captures the current international involvement of Cameroonian cities.¹² Elise Garcia defines AICT as follows:

“The diverse forms that international interventions by French cities, Public Establishments for Inter-Municipal Cooperation (EPCI), Departments and Regions may take. Decentralised cooperation is one of these components, alongside twinning arrangements, European projects and programmes, international outreach activities (economic development, academic cooperation, etc.), participation in networks, emergency humanitarian assistance, or any other international action undertaken, more or less occasionally, by local and regional governments.”¹³

This definition is specific to the French context. For the purposes of this research, we define AICT as the set of practices through which local and regional governments engage on the sub-state international stage, regardless of the motivations or the State and non-State actors with which they interact.

The emergence of new sub-state actors, both on the international stage and within the internationalisation practices of cities, is contributing to a gradual transformation of decentralised cooperation into AICT. The emergence of sustainable development has given local and regional governments greater visibility, as they are increasingly called upon by international organisations to implement their agendas. Diasporas, for their part, continually engage these local governments in pursuing their solidarity-based local development agendas. Local governments thus become a hub for mobilising international cooperation actors, which is an asset not only for their international standing but also for that of the State. Yet local governments struggle to seize these opportunities because of structural constraints and strategic limitations. Thus, decentralised cooperation and, more broadly, AICT mobilise a diversity of actors beyond local and regional governments. The new actors shown in the following figure are increasingly shaping traditional government-to-government relationships.

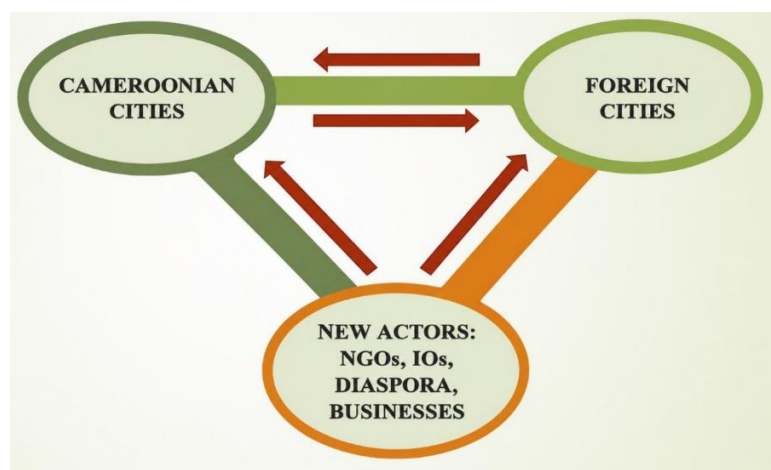


Figure 2. A new triangular approach to decentralised cooperation highlighting new actors (author)2

of the modalities through which local authorities engage internationally. This is the concept of the International Action of Local and Regional Governments (AICT). However, this evolution has not yet been fully integrated or mastered within the Cameroonian context, either by the legislator or by actors involved in cooperation. This explains the aforementioned conceptual confusion. Moreover, the legislator has not taken the necessary steps to clearly define the content of these concepts, despite their specific meanings.

¹² Hadrien ROZIER, *de la coopération décentralisée à l'action internationale des collectivités : un paradigme économique ?* Éditions de la Sorbonne « Revue internationale des études du développement » 2017/4 N° 232, p.10 & 11

¹³ Elise GARCIA. *L'action internationale des collectivités territoriales : un outil de développement des territoires français ?* Géographie. Université de Cergy Pontoise, 2013, p.28

Analysis of the 2022 decentralised cooperation database of Cameroon's Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development (MINDDEVEL) shows that, out of 374 communes, only 62 had an ongoing decentralised cooperation project, most of them twinning arrangements, even though a new approach to decentralised cooperation tending towards AICT is gradually taking hold in certain cities in the West, Centre and Littoral regions of Cameroon. This finding raises the issue of the limited dynamism of international action and, consequently, of decentralised cooperation among Cameroonian local and regional governments. The literature points to two trends. The first is structural and explains this limited development through legal and operational constraints that restrict both cities' autonomy in their internationalisation processes and the effectiveness of cooperation initiatives. The second is contextual and attributes this limited development to changes in the international environment, particularly the shift from a solidarity paradigm towards an economic paradigm to which African and Cameroonian cities have struggled to adapt. Without denying the relevance of these two trends in understanding the dynamics that shape the contribution of international action to local development, several questions remain: Can decentralised cooperation still adequately describe the involvement of CTDs in contemporary international relations? Which concept is most appropriate for defining the current field of CTD involvement on the international stage? How does the socio-historical trajectory of decentralised cooperation affect current CTD internationalisation practices? How can the limited development of city internationalisation be explained despite the institutional and legal frameworks established by the State? What place does decentralised cooperation occupy in the foreign policy of the Cameroonian State?

The literature on sub-state international relations has largely sought to analyse empirical situations demonstrating the role of cities, regions and local governments more generally as relevant actors on the international stage. These include the work of Panayotis Soldatos and Stéphane Paquin¹⁴, and Rodrigo Tavares¹⁵ on paradiplomacy, which focuses on major metropolitan areas. More recent works by Raffaele Marchetti¹⁶, Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi¹⁷, Agnieszka Szpak¹⁸ and Yves Viltard¹⁹ on city diplomacy and AICT in the French context describe the positioning of cities on the international stage. Despite the structuring role of these works in understanding the international positioning of cities and local governments, they do not adequately capture the issue of structuring relations between the national and local levels of foreign policy. This issue, which persists in the literature, remains insufficiently analysed. This explains the theoretical positioning of our research, which examines how relations between the national and local levels of foreign policy affect the effectiveness of cities' international projection and the local development process. In other words, it seeks to demonstrate that the contribution of international action to local development is influenced more strongly by the nature of interdependence in relation to State foreign policy. The study is structured around the following question: How does the evolution of interdependence between the Cameroonian State and its local and regional governments in the field of foreign policy influence the contribution of the International Action of Local and Regional Governments to local development? Our hypothesis is that: The contribution of the International Action of Local and Regional Governments (AICT) to local development in Cameroonian cities depends on the evolution of interdependence between the State and local and regional governments in the field of foreign policy. The more these relations evolve towards explicit, institutionalised and cooperative interdependence based on regulated autonomy for local governments, the more AICT generates sustainable effects on local development. Conversely, when these relations remain implicit, centralised or weakly coordinated, their contribution to local development remains limited. This hypothesis is empirically grounded in the socio-historical evolution of the international action of Cameroonian local and regional governments. Observation of this trajectory reveals a relationship of implicit interdependence characterised by the strong predominance of the State in conducting decentralised cooperation,

¹⁴ Stéphane PAQUIN, *Paradiplomatie et relations internationales, Théorie des stratégies internationales des régions face à la mondialisation*, Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes, Collection « Régionalisme et Fédéralisme » n° 3, Bruxelles, 2004, pp. 101-103

¹⁵ Rodrigo TAVARES, *PARADIPLMACY, Cities and States as Global Players*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p.8

¹⁶ Raffaele MARCHETTI, *la diplomatie des villes, Des anciennes cités-états aux villes globales*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2022, p.67

¹⁷ Lorenzo KIH LGREN GRANDI, *Le nouveau rôle international des villes (et pourquoi il faut l'encourager)*, Terra Nova Think Tank, Rapport, 13 mars 2020, pp.14 & 15

¹⁸ SZPAK Agnieszka & als., *The Role of Cities in International Relations: The Third-generation of Multi-level Governance?*, Northampton : Edward Elgar, 2022, p.243

¹⁹ Yves Viltard, « Conceptualiser la « diplomatie des villes » : Ou l'obligation faite aux relations internationales de penser l'action extérieure des gouvernements locaux », *Revue française de science politique*, 58-3, 2008, p. 511-533.

thereby limiting the autonomy and international initiative of local and regional governments. However, current dynamics observed in cities such as Yaoundé, Douala, Bafoussam, Dschang and Bangangté reveal a gradual reconfiguration of interdependence, characterised by the emergence of more autonomous forms of local international action despite the persistence of a centralised approach to foreign policy.

Our argument draws on Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's theory of complex interdependence²⁰, which we have sought to extend. Indeed, this theory has hitherto focused exclusively on interdependence between States and actors on the international stage, without considering manifestations of interdependence at the local level. This is where our theoretical contribution lies: we extend the analysis of interdependence to the relationship between foreign policy and AICT within the domestic framework of States. In our view, analysing this configuration makes it possible to understand the quality of a local government's international involvement. By combining the socio-historical approach to public policy with the theory of complex interdependence, we identified two dynamics in the socio-historical trajectory of the international action of Cameroonian cities in relation to foreign policy: a dynamic of implicit interdependence marked by a centralising conception of foreign policy that limits CTD involvement, and a dynamic of explicit interdependence in which the role of CTDs is more or less recognised and integrated into foreign policy. Methodologically, our research is essentially qualitative. Through semi-structured interviews, and using purposive sampling, we interviewed three officials from institutions supporting decentralised cooperation, notably MINDDEVEL and CVUC, as well as 15 cooperation officials in the cities of Yaoundé, Douala and Bafoussam and their arrondissement communes, and in the communes of Dschang and Bangangté. This sample covers the majority of decentralised cooperation projects. The data collected were analysed using content analysis and thematic analysis. The findings show that, in the relationship between AICT and foreign policy, implicit interdependence predominates, as reflected in the operational, legal-institutional, financial, human and strategic constraints observed in local governments. Nevertheless, the involvement of new actors such as the diaspora, international organisations, civil society, businesses and expert consultancies, among others, is contributing to a gradual transformation of decentralised cooperation into AICT, indicating the emergence of explicit interdependence that is becoming established vis-à-vis the State without necessarily conflicting with its foreign policy. It is therefore important first to present the methodological approach that led to these findings.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection procedures:

Data were collected using two complementary techniques: documentary research and semi-structured interviews. The documentary research covered scientific studies, legislative and regulatory texts, as well as institutional reports and documents relating to decentralisation, decentralised cooperation and AICT in Cameroon. The interviews were conducted using a guide organised around six dimensions: the structuring of international action, its manifestations, its results and impacts, the obstacles encountered, prospects for improvement, and good practices. Interviews were conducted both in person and remotely, particularly via WhatsApp, depending on respondents' accessibility and availability. The exchanges were recorded whenever possible and subsequently transcribed to constitute the empirical corpus. The sample presented in the table below was selected purposively, enabling us to identify not only the local governments most active in decentralised cooperation in Cameroon but also those with active or inactive decentralised cooperation projects. Our research sample is presented in the table below:

Table 2. Summary of the study sample2

ACTOR CATEGORY	TERRITORY / INSTITUTION	SURVEYED UNITS	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
Support and monitoring institutions	Yaoundé	MINDDEVEL (Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development)	02
	Yaoundé	CVUC (United Councils and Cities of Cameroon)	01

²⁰ Robert KEOHANE O. & Joseph S. NYE, *Power and Interdependence*, Longman Classic in political science, 4th éd., 2012

Institution subtotal	Yaoundé	/	03
Local and regional governments	Yaoundé	City of Yaoundé, Yaoundé Arrondissement Communes (CAY) 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7	08
	Douala	City of Douala, Douala Arrondissement Communes (CAD) 3 and 5	03
	Bafoussam	City of Bafoussam, Bafoussam 1 Arrondissement Commune (CAB 1)	02
	Dschang	Commune of Dschang	01
	Bangangté	Commune of Bangangté	01
Local government subtotal	/	/	15
TOTAL	Centre, Littoral et Ouest	Institutions + local and regional governments	18

Analytical tools:

Data analysis relied primarily on thematic analysis and content analysis. The former consisted of identifying, grouping and comparing the information collected around the main analytical categories defined on the basis of the interview guide and the research problem, as presented in the following table:

Table 3. Themes selected for data analysis³

MAIN THEMES	
1	Organisation/structuring
2	Manifestations of international action
3	Results/impacts of international action
4	Challenges/obstacles to international action
5	Prospects for improving international action
6	Good practices in international action

In our research, the analysis was conducted in several stages:

Stage 1: Preliminary identification of themes from the interview guide: We identified six themes concerning the structuring, manifestations, impacts, obstacles, prospects and good practices of international action. These dimensions were addressed through specific questions to cooperation actors in the selected cities.

Stage 2: Transcription of interviews with the various actors involved in the decentralised cooperation process within the defined geographical area: Once the interviews had been conducted, we transcribed the interviews in order to familiarise ourselves with the different corpora.

Stage 3: Grouping verbatim statements by theme: The next stage consisted of grouping verbatim statements under the different themes to facilitate analysis.

Stage 4: Analysis of themes in relation to the research problem: The final stage involved analysing the different themes in relation to the research problem. This analysis made it possible to confront our hypotheses with field realities. In this process, we used artificial intelligence to identify correlations and conduct a cross-cutting analysis of the verbatim statements.

Content analysis, in turn, made it possible to identify recurring ideas, dominant perceptions, convergences and divergences among the actors and local governments studied. A cross-cutting and comparative analysis of the

data was then used to relate the different local experiences and compare the empirical findings with the research hypotheses. Artificial intelligence was used as a support tool for classifying and linking verbatim statements, while interpretation and validation of the findings remained under our control.

Methodological limitations:

This approach has several limitations. The use of purposive sampling does not allow the findings to be statistically generalised to all Cameroonian local and regional governments. Similarly, the study prioritises local governments with an identifiable experience of decentralised cooperation, which may lead to an under-representation of less internationally active local governments. Finally, constraints relating to accessibility, the availability of actors and the conduct of remote interviews may have limited the depth of some of the data collected. These limitations do not, however, undermine the analytical scope of the study, whose primary aim is to understand the logics, practices and dynamics of AICT through significant empirical cases.

RESULTS

Implicit Interdependence As The Dominant Form Of Articulation Between AICT And State Foreign Policy

The international opening of Cameroonian local and regional governments did not develop in a context of local diplomatic autonomy, but within an institutional environment in which the State remains the principal regulator of external action. For a long time, this relationship was characterised by a form of implicit interdependence. This reflects a dynamic in which constraint governs relations between the local and national levels in the field of foreign policy. The State recognises cities' capacity to act in international relations without providing them with the technical, financial and human resources required for more effective international engagement. In our analysis, we operationalised the concept by focusing not on the nature or manifestations of this relationship, but rather on its effects on AICT and its contribution to local development.

Table 4. Operationalisation of the concept of implicit interdependence⁴

ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS	OBSERVED VARIABLES	EMPIRICAL INDICATORS	DATA SOURCES
Structuring of relations between foreign policy and AICT	Level of recognition of local international action	Legal framework; supervisory control; authorisation procedures; weak integration of AICT into foreign policy	Documentary analysis; interviews with State institutions
Distribution of international-action resources	Institutional and operational dependence of local governments	Limited technical support; limited financial resources; dependence on partners; centralisation of support mechanisms	Official documents; interviews with local governments
Organisation of cooperation arrangements	Level of institutionalisation of AICT	Absence of a dedicated service; low professionalisation; absence of an international strategy; predominant reliance on twinning	Interviews;
Effects on local development	Level of transformation of mobilised resources	Occasional results; low sustainability; territorial inequalities	Interviews

This table identifies the analytical dimensions and variables observed in the field in the international practices of local actors. It shows that this configuration promotes differentiated patterns of internationalisation across territories, producing significant disparities in institutional, human, financial and strategic capacities. The absence of explicit coordination and transfer mechanisms leads to uneven structuring of AICT and strong dependence of local governments on external opportunities.

Weak Institutional And Operational Capacities Of Cities In Implementing AICT

Although the gradual establishment of structures dedicated to international action reflects the growing willingness of local and regional governments to engage in international dynamics, this development does not automatically guarantee their capacity to conduct effective and sustainable external action. Beyond the formal existence of services or administrative arrangements, the effectiveness of AICT depends on the availability of qualified human resources, appropriate financing mechanisms, planning tools and a favourable institutional environment. Yet analysis of the cities studied shows that the rise of local international action continues to face significant constraints that limit its capacity to transform local development. These difficulties reflect less an absence of initiative on the part of local governments than an incomplete articulation between territories' ambitions for international openness and the mechanisms of regulation, support and coordination established at the national level. From this perspective, the limitations observed in the implementation of AICT can be interpreted as an expression of implicit interdependence in which local governments have a recognised sphere of action that is still insufficiently consolidated by the resources and arrangements needed to fully exercise their international mandate. The objective of this section is therefore to provide a comparative analysis of the level of AICT structuring in cities through the institutional and organisational, human and financial, and strategic dimensions that condition AICT effectiveness and influence its contribution to local development.

Observation of the institutional arrangements responsible for the international action of the Cameroonian local and regional governments studied reveals a structure that remains embryonic, heterogeneous and unevenly distributed between major cities and arrondissement communes. Although most local governments now have cooperation units or services, their functioning remains weak, under-resourced in terms of qualified human resources and insufficiently strategic. This situation reflects the limitations of an institutional dynamic that is still under construction in a context of incomplete decentralisation. The table below provides a concise comparative overview of the structuring and capacity of Cameroonian cities and communes to manage their international action, taking into account five key dimensions: the existence of a dedicated service, definition of responsibilities, staff qualifications, budget allocation and strategic planning.

Table 5. Comparative summary of AICT structuring in the Cameroonian cities studied (source: field data)⁵

CITY / COMMUNE	SERVICE	RESPONSIBILITIES	QUALIFIED IR STAFF	BUDGET LINE	STRATEGY / PLAN
City of Yaoundé (CUY)	✓	✓	⚠	⚠	✗
Yaoundé Arrondissement Commune (CAY 2)	✓	✓	⚠	✗	✗
Yaoundé Arrondissement Commune (CAY 3)	✓	✓	⚠	✗	✗
Yaoundé Arrondissement Commune (CAY 4)	✓	✓	⚠	✗	✗
Yaoundé Arrondissement Commune (CAY 5)	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Yaoundé Arrondissement Commune (CAY 6)	✓	✓	⚠	✗	✗
Yaoundé Arrondissement Commune (CAY 7)	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗

City of Douala (CUD)	✓	✓	✓	⚠	✗
Douala Arrondissement Commune (CAD 3)	3 ✓	✓	⚠	⚠	✗
Douala Arrondissement Commune (CAD 5)	5 ✓	✓	⚠	✗	✗
City of Bafoussam	✓	✓	✓	✗	⚠
Bafoussam Arrondissement Commune (CAB 1)	1 ✓	✓	⚠	✗	✗
Commune of Dschang	✓	✓	⚠	✓	⚠
Commune of Bangangté	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗

LEGENDE

- ✓ = Personnel qualifié présent mais insuffisant
- ⚠ = personnel partiellement qualifié
- ✗ = pas de personnel qualifié

Overall, almost all cities and communes have an operational service. Only CAY 7 remains completely without a structure for managing international action. With regard to qualified personnel, the table shows marked disparities. Major cities such as Yaoundé, as well as intermediate cities such as Dschang and certain arrondissement communes (CAY 3, CAY 2, CAY 4, CAD 3 and CAD 5, CAB 1), have partially qualified staff (indicated by ⚠), whereas the cities of Douala and Bafoussam, Bangangté and CAY 5 have staff qualified in international relations but insufficient in number to manage international action (indicated by ✓). CAY 7 has no trained staff (indicated by ✗). With regard to budget allocations, very few local governments have a clearly identified budget line for AICT. Only Dschang, Yaoundé, Douala (for certain activities) and CAD 3 (partially) demonstrate relatively structured financial capacity. The absence of dedicated funding in most cities and communes severely limits their autonomy and their ability to plan and sustain international partnerships. Finally, in terms of strategic planning, only Dschang (Communal Plan) and Bafoussam have initiated a process that is still informal, while all other local governments have neither a plan nor a strategy. This lack of strategic direction reveals management that remains highly opportunistic and dependent on external partners, as well as a lack of anticipation in the conduct of cooperation. Considering these dimensions enabled us to categorise cities according to the level of structuring of their international action, as shown in the following table:

Table 6. Typology of international action structuring models in Cameroonian cities (source: field data)6

STRUCTURING MODEL	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS	EXAMPLES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS	AICT MATURITY LEVEL
Structured and emerging model	- Existence of a clearly identified service or unit; - Minimally qualified or trained staff; - Initial strategic planning (communal plan, reflection on an international strategy); - Regular cooperation activities and operational partnerships.	Commune of Dschang, City of Bafoussam, City of Douala, CAD 5, CAY 6, CAD 3, City of Yaoundé	High / consolidating
Institutionalised but weakly	- Existing cooperation structure (often attached to the mayor's office or economic affairs);	Yaoundé Urban Commune, CAY 2, CAY 5, Bangangté,	Medium / partially functional

operational model	- Defined responsibilities but limited implementation; - No dedicated budget line; - no international action plan.		
Embryonic / weakly structured model	- Presence of a local development unit or service integrating cooperation only marginally; - Staff not trained in IR; - Absence of a budget and strategy; - Occasional or opportunistic activities.	CAY 3, CAY 4, CAB 1,	Low / weakly structured
Absent or non-existent model	- Complete absence of a dedicated service or unit; - No identified official responsible for international action; - exclusive and predominant role of the mayor in international affairs - No planning or budget.	CAY 7	Very low / non-existent

The first category consists of cities in which awareness of the challenges of international action is gradually emerging. Dedicated structures exist within the Yaoundé Urban Community, the Douala Urban Community, and certain pioneering communes such as Dschang and Bafoussam. These local governments embody what may be described as emerging models, characterised by functional services, relatively competent staff, and, in some cases, the implementation of plans or strategic thinking on international outreach. Their approach reflects growing awareness of the potential of international action as a lever for territorial development and the mobilisation of external resources.

The second category is the institutionalised but weakly operational model. Under this model, an institutional framework exists but is not yet accompanied by genuine operational capacity. The creation of a service, often located within a complex organisational structure (mayor's office, economic affairs or development service), reflects formal recognition of cooperation, but the mechanisms required for its operation (dedicated budget, specialised staff and strategic plan) remain absent or insufficient. This model illustrates the disconnect between institutionalisation and operationalisation. Local governments recognise the importance of AICT but have not yet crossed the critical threshold required to build a stable strategy independent of political voluntarism.

The third category is the embryonic or weakly structured model. Local governments in this category have begun to develop administrative organisation, but it remains peripheral and weakly structured. Cooperation is not an autonomous field but a sub-component attached to local development or the economic service. Human resources are limited and often lack training in international cooperation issues. The operating mode is largely opportunistic: international activities emerge mainly under the pressure or influence of external partners (NGOs, diaspora, donors and associations), without strategic vision or continuity. This model reveals fragmented, unplanned management in which AICT is not yet regarded as a strategic lever for local development. The absence of a budget, strategic directions and institutional formalisation prevents the development of an organisational learning system. These limitations contribute to excessive dependence on foreign partners and weak local ownership of international actions.

The final category is the absent or non-existent model. This represents the lowest level of structuring, characterised by the complete absence of an institutional mechanism dedicated to AICT. No service, unit or official staff member is assigned to international relations. Where international action exists, it rests exclusively on the mayor, whose initiatives follow a personal rather than organisational logic. This model reinforces the personalisation of local international action: AICT depends on the mayor's political visibility, personal networks or travel. The absence of formalisation prevents administrative continuity, monitoring or evaluation and exposes the local government to a risk of sustained international isolation. Without qualified staff or a budget, it becomes impossible to meet the requirements of international partners (accountability, reporting, contracting and implementation). This model signals a local government operating at the margins of decentralised cooperation

dynamics and highlights a governance deficit that significantly limits its potential integration into international networks.

This classification thus reveals a clear differentiation between local governments engaged in structuring their international action and those that remain on the margins. Some major cities, medium-sized cities and certain arrondissement communes have initiated genuine institutionalisation of AICT, whereas others remain at an embryonic stage. This illustrates the gradual development of local diplomacy in Cameroon, marked by growing ownership of international issues but still constrained by internal disparities in organisational, financial and human capacities. Overall, consolidating cooperation services appears to be an essential lever for professionalisation and a prerequisite for sustainable partnerships. The major challenge now is to strengthen the effectiveness and performance of existing structures while supporting local governments without dedicated services in order to ensure more consistent structuring of AICT across the country.

Comparison of the cities studied also makes it possible to identify an explanatory relationship between the level of AICT structuring and the intensity of interdependence with the State and external partners. The more local governments have coordination mechanisms, dedicated resources and internal capacities, the better able they are to convert their international relations into tangible local development outcomes. Conversely, when institutional capacities remain weak, local governments develop a functional dependence on international partners or State support mechanisms. This dependence reduces their room for initiative and encourages a reactive logic of capturing opportunities rather than a developed territorial strategy.

AICT Confronted With Diverse Constraints Limiting Its Contribution To Local Development

Although AICT has demonstrated its potential for local development, its effectiveness remains conditioned by a set of structural constraints that limit its scope and sustainability in Cameroonian cities. These obstacles, relating to internal governance, institutional capacities, financing and coordination among actors, reveal the fragility of a system that remains insufficiently embedded in local administrative practices. However, these limitations should not obscure the emergence of positive dynamics reflecting a growing willingness to professionalise, appropriate and structure AICT. Recent initiatives in strategic planning, although embryonic, capacity building, participation in international networks and formalisation of partnerships indeed open prospects for evolution towards genuine institutionalisation. Analysis of the data collected from local and regional governments reveals that the implementation of the International Action of Local and Regional Governments (AICT) in Cameroon faces a range of obstacles that limit its effectiveness in this context. Although these obstacles vary across local contexts, they converge around five main dimensions: institutional, organisational, human, financial and strategic.

Weak institutional structuring

The majority of actors emphasise that international cooperation remains weakly institutionalised within local governments. With the exception of a few cities such as Douala and Dschang, most do not have fully functional cooperation units or clearly defined organisational structures. In Yaoundé, for example, cooperation services have limited visibility and lack operational autonomy. Cooperation often depends on the individual willingness of local executives or on circumstances, which limits the sustainability and coherence of international initiatives.

Insufficient qualified human resources

Actors also highlight the shortage of staff trained in international relations and project development. Although some local governments (e.g., Douala) have recruited IRIC graduates, most remain without specialised officials. The lack of technical skills in negotiation, partnership management and fundraising prevent optimal use of the opportunities offered by decentralised cooperation. Consequently, projects are often poorly formulated and either unfunded or unfinished, resulting in increased dependence on external technical assistance.

Lack of financial resources and budgetary autonomy

A cross-cutting obstacle is the low level of budgetary allocation to international action. Very few communes

have a specific budget line for AICT. Actors denounce the burden of local expenditure and the absence of State support for co-financing projects arising from partnerships. This budgetary constraint limits communes' participation in international programmes and networking events. Cooperation activities remain occasional, without a genuinely structuring effect on local development.

Weak coordination among actors and lack of synergy

Data collected from cooperation actors reveal a lack of horizontal and vertical coordination: between local governments (where inter-municipal cooperation remains embryonic) and between CTDs and the State. Weak inter-municipal cooperation is a constraint on resource pooling and the implementation of joint AICT projects. In addition, overlapping competences between ministries and local governments limit cities' autonomy and effectiveness in AICT. The fragmentation of initiatives prevents the consolidation of experience and the implementation of coherent territorial diplomacy at the national level.

Lack of visibility, communication and a clear strategy

Several actors mention the absence of an overall cooperation strategy or formalised action plan. AICT is often conducted without a prior diagnosis or measurable objectives. In addition, the visibility of actions is low because of the lack of digital communication tools and evaluation mechanisms. This strategic deficit makes it difficult to identify priorities and sustain partnerships. Local governments therefore remain in a reactive rather than proactive mode, depending on external requests rather than on an endogenous vision of international development.

Dependence on the aid model and weak local ownership

Several respondents, particularly in Bafoussam, Bangangté and CAD 3, denounce the persistence of a public-development-aid approach marked by dependence on partners from the Global North. This situation reflects weak local ownership of cooperation instruments and a deficit of endogenous innovation. The transition towards more economic and South–South cooperation remains embryonic, although it is perceived as more promising. Partnerships remain unbalanced, focusing on the one-way transfer of resources rather than on equitable exchanges of expertise.

Insufficient mobilisation of local stakeholders and the diaspora

The limited involvement of local stakeholders (civil society, the private sector and the diaspora) restricts the scope and sustainability of international actions. Local governments struggle to establish policies for mobilising the diaspora, even though these actors could play a key role in the co-construction and financing of local projects. As a result, cooperation remains institutional and closed, without territorial anchoring or citizen participation. The following table summarises the various obstacles identified:

Table 7. Summary of obstacles to international action in the Cameroonian cities studied (source: field data)⁷

OBSTACLES	DESCRIPTION / EXAMPLES	FREQUENCY	EFFECTS ON AICT
Human resources	Lack of qualified staff to manage international projects and partnerships; insufficient technical skills	High	Difficulty designing and implementing projects
Financial resources	Insufficient or unavailable counterpart funding; absence of dedicated budget lines; difficulty mobilising funding	High	Limits participation in networks and projects
Administrative constraints	Cumbersome and lengthy procedures for project implementation; burdensome formalities for partnerships and travel; overlapping competences	High	Limits the effectiveness and autonomy of cities in AICT

Governance and coordination	Conflicts of interest with higher authorities or deconcentrated services; weak commitment by decision-makers; lack of coordination	Medium to High	Fragmentation of initiatives
Legal and institutional framework	Legal constraints on cooperation; inoperative or ineffective operational structures	Medium	Limited clarification of the content and scope of AICT; limited support from cooperation-support bodies,
Strategy and embeddedness	Absence of a formal strategy; limited involvement of local actors; dependence on the initiative of a single actor	Medium	Reactive and ineffective cooperation; lack of ownership and sustainability
Land-related issues	Absence of land reserves; conflicts or difficulties in land redistribution or acquisition	Medium	Limits the implementation of city infrastructure projects
Logistical problems	Difficulties with mobility, logistics or equipment required for international projects or meetings	Medium	Limits the dynamism and deployment of cooperation services
Institutional delays	Delays in decision-making, issuance of authorisations and mobilisation of resources; bureaucratic obstacles	Medium to High	Hampers cities' cooperation activities

Thus, AICT in Cameroon remains in an unfinished phase of development, oscillating between political will and structural constraints. Overcoming these limitations requires an integrated approach combining professionalisation, inter-municipal cooperation, diaspora mobilisation and budgetary structuring in order to transform AICT into a genuine lever for sustainable local development.

Ultimately, analysis of the structuring of the International Action of Local and Regional Governments in the cities studied reveals a contrasting reality marked by differentiated levels of institutionalisation, unequal capacities to mobilise international resources and persistent constraints limiting their effective contribution to local development. The differences observed between local governments are not, however, solely attributable to variations in internal administrative capacities; more fundamentally, they reflect a particular configuration of relations between the State and local and regional governments in the conduct of external action. The findings show that AICT in Cameroon has historically developed within a context of implicit interdependence characterised by the gradual recognition of local international action without the simultaneous establishment of sufficiently structured mechanisms for coordination, support and co-production between local and national levels. In this configuration, the State retains primarily a supervisory, regulatory and administrative authorisation role, without deploying sufficiently operational and sustainable instruments of technical, financial and strategic support to enable local governments to consolidate their international capacities.

This form of interdependence produces several observable effects in the territories. On the one hand, it contributes to uneven structuring of AICT, with some local governments developing more advanced arrangements through their own resources or external partnerships, while others remain engaged in occasional and weakly institutionalised activities. On the other hand, it encourages recurrent constraints such as limited specialised human capacities, insufficient financial resources, weak vertical and horizontal coordination, the absence of a clear territorial strategy and increased dependence on external partners. Thus, the limitations observed in implementing AICT should not be interpreted simply as the result of local shortcomings, but as an expression of a centralised approach to national foreign policy that does not clearly integrate the place of the international action of its territories.

AICT therefore appears as a recognised sphere of action that remains operationally weakly consolidated, preventing international opportunities from being transformed consistently into sustainable local development

gains. This interpretation makes it possible to understand that the observed inequalities in structuring are not merely a matter of local capacity, but also reflect the limitations of a historical model of implicit interdependence. The challenge is therefore no longer simply to increase the international openness of local governments, but to move relations between the State and territories towards more explicit forms of coordination, mutual recognition and multi-level governance, which are necessary conditions for a more structurally significant contribution of AICT to local development.

The Gradual Emergence of Explicit Interdependence in Relations Between AICT And Foreign Policy

If implicit interdependence has long constituted the dominant framework for the deployment of AICT in Cameroon, recent developments point to a gradual transformation of relations between the State and local and regional governments in the field of external action. This change is reflected in diversified forms of international intervention, increasing professionalisation among local actors and growing recognition of the role of territories in implementing sustainable development objectives, without overlooking the diversification of actors. We describe this dynamic as explicit interdependence, in which the State adopts a collaborative posture favourable to greater autonomy for cities in international action. However, the reality observed shows that this configuration is taking shape independently of any deliberate State initiative, as international organisations become increasingly involved.

Table 8. Operationalisation of the concept of explicit interdependence⁸

ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS	OBSERVED VARIABLES	EMPIRICAL INDICATORS	DATA SOURCES
Reconfiguration of State-local government relations	Level of multi-level coordination	Increased cooperation; institutional dialogue; gradual integration of local governments	Interviews; regulatory texts;
Diversification of actors	Expansion of international action spaces	Involvement of international organisations; mobilisation of the diaspora; city networks; multi-actor partnerships	Interviews; agreements; reports;
Strengthening territorial capacities	Level of functional empowerment	Autonomous mobilisation of resources; international initiatives; organisational structuring	Interviews
Transformation of cooperation forms	Shift from decentralised cooperation to AICT	Diversification of instruments; territorial attractiveness; economic cooperation; co-development	Documentary analysis; interviews

The table above makes it possible to analyse the dimensions and variables observed in relation to explicit interdependence. Although still tentative and under construction, this trend is gradually becoming established under the impetus of emerging actors such as the diaspora and international organisations.

Diversification Of CTD Intervention Modalities on the Sub-State International Stage: Typologies, Actors and Fields

Recent developments in the international action of Cameroonian local and regional governments reveal a gradual transformation in the ways territories engage with international dynamics. Long limited to conventional forms of decentralised cooperation based on twinning and technical assistance, AICT is now diversifying through new cooperation practices, participation in international networks, co-development and territorial diplomacy. This diversification is not merely a functional evolution of international intervention tools; it also reflects a reconfiguration of relations between the State and local governments in the conduct of external action. By multiplying spaces of interaction with foreign partners, local governments are gradually developing their own internationalisation capacities while remaining embedded in the broader framework of national foreign policy. Thus, the internationalisation of territories should not be interpreted as a process of local diplomatic emancipation, but as an expression of more explicit interdependence in which local governments acquire relative

autonomy while maintaining coordination relations with central institutions. The purpose of this section is therefore to analyse the main forms taken by this international opening in order to understand how they contribute to redefining the international role of Cameroonian local and regional governments.

Analysis of the internationalisation practices of the Cameroonian cities studied reveals a plurality of forms of involvement on the sub-state international stage. This can be explained by the diversity of local contexts and inequalities in institutional capacities among local governments. Far from being homogeneous, AICT operates through differentiated configurations: from conventional decentralised cooperation to more advanced forms of municipal diplomacy, including diaspora-driven co-development, participation in programmes and projects led by international organisations, and inter-territorial twinning. Presenting these different modalities makes it possible not only to understand the depth and evolution of international action within Cameroonian cities, but also to identify the specific logics underpinning territorial dynamics of openness to the world.

The predominance of decentralised cooperation in cities' practices

Decentralised cooperation is the most widespread form in almost all cities. However, it does not take the same form in all cases studied. In cities such as Douala, Yaoundé, Bafoussam and Dschang, decentralised cooperation is integrated into a more structured strategy, supported by specialised services, dedicated administrative frameworks and continuity in partnership management. It therefore takes on a strategic, multidimensional dimension focused on technical support, financing of structuring projects and modernisation of local administration. Conversely, in local governments such as CAY 7, CAY 5 and CAY 2, decentralised cooperation refers more to occasional, unplanned activities that are highly dependent on external requests. These are often localised initiatives based on informal twinning, the intervention of a foreign NGO or the diaspora. Here, decentralised cooperation is closer to assistance-based cooperation than to a structuring partnership. Repeated reliance on donations, equipment and short-term programmes shows that these communes have not yet developed sufficient absorption capacity to turn cooperation into a driver of territorial governance. The following table lists the decentralised cooperation activities mentioned by the actors:

Table 9. Summary of decentralised cooperation activities in the cities studied (source: field data)⁹

FORM OF DECENTRALISED COOPERATION	PARTNER GOVERNMENTS (EXAMPLES)	LOCAL MAIN AREAS OF INTERVENTION	TYPES OF ACTIONS IMPLEMENTED
Institutional bilateral twinning	French cities (Nantes, Bordeaux, Montargis, Saint-Denis), Europeans' cities (Berlin-Mitte, Udine, Vasanello), Extra european's cities (Shenyang, Brasilia, Florianópolis, Caxias)	Urban governance, culture, urban planning, mobility	Delegation exchanges, technical missions, cultural and institutional exchanges, donations and equipment.
Operational bilateral decentralised cooperation	Nantes–Dschang, Bordeaux–Douala, Berlin-Mitte–Douala, Vasanello–Dschang	Water, sanitation, waste, energy, institutional strengthening	Multi-year programmes, structuring projects, continuous technical support
South–South decentralised cooperation	Yaoundé–Marrakech, Bangangté–Laâyoune, Bafoussam–Brazilian cities	Cultural and socio-cultural heritage, local economy	Heritage inventories, institutional exchanges, university cooperation
Domestic inter-municipal cooperation	Douala–Édéa, Yaoundé IV–communes of Lekoundje, Dschang–several Cameroonian communes	Local economic development, environment, urban management	Pooling of resources, experience sharing, joint projects
Multi-party decentralised cooperation	Bangangté–Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf, Dschang–Nantes (with external support)	Water, culture, local governance	Tripartite agreements, projects combining expertise and financing
Informal cooperation	Bangangté–Laâyoune, certain European twinning arrangements	Donations	/

The table highlights heterogeneous decentralised cooperation with several levels of effectiveness. Institutional twinning arrangements are the dominant modality, but their impact varies, ranging from essentially symbolic relationships to genuinely operational cooperation when embedded in structured multi-year programmes. The most developed experiences mainly concern North–South bilateral partnerships, particularly with European local governments, which concentrate the most visible actions in the fields of water, sanitation, energy and institutional strengthening. By contrast, South–South and inter-municipal cooperation, although growing, remain weakly institutionalised and struggle to produce lasting effects. Overall, this reveals international action that remains fragmented and insufficiently strategic, but which generates learning and structuring dynamics that could ultimately strengthen the contribution of decentralised cooperation to local development.

The emergence of city diplomacy among structured metropolitan areas

City diplomacy, an advanced form of AICT in which the city acts as an autonomous international actor, is visible in only a few major local governments: Douala, Yaoundé, Bafoussam, Dschang and Bangangté. This category is distinguished by:

- The mobilisation of transnational city networks (AIMF, METROPOLIS, UCLG-A, OIDP, etc.);
- The existence of multilateral cooperation agreements;
- Participation in international conferences;
- The capacity to attract competitive funding.

These cities position themselves as visible actors on the African international stage, incorporating global issues such as climate resilience, participatory governance, sustainable mobility and green cities. This municipal diplomacy, still uncommon in Central Africa, demonstrates the growing professionalisation of local elites and a willingness to embed Cameroonian cities in global development dynamics. The following table lists the cities involved in international networks of local and regional governments.

Table 10. City diplomacy through participation in international networks of cities and local governments (source: field data)¹⁰

TYPE OF INTERNATIONAL CITY NETWORK	NETWORKS CONCERNED (EXAMPLES)	PARTICIPATING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS	FORM OF PARTICIPATION	MAIN DIPLOMATIC FUNCTIONS
Francophone local government networks	AIMF	City of Yaoundé, City of Douala, City of Bafoussam, Commune of Dschang, Commune of Bangangté	Formal membership, participation in forums and meetings	International representation, advocacy, experience sharing
Global metropolitan networks	METROPOLIS	City of Yaoundé, City of Douala, City of Bafoussam	Institutional membership	Metropolitan positioning, international visibility
African regional and city networks	UCLG-Africa, COMSSA	City of Yaoundé, City of Bafoussam	Member / signatory	Regional diplomacy, local governance, climate
International thematic networks	Milan Pact, OIDP, International Association of Cities and Ports	City of Douala, City of Bafoussam	Signatory city / member	Sectoral diplomacy (food, participatory democracy, port cities)
National networks with international reach	AMVC, CVUC	City of Yaoundé, City of Bafoussam, City of Douala	Active participation	City coordination, collective representation

The table shows that the involvement of Cameroonian cities in city networks is highly uneven. Some local governments, thanks to better-structured cooperation services and qualified human resources, actively participate in several networks, enabling them to benefit from technical exchanges and partnership opportunities. Other

cities, which are less organised or less well resourced, remain marginal within these networks, limiting their visibility and ability to benefit from decentralised cooperation. Participation in these networks is an important lever for institutional strengthening and local development, but its effectiveness depends heavily on internal commitment and continuity of action.

Co-development as an alternative modality in certain cities

In cities such as Bangangté and CAY 7, co-development appears as a response to insufficient local capacities. It takes the form of diaspora initiatives, whose associations have become essential partners in providing basic services (drinking water, health and educational equipment). Although effective in the short term, this model suffers from limited formalisation and strategic planning. It remains exposed to fluctuations in contributions and to the absence of integration into the city's master plans. The following table lists the co-development activities identified in the international practices of the cities studied:

Table 11. Co-development activities identified in the international practices of the cities studied (source: field data)¹¹

LOCAL GOVERNMENT	CO-DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES (DIASPORA)	MOBILISED DIASPORA ACTORS	RELEVANT AREAS	OVERALL CONTRIBUTION TO LOCAL DEVELOPMENT
Commune of Bangangté	Rehabilitation and extension of drinking-water supply systems (Bangoua), MODEAB project, community water projects, cultural exchanges and rehabilitation of water points	Les Enfants du Ndé Association (France), Bantoum Family USA, Cameroonian diaspora in Spain, local diaspora networks	Water, sanitation, culture, infrastructure	Sustainable improvement of basic services, skills transfer, strong local ownership
City of Bafoussam	Diaspora mobilisation forum ("territorial call"), cultural cooperation with Dortmund, project to establish a diaspora desk	Bafoussam diaspora (Europe, Americas), Cameroonian diaspora in Germany	Economic development, culture, youth, governance	Progressive structuring of diaspora investment and expertise
CAD 3 (Douala 3 Arrondissement Commune)	Incubation and empowerment of young women in the health sector	OFAD – Organisation of African Women of the Diaspora	Health, women's entrepreneurs hip	Social inclusion and strengthening of local capacities
CAY 7	Medical campaigns, donations of medical equipment and occasional social support	Health professionals and external actors that may be regarded as an unstructured diaspora	Health, social affairs, energy	Occasional technical contribution, weak institutionalisation of co-development

The table highlights unevenly distributed co-development activities among the local governments studied. Cities in the West Region, particularly Bangangté and Bafoussam, appear to be the territories where co-development is most developed and structured, owing to active mobilisation of the diaspora through associations or individually, particularly in water, infrastructure and economic development. In the other regions, particularly the Centre and Littoral, some activities were identified in CAD 3 and CAY 7, where co-development actions remain occasional and are often limited to social or health interventions. Overall, this geographical concentration of co-development in the West Region suggests the existence of specific territorial factors, such as the density

of diaspora networks, community anchoring and local leadership, that favour the emergence of more developed co-development practices.

Inter-municipal cooperation and local partnerships: networking territories at the domestic level

Inter-municipal cooperation and local partnerships reflect a search for pragmatic, less costly solutions adapted to the local context. Analysis of the verbatim statements reveals a growing preference among local actors for inter-municipal cooperation, perceived as a form of cooperation better suited to territorial realities. Decentralised cooperation is often described as costly and difficult for communes to mobilise, as illustrated by this testimony: “With regard to decentralised cooperation, it requires substantial resources (...) it is burdensome for a commune like ours” (CAY 2). This financial constraint encourages local governments to turn towards forms of proximity-based cooperation founded on pooling resources and sharing experiences among territories facing similar problems. The following table provides a distribution of the observed inter-municipal cooperation and partnership activities.

Table 12. Distribution of inter-municipal cooperation and partnership activities with local stakeholders (source: field data)¹²

LOCAL GOVERNMENT	LOCAL / INTER-MUNICIPAL PARTNERSHIPS	RELEVANT AREAS	MAIN PURPOSE AND EFFECTS
CAY 7	Cooperation with the Commune of Mbankomo	Infrastructure, social services	Search for sustainable local solutions and territorial mutual assistance
City of Douala	Inter-municipal cooperation with Edéa; partnership with the Port Authority of Douala	Cattle value chain, urban logistics	Coordinated management of urban and economic issues
CAD 5	Territorial twinning with Tiko, Dibombari and Buea; inter-municipal pact	Water, sanitation, infrastructure	Pooling of resources and territorial coordination
CAY 4	Cooperation with Mindi (Lekoundjé); exchanges with the CUD of Douala	Agriculture, fisheries, sanitation, waste	Structuring of local economic channels and transfer of good practices
Commune of Bangangté	Partnership with the Bangoua traditional chieftaincy	Water, culture	Community anchoring and social legitimisation of projects
Commune of Dschang	National inter-municipal cooperation (Douala, Batcham, Pitoa, etc.)	Water, waste, energy, governance	Experience sharing and territorial assessments
CAD 3	Partnerships with local NGOs, associations and businesses	Waste, education, health	Co-production of local public policies
CAB 1 (Bafoussam 1)	Partnerships with AFROLEADERSHIP, ADISI Cameroon, Water-Energy Alliance	Governance, water, institutional capacities	Modernisation of local public action

Reading this table shows that local partnerships and inter-municipal cooperation constitute a pragmatic and operational modality of local international action, primarily oriented towards solving concrete territorial problems. The activities identified concern key sectors such as water and sanitation, waste management, agriculture, governance and infrastructure. This reflects the gradual emergence of an approach based on pooling resources and sharing experiences among local governments and local stakeholders. Major cities, such as Douala and Dschang, act as hubs for disseminating good practices, while arrondissement and rural communes favour

proximity-based cooperation adapted to their constraints. However, these initiatives remain weakly institutionalised and poorly connected to an overarching strategic vision, limiting their visibility and capacity to produce long-term structuring effects. Overall, inter-municipal cooperation appears to be an underused but high-potential lever capable of strengthening the effectiveness of AICT.

In sum, the typological analysis reveals a diversified International Action of Local and Regional Governments (AICT) in the Cameroonian local context. Institutionalised decentralised cooperation and multilateral partnerships represent the most structured forms of AICT. They rely on stabilised legal and financial frameworks, multi-year planning and strong involvement of donors and international networks, reflecting the growing capacities of local governments able to position themselves as full-fledged actors in international dynamics. Conversely, informal cooperation and co-development with the diaspora and NGOs are characterised by flexibility and the ability to respond rapidly to local needs, but they suffer from weak institutional anchoring and dependence on individual actors, which limits their sustainability. Local and inter-municipal partnerships occupy an intermediate position, illustrating a pragmatic logic of pooling resources and solving concrete territorial problems.

Diversified Actors, But Unevenly Mobilised Across Cities

The effectiveness of the International Action of Local and Regional Governments (AICT) does not depend solely on institutional arrangements or the forms of cooperation mobilised; it also depends on cities' capacity to activate and coordinate a range of actors whose resources, expertise and intervention logics differ considerably. Yet analysis of practices in Cameroonian cities reveals highly heterogeneous mobilisation of these actors—international donors, diasporas, NGOs and city networks—depending on the level of administrative structuring, the quality of local governance and the maturity of cooperation practices. Some better-resourced and more professional local governments are able to attract and stabilise high-level partners, while others remain dependent on more informal or externally driven dynamics and struggle to integrate these collaborations into a sustainable strategy.

The central role of international donors in structured cities

Major cities extensively mobilise international actors such as AFD, the World Bank, AfDB, FAO, the European Union and UN-Habitat. These donors provide financing, expertise and support, but their involvement is strongly conditioned by the level of internal governance and the quality of the technical proposals submitted.

A strategic and often underestimated diaspora

The diaspora plays a crucial role in fragile and intermediate communes such as CAY 7, Bangangté and Bafoussam. The diaspora finances school infrastructure, social centres, health projects and drinking-water programmes. This dynamic is nevertheless constrained by the absence of a municipal strategy for integrating diaspora actors into a long-term vision.

NGOs and associations: operational actors in local development

National and international NGOs often ensure the day-to-day implementation of projects. They are particularly active in arrondissement communes, notably CAD 3 (GIZ, Caritas, UN-Habitat), Bangangté (APADER NGO), CAY 6, and others. They compensate for institutional shortcomings in cities.

City networks: spaces for learning and advocacy

Cameroonian cities are represented in several city networks at both regional and global levels, notably AIMF, METROPOLIS, UCLG-A, OIDP, COMSSA and the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. These networks enable the most mature cities to gain international visibility, share experiences and access high-level technical expertise. The summary table below shows that AICT relies on a plurality of actors with differentiated roles, mobilised unevenly according to the level of structuring of local governments. International donors dominate action in major cities, where they provide financing and expertise, while the diaspora plays a decisive role in more fragile

communes, mainly through financing social infrastructure. NGOs ensure the operationalisation of projects and often compensate for local institutional limitations. International city networks primarily constitute spaces for learning and visibility, benefiting mainly the most mature local governments. The table below provides a synthesis of the actors mobilised in implementing international action.

Table 13. Actors in the International Action of Local and Regional Governments (AICT) and modes of mobilisation (source: field data)¹³

ACTOR CATEGORIES	IDENTIFIED ACTORS	LOCAL GOVERNMENTS PRIMARILY CONCERNED	ROLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO AICT	MODES AND LIMITATIONS OF MOBILISATION
International donors	AFD, World Bank, AfDB, European Union, FAO, UN-Habitat	Douala (CUD), Yaoundé (CU), Dschang, Bafoussam (CU)	Financing of structuring projects, technical expertise, institutional support	Mobilisation conditioned by the quality of local governance and technical proposals
Diaspora	Cameroonian diaspora (Europe, Americas), diaspora associations	CAY 7, Bangangté, Bafoussam	Financing of social infrastructure (water, health, education), intermediary role	Strong personalisation of actions, weak strategic integration at the municipal level
International NGOs	GIZ, Caritas, WEST AID, APADER NGO	CAD 3, Bangangté, Dschang, CAY 6	Operational implementation of projects, sectoral expertise	Partial substitution for municipal capacities, dependence on external funding
National NGOs and associations	AFROLEADERSH IP, ADISI Cameroon, Académie du Bien-Être	CAB 1, CAY 3, CAY 5	Strengthening local capacities, governance, youth and inclusion	Interventions often occasional and project-dependent
UN agencies and organisations	FAO, UN-Habitat, WHO, UN Women	Dschang, CAD 3, Douala, Yaoundé	Technical support, sectoral projects (green city, health, urban planning)	Targeted and time-limited interventions
International city networks	AIMF, METROPOLIS, UCLG-A, OIDP, COMSSA, Milan Pact	Yaoundé, Douala, Bafoussam, Dschang	Learning, advocacy, international visibility, exchange of good practices	Benefits concentrated in the most institutionalised cities
Foreign partner local and regional governments	Nantes, Bordeaux, Berlin-Mitte, Vasanello, Marrakech, Brazilian cities	Dschang, Douala, Yaoundé, Bafoussam, Bangangté	Decentralised cooperation, transfer of expertise, joint projects	Asymmetry of relations, technical dependence
Local and traditional actors	Traditional chieftaincies, local elites, municipal technical services	Bangangté, arrondissement communes	Local facilitation, social legitimisation of projects	Weak formalisation, dependence on individuals

In sum, AICT in the cities studied remains unbalanced, dependent on external actors and insufficiently coordinated within a long-term local strategy.

DISCUSSION

Recent scholarship on the international action of local authorities in Africa and Cameroon highlights three major developments. First, studies such as Mindja (2021) and Iguigui (2023) emphasise the diversification of decentralised cooperation towards South–South cooperation, city diplomacy and multilateral networks. Second, Simo (2021) and Tchenkeu and Raynaud (2021) underline the persistent legal, institutional and financial

constraints limiting the international autonomy of Cameroonian local authorities. Third, more recent analyses, including Kihlgren Grandi (2024) and Mvondo (2026), point to the growing strategic role of African cities in international affairs and to the progressive multipolarisation of subnational international action.

However, these contributions leave an important analytical gap. Existing studies tend either to examine the evolution and diversification of city diplomacy or to focus on the legal and institutional obstacles affecting decentralised cooperation. In the Cameroonian case, the literature therefore provides limited explanation of how the international action of cities is articulated with the State's foreign policy and how this relationship conditions its developmental effects. The existing analyses also tend to portray the constraints facing local authorities as obstacles to autonomy, without sufficiently examining the changing configuration of relations between the State and cities.

This study contributes to filling this gap by interpreting the relationship between the State and cities through the lens of complex interdependence, while adapting the concept to the domestic relationship between foreign policy and subnational international action. It identifies two configurations: implicit interdependence, in which cities possess formally recognised international competences but remain dependent on State-controlled political, institutional, diplomatic and financial resources, and explicit interdependence, in which coordination, institutional recognition, local initiative and resource mobilisation become more structured.

Empirically, the study shows that the predominance of implicit interdependence helps explain the limited institutionalisation and uneven developmental impact of AICT in Cameroonian cities. At the same time, evidence from Yaoundé, Douala, Bafoussam, Dschang and Bangangté reveals an emerging form of explicit interdependence associated with the diversification of international action and the involvement of new actors, particularly international organisations, civil society and the diaspora.

The main scientific contribution of the study therefore lies not simply in confirming that AICT can support local development, but in explaining why its effects vary according to the quality and configuration of State–city interdependence. By linking AICT, foreign policy and local development within a single analytical framework, the study extends the literature on city diplomacy and subnational international action beyond a predominantly descriptive or institutional approach. It consequently provides an analytical basis for understanding the transition from a predominantly centralised model towards a more coordinated form of multi-level governance of foreign policy.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the international action of Cameroonian local and regional governments undertaken in this study has shown that the contribution of AICT to local development cannot be understood independently of the evolution of relations between local governments and the State in the field of foreign policy. The empirical study conducted in Yaoundé, Douala, Bafoussam, Bangangté and Dschang shows that the internationalisation of territories results neither from complete local autonomy nor from exclusive control by the central State, but from a system of interdependent relations whose forms are gradually evolving. The findings first highlight the existence of implicit interdependence, which has historically structured the development of AICT in Cameroon. This configuration is characterised by the gradual recognition of local international action without sufficient institutional, financial and strategic support to ensure its effective deployment. The disparities observed in the structuring of cooperation services, the qualification of human resources, budgetary autonomy and the absence of strategic planning for AICT thus reflect less an absence of local willingness than an interaction framework between local governments and national mechanisms supporting international action that remains incomplete.

However, the study also reveals the gradual emergence of a second dynamic marked by more explicit interdependence. This is manifested in the diversification of local governments' forms of international intervention, their growing integration into transnational city networks, the gradual professionalisation of cooperation arrangements, and an increased capacity to mobilise external resources in support of territorial priorities. Without challenging the strategic role of the State in conducting foreign policy, this evolution reflects

growing recognition of the territory as a legitimate space for international projection and the implementation of development policies. The comparative analysis of the cities studied nevertheless shows that this transition remains uneven and produces differentiated trajectories. Local governments with stronger institutional resources and more developed organisational capacities appear better able to convert their international openness into tangible local development outcomes, while those that remain weakly structured continue to depend on external opportunities and assistance-based logics.

In light of these findings, the hypothesis that the contribution of AICT to local development results from the evolution of interdependence with the State appears broadly confirmed. Indeed, the stronger the mechanisms of coordination, support and mutual recognition between governance levels, the more local governments develop their capacity to transform international action into a sustainable lever for territorial development. However, the effectiveness of AICT and its impact on local development do not depend exclusively on State involvement but also on structural factors specific to the cities themselves. We found that cities with qualified staff in international relations had more dynamic AICT. The same applies to cities where AICT receives recognition and support from the municipal executive. In addition, cities that deploy operational and financial resources achieve better results in international action. However, the sustainability of cooperation activities depends on the involvement of territorial stakeholders. The general finding is that cities lack a strategic vision of their international involvement, hence the absence of international action strategies in all the cities studied. Thus, other factors influence the structuring of AICT and its impact beyond State involvement, with the State acting as guarantor of foreign policy: mayoral leadership, the level of professionalisation, the level of institutional maturity, the availability of operational and financial resources, and so forth.

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