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**ANALYSIS OF THE INTERNATIONALIZATION
PROCESS OF CUENCA THROUGH THE
DIRECTORATE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND COOPERATION OF THE MUNICIPAL
DECENTRALIZED AUTONOMOUS GOVERNMENT**

**Thesis project prior to obtaining the Bachelor of
Arts Degree in International Studies**

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DEDICATION

To my parents, who have supported me throughout
my life with all their love.

To my boyfriend, who always supports me in my
decisions.

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ABSTRACT

Following global trends, an increasing number of cities seek to implement internationalization processes. In this context, the local government of Cuenca, Ecuador, developed its internationalization process in an articulated manner. This work analyzed the internationalization process of Cuenca through the Directorate of International Relations and Cooperation of the Municipal Decentralized Autonomous Government, focusing on evaluating the Internationalization Strategy 2021-2025. This work used a qualitative approach, examining the construction of this strategy and highlighting key actions and achievements. Additionally, a comparative analysis of the internationalization of Cuenca and Medellin was conducted, identifying significant similarities and differences. The findings revealed that although Cuenca achieved important advances in international cooperation, there are areas for improvement to further its development in the field of international relations and cooperation.

Keywords: local government, international cooperation, internationalization, paradiplomacy, twin cities.

RESUMEN

En la actualidad un mayor número de ciudades, siguiendo las tendencias globales, buscan implementar un proceso de internacionalización. Es así como el gobierno local de Cuenca, Ecuador desarrolló este proceso de manera articulada. Este trabajo analizó el proceso de internacionalización de Cuenca a través de la Dirección de Relaciones Internacionales y Cooperación de Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado del Cantón, evaluando también la Estrategia de Internacionalización 2021-2025. Se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo para examinar la construcción de dicha estrategia, destacando las acciones y logros alcanzados. Además, se realizó un análisis comparativo entre la internacionalización de Cuenca y Medellín, identificando similitudes y diferencias significativas. Los hallazgos revelaron que, aunque Cuenca logró avances importantes en la cooperación internacional, existen áreas de mejora para continuar desarrollándose en el ámbito de las relaciones internacionales y la cooperación.

Palabras clave: cooperación internacional, gobierno local, hermanamiento, internacionalización, paradiplomacia.

Analysis of the Internationalization Process of Cuenca through the Directorate of International Relations and Cooperation of the Municipal Decentralized Autonomous Government

1. Introduction

The city of Cuenca began its internationalization process with the creation of a space for opening dialogue through the reception of diplomatic authorities in 1999. This initiated a series of actions that achieved greater interrelation between the local government and representatives of embassies and consulates. The qualitative analysis of this research is of high importance as it will allow for a better understanding of the management and achievements obtained through the evaluation of the construction of the existing Internationalization Strategy 2021-2025 of the city and its impact, with the purpose of publicizing the actions that have been developed for the city's international growth. Additionally, it seeks to establish other possible actions that can be carried out so that Cuenca can continue developing in international relations and cooperation areas.

This study aims to understand Cuenca's need to insert itself in the international arena and the implications this has for its local development. In an increasingly globalized world, cities compete to develop at a national level and from an international perspective. The ability to establish solid relationships with other international actors has become a crucial point. Internationalization brings many advantages to cooperation in various areas such as the economy, education, health, environment, and infrastructure, allowing cities to grow in different areas of knowledge and development.

This work seeks to document and evaluate the actions carried out so far and provide information that guides future initiatives. Comparing the cases of Medellín and Cuenca offers a valuable perspective on how different internationalization strategies can result in successful experiences despite various challenges. By analyzing these experiences, the study aims to identify good practices and areas for improvement that can be applied to Cuenca.

Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of multi-actor collaboration involving civil society, the private sector, academia, and local government in the construction of an international strategy that seeks to be inclusive and effective. This study is crucial to understanding the internationalization process of Cuenca from a chronological perspective and its relevance in the current global context. It also provides a comprehensive view of how cities can benefit from a well-structured internationalization strategy, like the comparative cases of Cuenca and Medellín, and how these actions can positively impact their long-term development.

1.1 Objectives

1.1.1 General Objective

Analyze the Internationalization process of the city of Cuenca through the Department of International Relations and Cooperation of the Municipal Decentralized Autonomous Government (*GAD*).

1.1.2 Specific Objectives

1. Learn about the internationalization process of the local government and the local government and the *GAD*'s Internationalization Strategy 2021-2025 of the city of Cuenca.
2. Evaluate the construction of the *GAD*'s Internationalization Strategy 2021-2025.
3. Conduct a comparative analysis of the internationalization of Cuenca – Ecuador and Medellín – Colombia cities.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The theory of liberalism in international relations —developed by Immanuel Kant (Kant I., 1991) and John Locke—as major contributors— whose most important precept is to avoid war (Scotton, 2020), has fostered spaces of dialogue among nations. The theory of liberalism contends —in contrast to realism— that a better alternative to conflict exists and that it can be avoided through peaceful mediation, such as dialogue and negotiations. At the same time, it considers rationality within the framework of human rights, the use of democracy, and the importance of establishing limits on power (Burchill et al., 2005, p. 55).

The creation of the United Nations is, to date, the greatest embodiment of liberal theory. The work of the UN, together with its organs, seeks to enable nations to deliberate on common problems to create solutions that can benefit humanity (United Nations, n.d.). Through the United Nations Charter, governments are invited to take action to prevent wars by promoting tolerance to maintain international security and peace while also promoting the use of "an international mechanism to promote the economic and social progress of all peoples," thus calling for respect for international law (United Nations, 1945).

The study of International Relations has grown since the Second World War, focusing on the dynamics of state relations. Nowadays, most cities and communities have sought to increase their international interaction through embassies and other agencies from different countries (Fenglian & Narot, 2017, p. 141). The above considers the principles of low politics, which refer to political activities linked to the daily administration and management of the economy, education, health, environment, infrastructure, and cooperation in areas that exclude the military aspect (Youde, 2016, p. 158).

These areas, considered less strategic in terms of geopolitical rivalry and competition, are fundamental for the development and well-being of societies (Scotton, 2023). The concept of low politics also implies a search for practical solutions to specific problems faced by a community, promoting collaboration, decision-making, and cooperation based on policy analysis and evidence.

With increased global relations and an ever-more-interconnected world, low politics has become more critical in addressing transnational challenges and promoting collective welfare at the local, regional, and global levels. Thus, low politics seeks to address political challenges with a more practical approach that prioritizes problem-solving through international interaction and collaboration.

With this premise, in 2003, a series of High-Level Forums led by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) began, aiming for greater harmonization in cooperation between countries and development outcomes. Among these forums, the Paris Forum (OECD, 2005) stands out, where OECD member countries—considered developing and developed—international organizations, and civil society organizations meet in the second High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness to increase and emphasize the importance of mutual aid effectiveness, seeking harmonization and alignment of results with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNGA, 2000) in order to expedite them through cooperation.

Figure 1

Millennium Development Goals



Note. From MDGs. CEPAL, 2000.

Subsequently, in the city of Accra, Ghana, the third High-Level Forum was held to deepen and strengthen the implementation of the Paris Declaration through a concrete evaluation of what needed to be improved. This cooperation forum generated more significant interaction between States and later between local governments through embassies, NGOs, and other governmental and intergovernmental institutions, which allowed for a more extensive network of globalization in international relations to be inserted not only of the countries - as was the custom before - but also of their cities, communities, and civil society organizations (OECD, 2008).

International cooperation emerged as a response to the multiple deficiencies present in many regions of the world, in contrast to the situation of developed or industrialized countries. Articles 1, 13, and 55 of the Charter of the United Nations set forth international cooperation as a mechanism for solving international problems in the social, economic, educational, health, and other areas, and for promoting conditions of

well-being and stability, and fostering equal rights; through this, it seeks to generate conditions for progress in social and economic development (United Nations, 1945).

Based on this, the current cooperation system comprises various international bodies, United Nations agencies, and national agencies. These actors play a vital role in implementing strategies and programs to address inequalities and promote development worldwide (Gutiérrez Goiria et al., 2022, p. 9), currently based on the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development Goals. These goals -whose predecessors are the MDGs- are integrated to take action in areas that have been determined as the most critical; thus, the SDGs seek that countries that are lagging in progress -compared to others- can develop and balance their economic, environmental, and social sustainability (UNDP, 2015).

Figure 2
SDGs Wedding cake



Note: From Rockström, 2016.

According to Johan Rockström, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals focus on three major interdependent areas: the economy, society, and biosphere. This analogy of the wedding cake figure highlights elements such as quality education, gender equality, and poverty eradication, which are fundamental to preserving a sustainable development goal (SDG). It illustrates how each complements and becomes interdependent.

This structure shows the three layers in which the SDGs are divided and interconnected to achieve the sustainable development of today's society. Without a well-cared-for planet, there cannot be prosperous societies with a stable economy (Rockström, 2016). The bottom layer shows goals related to the environment, highlighting clean water and climate action; without a sustainable planet, people's lives and economic prosperity are at risk.

The middle layer refers to the goals of a prosperous society. The top layer symbolizes the economy and includes essential goals such as sustainable economic growth; without this, there cannot be a more robust economy. Hence, their interconnection is essential, as these areas' imbalance could hinder the SDGs' proper development (Cisar, 2023).

According to Bustos and García (2021, p. 7-8), international cooperation is an action in which state or non-state actors work or collaborate to achieve a common goal. Among the highlighted actions on cooperation

are promoted: solidarity among peoples, respect and protection of human rights, improvement of conditions to guarantee human dignity, common goals, and strategies. The international community has reformed the cooperation system to improve its effectiveness (Ocampo, 2015, p. 161).

In the past, international cooperation followed a traditional north-south approach involving a relationship between developed and developing countries. However, an increasingly relevant approach, known as technical cooperation among developing countries (TCDC) or South-South cooperation, has emerged. In this type of cooperation, collaboration is established between peers who share similar objectives and experiences, and there is a transfer of resources that strengthens the experience and knowledge of both involved actors.

This approach allows for a more equitable and mutually beneficial exchange, where parts of developing countries can leverage and learn from the best practices and solutions applied by other parts in similar situations (Bustos & García, 2021, p. 12). Technical cooperation among developing countries has become increasingly important in the current scenario of international cooperation; this has set a precedent for decentralized international cooperation to acquire growing relevance in the current scenario of international cooperation.

This development has favored the growth of a global vision in local governments that was not considered before because it was seen as merely an act of the States. With globalization, there was an increase in the interdependence of actors, these being not only from the central government but also from cities belonging to other provinces, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, private companies, local governments from other countries, and academia, among others. This, in turn, led to more spaces for international cooperation (Abad, 2019, p.58), such as South-South cooperation.

This interaction created the concept of "complex interdependence," which refers to the different ways of linking non-state actors, not just the different types of organizations (Martínez, 2014, p. 1). The effectiveness of a policy aimed at addressing interdependence depends on permanent negotiations (Barbé, 1989, p. 56). Keohane and Nye expounded on this concept of complex interdependence in their book *Power and Interdependence*, where they explain that international relations occur not only from State to State but also between various transnational and transgovernmental entities in both public and private spheres (Keohane & Nye, 2011, pp. 1-33).

With this background, the influence of the concept of paradiplomacy (Zeraoui, Z. 2013) can be appreciated in the complex interdependence between non-state institutions.

Paradiplomacy refers to the practice of international relations between subnational entities whose participation occurs outside the relationship between countries and where these intervene with each other for political or economic reasons that have increased with regional integration mechanisms (Farfás, 2014, p. 160).

Paradiplomacy explains the difference between classic diplomatic relations between States and those now carried out by non-state actors (Keating & Aldecoa, 1999, p. 9). A protocolary instrument is created and serves as operational support in this subnational relationship (Guillén & Martínez, 2013). This mode of relationship allowed an increase in the dynamics between entities, thus generating a boom in decentralized international cooperation.

2. State of the Art and Literature Review

Living in a globalized world, "Think globally, act locally" (Rochester & Pearson, 2000, p. 19) is more consistently considered. Due to this trend, more local governments in Ecuador and around the world are increasingly considering adding an international vision to their policies by creating an entity responsible for managing cooperation and internationalization efforts. In the Republic of Ecuador, the body responsible for the management and coordination of international policy—as of this date—is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility (MREMH, n.d.).

However, in the case of cooperation processes, Ecuador has created initiatives for the country to adopt a regulatory framework in which sub-state actors have also been included (Bustos & García, 2021, p. 5). The country has a regulation in force for the management of international cooperation in which Decentralized Autonomous Governments (GAD) are empowered to carry out their own processes in this area (CONGOPE, 2022).

First, the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador establishes in the fourth chapter of the regime of competencies—specifically in article 264—the exclusive competencies of municipal governments, and it states in section 14 of this article that they have the power to "Manage international cooperation for the fulfillment of their competencies" (Constitutional Court, 2008). Second, likewise, these exclusive competencies for the management of international cooperation of the autonomous decentralized municipal government are specified in the Code of Territorial Organization, article 55, subsection n (COOTAD, 2010); in addition to this, article 131 of the same code establishes that:

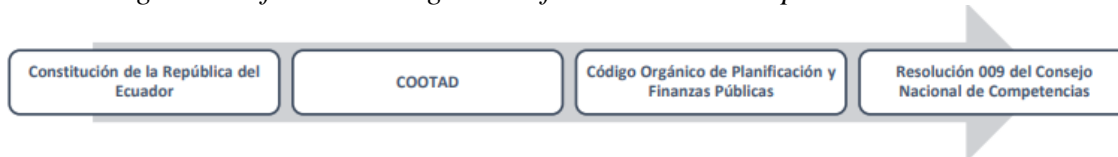
Decentralized autonomous governments may manage the obtaining of resources from international cooperation and technical assistance to fulfill their own competencies within the framework of national objectives, their development plans, and the principles of equity, solidarity, interculturality, subsidiarity, opportunity, and relevance (p. 55).

Third, paragraph 2 of the Organic Code of Planning and Public Finance, articles 68 and 69, on the planning of non-reimbursable international cooperation, indicates that this type of cooperation exercised by the decentralized autonomous governments will be based on the development and territorial planning plans and national policies and that the approval of non-reimbursable international cooperation projects (CINR).

The authorities of each decentralized autonomous government may carry out these activities as long as they are within the national policy guidelines. Finally, Resolution No. 0009-CNC-2011 of the National Council of Competencies allowed the GADs to implement the competence of international cooperation management to obtain technical assistance and non-reimbursable resources (SENPLADES, 2011). All this is framed within the principles of interculturality, solidarity, equity, relevance, opportunity, and subsidiarity (CNC, 2012).

Figure 3

Current regulations for the management of international cooperation in Ecuador



Note. CONGOPE analysis of the regulatory framework and public policies for international cooperation, 2022.

Decentralized international cooperation allows local public and private actors to develop their own interests without relying exclusively on central governmental entities that might not be aware of each entity's specific needs. Public decentralized cooperation involves activities managed by agencies at the local or sub-state level, such as parish, cantonal, or provincial governments (Bustos & García, 2021, p. 12).

This type of cooperation facilitates the active participation of various local actors in their development process, which allows for better adaptation to the realities and demands of each context. This specific approach promotes more efficient collaboration for achieving the objectives of each entity, extending to a multi-level, multi-actor, and comprehensive approach. The decentralization of governments has enabled intermediate cities like Cuenca to create a "vital nexus between the local and the global" (UCLG, 2016).

These cities, whose population ranges between 50 thousand and 1 million inhabitants, have a decisive role in creating "inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" urban settlements (as stated in SDG 11), and internationalization plays a key role in giving these cities greater global prominence. "Intermediary cities must increase their visibility by projecting themselves as centers of innovation, intermediation, service provision, heritage protection, and prosperity" (UCLG, 2016).

This has also been possible through the tool of paradiplomacy, which has promoted international cooperation, twinning, and membership in city networks that seek to strengthen cities' global role and increase their visibility through contributions on an international stage.

Because of this nexus between the local and the global, Cuenca has adopted a policy of internationalization that has grown over the years. The city of Cuenca, Ecuador, was not previously considered a reference for internationalization because it lacked a local government entity in charge of this dynamic. In addition, in

the private business sector, there was also a lack of a wide range of companies that had expanded abroad, so there was no large-scale international vision on this side.

In relation to an entity in charge of the city's international relations, it was not until 1999 when Cuenca - after being declared Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, n.d.) - was given greater notoriety and the need for the creation of the first International Relations and Protocol Unit for the reception of diplomats and authorities from abroad.)- was given greater notoriety, and the need was seen for the creation of the first International Relations and Protocol Unit for the reception of diplomats and authorities from abroad; then, in 2005, the International Relations Unit was created where international cooperation projects began to be developed with entities such as the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (AECID), the Junta de Andalucía, United Nations Programs, and Agencies, among others.

Subsequently, in 2009, the Directorate of External Relations (DRE) was created, which took better charge of the IC area and managed projects with the Diputación de Barcelona and ACI Medellín (Alcaldía Cuenca, 2017, p. 72). Finally, the Directorate of International Relations and Cooperation was created in 2016, which gradually increased the international dynamics (DRIC, 2020, 33). At the time of this chronology, the mayor's office on duty carried out different activities that allowed an approach towards international diplomacy. The expansion abroad of the private sector increased, and the number of NGOs and international organizations with a presence in the city also increased.

The creation of directorates or departments of international relations and international cooperation in the GADs of Ecuador has allowed the internationalization of cities and communities to grow and an increasing number of actors to join this trend that allows for closer cooperation ties with entities in other countries (Arjona, 2022). For Cuenca, co-creation processes have also been important, such as the "Cuenca Sustainable City / Action Plan" that was developed jointly between the Inter-American Development Bank and the GAD Municipal GAD of Cuenca through the Emerging and Sustainable Cities Initiative (ICES) (IDB, 2014, p. 7).

Although this plan was not specifically related to an internationalization process, this type of activity set precedents of work with international organizations that apply these methodologies in other cities in Latin America and the Caribbean. The ICES Action Plan for Cuenca carried out a multisectoral analysis to provide solutions to problems identified at the time as priorities for the city:

This will allow Cuenca to achieve its vision for the future and become a model city, nationally and internationally competitive, taking advantage of its productive and artisanal vocation, with the best quality of life in the country, modern, socially equitable, and growing in harmony with its heritage and the surrounding environment (p. 170).

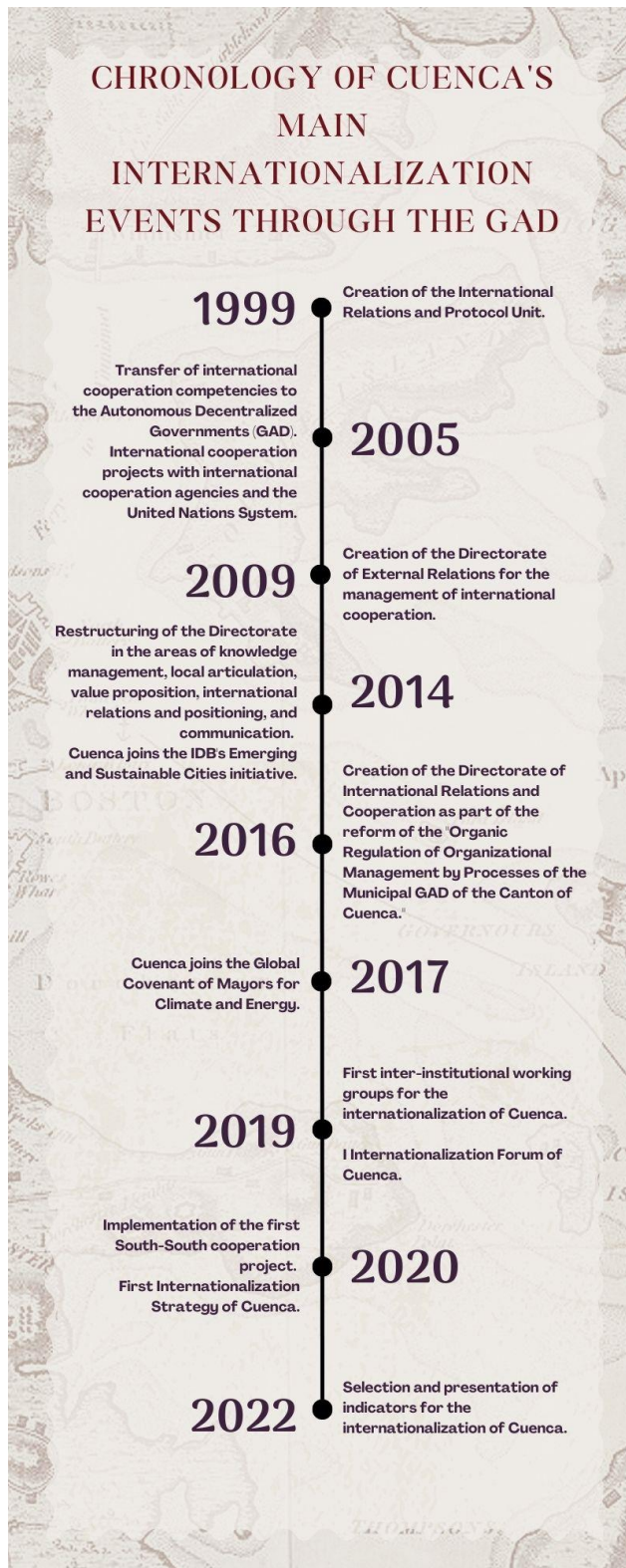
Another significant milestone occurred in November 2015, when Cuenca was declared an Intermediate City by the United Nations at a thematic conference held in the city itself, prior to Habitat III, which promotes networks of intermediate cities for sustainable territorial and urban development (Municipality of Cuenca, 2015). Other relevant projects that have provided free technical assistance include the Ecuadorian-German technical assistance program for Sustainable Intermediate Cities (CIS I and II), projects with the International Cooperation Agency and the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOICA and KOTRA), technical support from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and support from United Nations entities such as IOM, UN Women, UNDP, and UN-Habitat.

These events led to a closer approach of international organizations to the Municipality, and subsequently, several collaborations between these organizations and the entity were added. These approaches allowed the city to create the necessary local foundations to obtain solid bases and thus have a better internationalization process. Other actors, such as educational institutions, also joined this globalized vision through exchange programs and studies in other countries.

The president of Regional 6 of the Ecuadorian Association of Municipalities (AME), Raúl Delgado, indicated that currently, Cuenca has positioned itself as a great example for other municipalities in terms of using the management of decentralized international cooperation as a strategic tool for local development, as it has been able to find foreign investors to execute projects according to the local reality of the city (AME, 2015). These precedents have allowed this internationalization process to expand today.

Figure 4

Chronology of Cuenca's main internationalization events



Note. GAD Municipal del Cantón Cuenca, 2021.

After the creation of the Directorate of International Relations and Cooperation of the Municipal Government of Cuenca, the city has developed more structured, following global trends and adapting to

international action modalities such as city twinning, the management of specific cooperation projects, and exchanges of participation and experiences in networks of local governments, among others (DGRIC, 2021, 15).

Strengthening the structured internationalization process, the Government Autonomous Decentralized (GAD) of Canton Cuenca, with the assistance of the UNDP, is developing the city's first internationalization strategy aimed at identifying the main objectives, goals, and expected results of international action in order to improve the living conditions of its inhabitants. This strategy was built based on four axes to which the priority themes for the city's internationalization belong (See Figure 5), namely: "1) Cuenca as a city with a high quality of life, 2) Cuenca as a city leader in creativity and culture, 3) Cuenca as a city rich in nature and biodiversity, and 4) Cuenca as a hub of knowledge and talent." To achieve this, they developed 68 general indicators related to the four axes of the strategy and 131 indicators on governance and management that will allow for the generation of a diagnosis of the level of internationalization in various fields, thus being able to measure and evaluate this process.

Figure 5

Axes of the Internationalization Strategy of Cuenca 2021-2025



Note. Internationalization Strategy of Cuenca 2021-2025, GAD Cuenca, 2021.

This process considered the methodology of the Euro-Latin American Alliance for Cooperation among Cities (AL-LAS, 2007), which promotes multi-stakeholder dialogues to recognize the actors involved in the city's internationalization process, thus promoting a more articulated participation. The strategy took six basic principles: local action, global reach, inclusive internationalization, cantonal perspective, post-COVID-19 resilience, improved basic services, and planetary solidarity.

In addition, the strategy's vision, mission, and objective were defined, which sought to position Cuenca as a reference of high quality of life, cultural richness, and creativity, where it would also be a destination where people could work, study, invest, and visit. This was complemented by improving its international recognition through articulated collaboration between the government, private sector, academia, and civil society, which would join efforts to face the city's challenges and seek solutions to global problems.

Subsequently, the priority issues to be addressed in the four axes were defined. In the quality-of-life axis, Cuenca was defined as a prosperous, industrious, and opportunity city, a destination for retirees, a healthy and wellness destination, and a sports territory. The culture and creativity axis prioritized architectural heritage, the city of art and festivals, and the Andean gastronomic destination. The themes in the natural treasure axis were green city, water city, biodiversity, and climates. Finally, the talent pole axis chose The Andean reference to arts and crafts, the city of university students, and the regional headquarters of knowledge.

Partners and priority regions were also established at the international level:

Cities of similar scale; friendly cities; model or reference cities; networks of cities or associations of municipalities; international organizations and agencies of the United Nations System; private

institutions, foundations, or philanthropic organizations; and foreign governments active in international cooperation in the priority themes. And the regions of Latin America, Europe, North America, and Asia-Pacific (DRIC, 2021, p. 81).

For better visibility of the strategy's progress, it was divided into eight parts that explained its development. Part I discusses how the internationalization of local governments has increased in general. Part II examines the background of Cuenca's internationalization. Part III indicates a conscious effort to ensure that Cuenca's internationalization is recognized as a sustained priority and is not subject to political cycles.

This approach aims to establish a solid foundation for international action that can persist and adapt over time. Part IV specifies the strategy's fundamental principles and externalities of internationalization and how these elements align with the long-term goals for sustainable development and the city's post-COVID-19 recovery. Part V articulates the strategy's vision, mission, and core objectives, establishing a clear framework for future actions. Part VI describes the priority issues for the internationalization of Cuenca and how these are articulated with the city's characteristics and strengths.

Part VII indicates which priority partners and key regions were chosen for the city's internationalization, which is essential to understanding how it was proposed that Cuenca could establish and strengthen its international relations. Finally, Part VIII presents recommendations for internationalization to be effective and sustainable, using principles of leadership, legality, resources, institutionalism, participation, coherence, alignment, promotion, communication, and impact as essential parts of a comprehensive strategy.

3. Methods

The methodological approach of this study is qualitative, so the author will conduct data analysis with an interpretative focus. It begins with the presentation of the internationalization case of the Autonomous Decentralized Government of Cuenca, using the available literature corresponding to the actions of the Autonomous Decentralized Government and the literary review of the Internationalization Strategy of the city of Cuenca 2021-2025. A comparative analysis of the Cuenca case with the city of Medellín is applied, finally triangulating this information with semi-structured interviews at the discretion of the researcher with officials from the Directorate of International Relations and Cooperation of the GAD.

Figure 6

Triangulation of this empirical article



Note. This image shows the triangulation of the methods used for this work.

The methodology to be used in the analysis of the Cuenca case is a case study design that allows for a more detailed study of the internationalization of Cuenca in particular (Bryman, 2012, p. 66). As indicated in the book by Robson & McCartan (2016, pp. 80 and 155), the case has generally been selected, then the case study within its context has been conducted, and information has been collected for analysis.

More specifically, through the case study plan, first, an overview of the case is presented; then, information is collected chronologically with the available resources; afterward, the fulfillment of the research question is reviewed; and finally, the collected information is presented. For the comparative analysis, the transnational comparative study methodology (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 153) is used as it involves the study of two cases that can be contrasted using very similar methods (Bryman, 2012, p. 72). Additionally, Bryman's text mentions that, as an example of studying these cases, it is common to use this methodology for comparisons of situations between two nations.

Hantrais (1996) suggested that this type of research is used when groups or individuals aim to assess specific phenomena or issues in two or more countries with the explicit intention of comparing their manifestations in different sociocultural environments (customs, institutions, value systems, language, traditions, lifestyles, language, etc.). The interviews are formulated in a semi-structured manner—at the discretion of the researcher—to officials and former officials from different periods of the DRIC of the GAD in order to be able to analyze what happened during the operation of this office (Bryman, 2012, p. 470).

4. Results

4.1 Analysis of the Construction of the Internationalization Strategy of Cuenca 2021-2025

4.1.1 Background Information

The Internationalization Strategy of Cuenca originated as a proposal from the DRIC during the mayoralty of Pedro Palacios, under the general direction of Sofía Arce. This strategy aimed to internationalize Cuenca in a structured manner through various actors from the tourism, cultural, business, academic, and civil society sectors, among others. This process sought to use the Strategy to generate greater global opportunities and improve the city's competitiveness on an international stage, which would have been difficult without the legal framework of Ecuador that grants specific competencies to the GADs for managing international cooperation.

The UNDP also provided support, providing the GAD with consultancy services from the beginning of the Directorate (Meneguelli, 2024). Cuenca's internationalization has been seen as necessary to improve its public policies on this topic, achieving more concrete action and thus structured international positioning through international cooperation. Several cities have opted for greater participation in the global dynamics through local internationalization, allowing growth in their international scene.

This has also increased the local benefits of South-South international cooperation, enabling relationships with cities with similar perspectives and experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of international action and the exchange of knowledge and resources in times of crisis. The city has used this crisis as a catalyst to strengthen its international position and learn from other cities. The Strategy aims for Cuenca to play a leading role in solving global problems, reinforcing its image and international relevance.

4.1.2 Motivation

Cuenca has stood out for its potential on the global stage, initially as a host for international events and, subsequently, for the renown it achieved after being declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Although the internationalization of Cuenca has been a process spanning several years, the use of a strategy allows this process to be more specific and carried out more precisely. This has been reflected in the need for global integration of the city due to its background in various international arenas.

The modality of sub-state international relations has evolved due to globalization, and this has been strengthened through the ideological integration of other cities and entities through twinnings, city networks, and political alliances that have generated this ecumenical change. The lack of continuity in the city's international policies has been exacerbated by changes in local administration, thereby increasing the need for a stable and effective strategy.

Through the Strategy, the aim was to make a local and global contribution, where solutions can be sought for various challenges facing humanity while improving the quality of life in the city.

4.1.3 Actors Involved

The Strategy was developed with broad participation from various actors, which allowed it to have a greater margin of contribution from different perspectives. This multi-actor dynamic allowed the Strategy to cover various aspects relevant to the city's internationalization. Among the main facilitators were representatives from the cultural, academic, tourism, and sports sectors, city historians, and civil society.

Ana Isabel Maldonado (2023), a former International Relations technician at the DRIC, indicated that this strategy aimed to involve as many actors as possible to benefit the city. The Strategy allowed the DRIC to expand its working horizons to other actors, not just the Municipal Corporation, thus generating a greater interrelation of the city's internationalization work with other sectors.

The Strategy had 383 participants in total, including members from the government, the private sector, academia, civil society, arts and culture, and the media.

4.1.4 Structure and Procedure

In April 2020, together with UNDP, Cuenca began the development of its first formal internationalization strategy. The construction of the Strategy emphasized the need for collective action through the involvement of non-governmental actors, academia, and the private sector. This denotes its highly participative approach through the integration of various stakeholders. A participatory methodology was prioritized, employing various methods such as multi-stakeholder dialogues, interviews, and discussion tables to gather opinions and establish priorities that allowed an understanding of how the city's residents perceive their position in the world and how it could be strengthened (DRIC, 2021, pp. 40-45).

The development revolved around the definition of axes and sub-axes previously defined through the organization of working tables, exchanges, and focus groups to formulate ideas through debate. More concretely, the priority themes and their strategic axes were defined in four parts as follows (see Figure 5):

1. **High quality of life:** This priority theme was chosen because it allows Cuenca to promote itself as a destination with a high quality of life, leveraging its natural environment, infrastructure, and efficient health and education services. This axis also considers projects to protect water sources and promote a healthy and safe life for all inhabitants, not only in the city center but also in the periphery and rural areas.
2. **Leadership in creativity and culture:** Regarding this theme, Cuenca aims to strengthen its role as a cultural leader by promoting art, gastronomy, and architectural heritage. The Strategy includes making Cuenca a key destination for festivals and cultural events that foster local culture and attract visitors and international recognition.
3. **Richness in nature and biodiversity:** This theme focuses on promoting sustainability and ecotourism, taking advantage of natural parks and reserves such as Cajas National Park. It seeks to enhance Cuenca as a green and sustainable destination, integrating the conservation of the natural environment with tourism and environmental education.
4. **Hub of knowledge and talent:** In this last chosen theme, Cuenca sought to be positioned as a center of education and knowledge, strengthening its educational and research infrastructure to attract students, academics, and scientific and academic events. Through the Strategy, the city aims to be an Andean reference in arts, crafts, and scientific knowledge, linking its rich artisan tradition with innovations and global market demands.

4.1.5 Foundations and Goal Setting

The strategy is based on the principles of internationalization as a local action with global reach, inclusion, and coherence with the Global 2030 Agenda. The internationalization of Cuenca and the development of the strategy to enhance it occurred through a broad framework of action that sought to coordinate and integrate various international agendas of the city's actors to strengthen the impact and visibility of the city globally. Dialogues and consultations helped to define key themes, regions, and strategic allies for its internationalization. The recommendations emerging from these dialogues aimed to make international action a sustainable public policy.

The strategy's objectives focused on improving Cuenca's international positioning, making the city a key player in solving global problems while promoting sustainable local development. It also sought to establish Cuenca as an attractive destination for living, working, studying, investing, and visiting.

As part of the structure of the Strategy, six basic principles were also set that guide the Strategy, focusing on connecting the local with the global, including all sectors of the population, integrating all areas of the canton, improving resilience against COVID-19, strengthening basic services through international learning, and fostering global solidarity. Additionally, it considers potential positive and negative externalities that identify both the benefits and possible costs of the city's internationalization, which is crucial for balancing development and avoiding adverse effects such as gentrification, loss of identity, or acculturation.

The strategy's mission and vision were also defined to clarify more precisely what is sought from it. The mission emphasizes equitable and sustainable development for the benefit of both residents and visitors. The vision highlights the city's intention to improve its appeal and competitiveness internationally.

4.1.6 Obstacles

The main obstacles faced during the strategy's construction were the lack of institutional space for dialogue and the fact that few people attended the talks when the strategy was socialized (Arce, 2024). Despite being an inclusive and participatory process, managing and coordinating such a broad approach presents endless challenges, especially in the coercive part and continuity of changes in municipal administration.

Maldonado (2023) and Carrillo (2024) indicated in their interviews that the Directorate's lack of databases in previous periods made it difficult to deliver detailed information about the management carried out by the Directorate of External Relations and the current DRIC, as there was no consolidated information from past mayoralties.

4.1.7 SWOT Analysis of the Construction of the Strategy

Strengths:

- Allow the Strategy to work for the citizenry so that it can better serve the inhabitants and thus make a relevant analysis of their needs.
- According to Arce (2024), an important strength of the Strategy is that it was built participatively with various actors in addition to public surveys, which were relevant for articulating it in a more concrete way.
- Alignment of the Strategy's objectives with the global Agendas (Maldonado, 2023).

Weaknesses:

- Lack of linkage of the SDGs with the Strategy: Ana Isabel Maldonado and María Isabel Durán (2023) agreed that the Strategy needed to be more closely linked to the SDGs and international agendas.
- Although the multi-actor dynamic yielded various results on the perception of Cuenca's internationalization, these are presented as general and not specific to each group of interviews, dialogues, and focus groups.
- Arce (2024) mentioned that there was not good socialization of the Strategy by the DRIC to convince all those involved in the voting of the "Ordinance for the Regulation, Articulation, and Strengthening of International Action in the Canton of Cuenca", so it would have been important to have a person dedicated to building a network of more informed allies and groups to get the ordinance approved.

Opportunities:

- Have a clear basis of what is being done and what is planned.
- Presentation of more specific data when analyzing the results of the dialogues established with the different groups and participating actors.

Threats:

- Among the most notable threats, in February 2023, the city elected a new mayor for the 2023-2027 period, which led to changes in the political agenda of the new authorities who did not prioritize the Strategy. To prevent this from happening, the administration of Pedro Palacios sought to have an "Ordinance for the Regulation, Articulation, and Strengthening of International Action in the Canton of Cuenca," which was presented in a first debate on November 16, 2022, where the ordinance was discussed and some changes were recommended (Concejo Cantonal, 2022).

Following this, in a second debate on April 24, 2023, it did not receive the necessary votes from the Cantonal Council for approval (Concejo Cantonal, 2023). Having an ordinance would have allowed the Strategy to transcend the political limitations of the interests of each party. Therefore, it is recommended to seek the continuation of such initiatives. In fact, Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo (2024), who is the current General Director of the DRIC, indicated that in the new administration of Cristian Zamora, the Strategy is not being used and will not be considered and that, in his opinion, it is very generalist and too brief.

4.2 Medellín – Cuenca Comparison

Cuenca and Medellín have been twin cities since 2011. Both cities share several similarities, with the main ones being geographical and climatic, as they are located in South America, in the Andes Mountains, and are considered cities with a spring-like climate. Another relevant characteristic is that they are preferred by expatriate communities as a favorite destination to live (Amelia and JP Abroad, 2023) and belong to groups of similar city networks. To generate a better comparison between the internationalization processes of both cities, the most relevant parameters have been considered:

Figure 7

Parameters of the internationalization process of Cuenca and Medellín

INTERNATIONALIZATION PROCESS		
PARAMETERS	MEDELLIN	CUENCA
Entity responsible for internationalization	ACI	DRIC
Year of creation of the entity responsible for internationalization	2001	2016
Support from municipal leaders (mayor)	High	High
Private sector participation	High	Low
Strategic alignment of international strategy with the (PDOT)	Yes	Yes
Economic resources	USD \$7'125.157.66	USD \$90.000
Sources of financial resources	Investment / IC	IC
Civil Society participation	Medium-high	Low
Nacionales Alliances	Private	Public
International Alliances	Twinings / City Networks/ NGOs	
Number of current IC projects	Non-accurate info.	Non-accurate info.
Areas benefiting from IC	Several	Several
Projects as cooperation recipients	Non-accurate info.	Non-accurate info.
Projects as cooperation donors	Non-accurate info.	Non-accurate info.
Digitalization (informing the public, online meetings, negotiation)	High	Medium
Example of internationalization	High	Medium

Note. This graph shows the parameters of the internationalization process of Cuenca and Medellín, respectively.

4.2.1 Entity Responsible for Internationalization

In the case of Cuenca, the entity responsible for this task is the Directorate of International Relations and Cooperation, currently led by Felipe Ochoa Mogrovejo. In the case of Medellín, the responsible entity is the Agency for Cooperation and Investment of Medellín and the Metropolitan Area, led by Cristina Zambrano Restrepo as the executive director since January 2024.

4.2.2 Year of Creation of the Entity Responsible for Internationalization

The DRIC of Cuenca was established in 2016 as part of the reform of the organizational structure found in the Organic Regulation of Organizational Management by Processes, and it states that its mission is to contribute to and coordinate international relations based on local priorities, reporting to the highest authority of the GAD (Cuenca GAD Municipal, 2016, p. 27).

The ACI was created in 2001 by authorization of the Medellín Council and is considered an international approach (ACI Medellín, n.d.). Both mayoralties saw the need to create institutions that would handle the processes to improve international synergies among various entities that could cooperate to improve the municipal corporation and the different sectors of the city.

4.2.3 Support from Municipal Leaders (Mayor)

Ochoa (2024) indicated that, although the DRIC does not have a specific amount of resources assigned, Mayor Cristian Zamora has responded positively to the Directorate's requests in case of events. Regarding personnel, the directorate has 7 people, including Ochoa, and because they are waiting for a loan from the Andean Development Corporation (CAF), they have not been able to hire for the 2 vacancies available. This also denotes the lack of financial independence of the Directorate since it could not receive money at any time of the year because there was no legal solution for the Directorate to accept donations or non-

repayable funds at any time, which caused the city to miss opportunities for receiving cooperation (Maldonado, 2023).

In the case of ACI Medellín, it also receives support from the mayor's office, which believes in the importance of foreign investment, its benefits for its citizens, and the work of cooperation through constant relations with governments and cities around the world, thus strengthening through best practices (Alcaldía Medellín, n.d.).

4.2.4 Private Sector Participation

In Cuenca, the private sector is somewhat separate from the DRIC in the internationalization processes; it has only been through the Internationalization Strategy that they have been included in the dialogues to better determine their roles. These include Chambers of Commerce, industries, services, SMEs, external sector companies, and startups (DRIC, 2021, p. 35).

ACI Medellín has evolved into an Investment Office in addition to its original function as an enabler of international relations and cooperation, which means that the private sector has a high level of participation in the investment area. The ACI works in synergy with other actors from the same city, such as Chambers of Commerce, trade associations, and entities from the public conglomerate (municipal corporation). Maldonado (2023) indicated that the DRIC was not focused on attracting international investment at that time.

Manfredi (2017, p. 2) states that corporate diplomacy is the reach of companies that relate to all kinds of social, political, and economic actors to achieve their business projects. This shows that the ACI is also implementing the reception of corporate diplomacy by receiving foreign investment proposals.

4.2.5 Local Development Model: Strategic Alignment of International Strategy with the Territorial Organization Development Plan (PDOT).

While Cuenca has a Plan for Development and Territorial Ordering (Bermeo, 2022), the internationalization strategy was developed in a way that was not necessarily included in the PDOT, although it is mentioned, as it must meet its objectives. The ACI has been included in the city's Development Plan since 2004 with an assigned budget (ACI Medellín, n.d.). This has allowed Medellín's internationalization strategy to go hand in hand with the Development Plan.

Another important aspect to emphasize is that Medellín's internationalization planning is directly articulated in the Development Plan (ACI Medellín, 2022). Although Cuenca's internationalization strategy follows local legal guidelines, it could not be considered in the PDOT because it was not made part of the city's legal regulatory framework, such as an ordinance. If it were so, it could be included in the PDOT to form structured projects with better articulation.

4.2.6 Sources and Economic Resources

The city of Cuenca does not have specific resources for the DRIC (Arce, 2024). As of 2022, the budget assigned—within the category of "contracting studies, research, and specialized technical services"—was USD 90,000 (GAD Cuenca, 2022, p. 5). Maldonado (2023) indicated that the DRIC does not have an assigned budget and that it is not considerable. The Strategy also recommends having an assigned budget (DRIC, 2021, p. 85). Maldonado also mentioned that after COVID-19, the budget had been lower.

Meanwhile, ACI Medellín has assigned budgets. For the period 2020-2023, it was USD 7,125,157.66 (COP 27,502 million), which represented 0.13% of the Development Plan's budget (ACI Medellín, n.d.). Being an investment agency, ACI reuses its resources as it has a high rate of return for the benefit of the city, which has earned it recognition at local, national, and international levels. ACI can be taken as an example of how Cuenca might emulate a similar or identical model.

4.2.7 Civil Society Participation

In relation to Cuenca, the map of actors for the internationalization of the city considers civil society organizations to have a low level of involvement (DRIC, 2021, p. 35). However, when developing the Strategy, their opinions were considered to create better relationships between them and improve the internationalization strategy. The ACI (2023) reports on its website that it involves various civil society organizations in accessing international cooperation courses through virtual and in-person workshops. This indicates that the ACI extensively involves civil society in international growth projects.

4.2.8 National Alliances

Cuenca has Chambers of Industry and Commerce and is also a member of the AME. As part of sub-axis 3 of the Strategy, it aims to generate alliances among various actors to associate them with health, education, tourism, and hospitality services (DRIC, 2021, p. 59). The Strategy also sought for the DRIC to have the authority to generate different types of alliances to promote the city's internationalization (DRIC, 2021, p. 85). However, no specific alliances are found in this context.

Medellín has a Network of Local Strategic Allies depending on the type of investment that investors need to make. These are from the legal, real estate, logistics, tourism, and hospitality sectors (ACI Medellín, n.d.).

4.2.9 International Alliances

- Twinning

This practice dates back to 1989, and currently, Cuenca has 24 twinnings with cities in Europe, Asia, and America (Alcaldía de Cuenca, n.d.). Medellín has 27 twinnings with cities on the same continents as Cuenca (ACI Medellín, 2021). For ACI, twinnings are key as they aim to attract resources and boost Medellín's internationalization strategy.

It should be noted that Cuenca has also twinned with Medellín since 2011. However, as Maldonado (2023) indicated, this twinning had an expiration date, as evidenced on the ACI Medellín page since Cuenca is not listed in its twinning list (ACI Medellín, 2021). Maldonado also noted that, in her opinion, twinnings generally remain only on paper and, unfortunately, are not followed up. This is evidenced again as a cooperation project between Cajamarca and Cuenca was carried out through the binational cooperation of the Ecuadorian Foreign Ministry and not as part of the existing twinning (S. Arce, personal communication, June 11, 2024).

- City Networks

Cuenca belongs to 12 city networks (DRIC, 2021, p. 31). According to the DRIC (n.d.), these are considered a mechanism for the insertion of local governments in the international arena to promote decentralized international cooperation. The city started this relationship in 2009, and according to Meneguelli (2024), it was given high importance. According to the ACI (2018) for Medellín, city networks are a strategy that serves international relationships by strengthening the insertion of local governments and increasing knowledge exchange through decentralized international cooperation.

As of the mentioned date, Medellín belonged to 13 city networks, sharing the following with Cuenca: Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), Mercociudades, UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), and the Ibero-American Center for Urban Development (CIDEU). City networks also enhance the understanding of different programs that can assist various sectors of the city, but as Medellín shows, despite being a larger city, it is selective in the city networks it is a member of. This is a cautious act by ACI, as joining most of these networks comes at a cost.

- International Organizations

Cuenca and Medellín, being Latin American cities with several similarities, have similar partners such as GIZ, KFW, IDB, UN programs and agencies, and other cooperation agencies from various countries.

4.2.10 Number of Current International Cooperation Projects

As of the completion date of this work, the DRIC website lacks specific information on where the projects currently being executed are listed. However, in interviews, information was gathered about cooperation projects being carried out at the time and/or being continued. Arce (2024) indicated that projects need follow-up since they take a long time to be executed and finalized. Ochoa (2024) revealed that projects initiated under the previous municipal administration have continued, and the management of new projects is also ongoing.

ACI Medellín has a website where one can view the international cooperation projects in development (ACI Medellín, n.d.). The ACI example is important as it shows how DRIC could gather information, offer proposals for international cooperation, and direct them to the city groups that need them.

4.2.11 Areas Benefiting from International Cooperation Projects

Regarding Cuenca, the Strategy aimed to increase the number of actors receiving international cooperation, as initially, the projects were directed at the Municipal Corporation. ACI has a portfolio of 32 public city projects displayed on its website. These projects cover various areas such as energy generation, mental health, recycling, migration, transportation, education, electrification, LGBTI population, culture, etc. Additionally, it has a project bank that manages to connect with organizations and cooperators (ACI Medellín, n.d.).

4.2.12 Projects as Cooperation Recipients

Maldonado (2023) and Arce (2024) indicated that various projects were carried out with different international and cooperation organizations in areas such as the Learning Exchange Program (PIA), Child Development Centers of the GAD of Cuenca through the World Food Program (WFP), infrastructure through GIZ CIS I and CIS II with the bicycle lanes project, and the "Start and Improve Your Business" (IMESUN) program from the International Labour Organization (ILO).

It is unclear whether these projects are still ongoing as there is a lack of easily accessible information on the web. Several companies from the Municipal Corporation of the GAD of the Canton of Cuenca benefit from these projects, with the clearest example being the Municipal Sanitation Company of Cuenca (EMAC) through KOICA with the "Strengthening of the Capacity for Integrated Waste Management and Resource Circulation towards the Circular Economy of Cuenca, Ecuador (2023-2029)" (EMAC EP, 2023).

4.2.13 Projects as Cooperation Donors

Although Cuenca already has its first South-South cooperation project, specific details are not available on the DRIC website regarding the cooperation actions undertaken; however, the former director, Sofía Arce, indicated that it was a solid waste management project with the Regional Government of Cajamarca - Peru as the requesting actor (S. Arce, personal communication, June 11, 2024). Another project as a cooperation provider through twinning was a cultural collaboration with Newark, who made a replica of an Economuseum from Cuenca, for which pieces of hats, textiles, etc., were sent (Maldonado, 2023).

In the case of Medellín, Maldonado also explained that if one wants to request training from the ACI, a form must be filled out for them to approve or deny that request. However, Medellín has a specific page about its multi-actor and multi-level cooperation offer to replicate solutions to various problems already employed by the city. Medellín offers three types of cooperation: Medellín LAB, which is an exchange of learning experiences, twinings, and agendas to create ties between institutions (ACI Medellín, n.d.).

While Cuenca does not have an internationalization process as developed as Medellín's, it is already a source of knowledge and experiences that could begin to collaborate and not just act as a recipient of cooperation.

4.2.14 Digitalization (informing the public, online meetings, negotiation)

Two important compilations of the successful experiences of the City of Cuenca have been made—"Cuenca: Successful Experiences" (Alcaldía, 2017) and "Cuenca International Book" (Bonilla et al., 2022)—these publications allow for tracking the work of various actors involved in the development of the city and also serve as examples in various areas where the city has excelled due to its organized and successful efforts, creating opportunities for cooperation for Cuenca not only as a recipient but also as a provider of cooperation. The current administration is giving greater importance to the use of major social networks, as DRIC actions are being published more consistently than in previous administrations, following trends that help attract attention from various segments of the population.

Medellín has a digital collection of around 200 publications related to the area of investments, international cooperation, local governments, and international business, among others (ACI Medellín, n.d.). It is important to continue collecting experiences and digitalizing information as these compile a database of high importance for future studies and cooperation projects, moving beyond the vision of being solely recipients of cooperation but also providers. Regarding its impact on social networks, ACI Medellín has thousands of followers on major social networks, where it communicates about its actions through recurring posts following trends that seek to attract different segments of the population.

Regarding the SDGs, the Local Voluntary Report is a UN publication initiative that seeks to determine the progress of cities in implementing the SDGs. This is an action that, according to former technician and

former director of DRIC, Maldonado (2023) and Arce (2024), would give international visibility to the city of Cuenca, as few cities have reproduced this information. Ochoa (2024) also mentioned the importance of creating this report, so his management continued this effort. Finally, on April 8, 2024, the UNDP announced the contest: "Construction of the Local Voluntary Report of Canton Cuenca in compliance with the SDGs (UNDP, 2024).

4.2.15 Example of Internationalization

Cuenca is shown as an example of international cooperation at the national level, as its process has been commended by municipal institutions such as the AME. However, according to current literature, it is not specifically cited as an example of internationalization. Medellín is a city that is much more mature in its internationalization process than Cuenca. For this reason, it is seen as an international reference in innovation (DRIC, 2021, p. 79).

Several of the DRIC officials interviewed mentioned ACI Medellín as a benchmark in terms of international cooperation institutions due to its staff size and the number of projects and areas it manages (ACI Medellín, 2019). Another important project where Medellín is mentioned as an example of attracting foreign direct investment is in the article "Internationalization of Local Government" (AL-Las, 2014). To date, neither of the two institutions has presented their Local Voluntary Report to the United Nations.

5. Discussion

Since the strategy is not currently being used, this research does not find any positive or negative results regarding its use. State relations do not necessarily occur between state leaders but rather among various actors and branches of government at different levels (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013, p. 107). Cuenca's case aligns with this study as it led to international relations through various projects carried out with different international organizations who, seeing the openness of local authorities, were able to collaborate on actions in various areas, especially environmental and infrastructure. For the city, these actions have been highly relevant as they allow for the necessary international development in a sustainable manner.

As Cuenca is a city recognized worldwide for its multiple advantages and characteristics at the cultural, natural, touristic, gastronomic, academic, and architectural levels, the interactions conducted with various organizations led to the city being considered an important actor in paradiplomacy, aligning with (Guillén & Martínez). These interactions enabled Cuenca to establish relations that go beyond national governments, fostering direct cooperation between cities and regions.

In the case of Medellín, excellent management of this tool is evident. It has leveraged these relationships to generate gains in other sectors, such as the economy, by attracting foreign direct investment in addition to international cooperation. Thus, comparing Medellín with Cuenca shows that the latter still has a lot of work ahead, as there are other areas where synergies can be generated.

Mathers and Deonandan (2018) mention that the SDGs should be more specific. This aligns with the results of the strategy construction analysis, as while it mentions that international agendas should be followed, it does not specify how each axis and sub-axis should carry the SDGs according to each activity. Cuenca has demonstrated a vast openness and acceptance of the 2030 Agenda; however, reviewing whether each proposed goal is viable or aligns with the city's development and planning is important, even though the PDOT suggests aligning with these Goals.

International cooperation has benefited Cuenca in various projects that have been allocated for the city and in different areas of the Municipal Corporation. These projects demonstrate the importance of maintaining solid international relations, while cooperation projects show the benefits of using these synergies as a catalyst for actions to overcome various problems or areas for improvement that the city may face. This aligns with Bustos and García (2021), who emphasize that cooperation promotes the solidarity of peoples. Additionally, international cooperation allows learning from similar processes that other cities have undergone, which could be replicated through other international examples, such as Cuenca.

The case of Cuenca has shown that decentralized international cooperation has helped the city benefit from projects specific to its needs. This aligns with the Practical Manual for Internationalizing the City, which indicates that "this form of cooperation allows cities to manage their own international relations and projects, adapting to their local realities" (Zapata, 2007).

In the development of Cuenca, it has been key to have an entity in charge of the process of internationalizing the city, in this case, the DRIC, as it provides specific and necessary support for the city's public companies to find international cooperation projects. In addition to the CI area, the work of the DRIC is relevant for the city to continue internationalizing by staying up-to-date with global relationship trends.

Arjona (2022) emphasizes that to strengthen local governments' internationalization capacity, it is vital to support institutions with the necessary technical, human resources, or financial tools within each institution's possibilities. These two examples between Cuenca and Medellín denote how, with more support, the institution can significantly improve. Medellín shows that it has a different way of thinking about this, seeking ways to profit from this increase in resources.

The Internationalization Strategy of Cuenca is not integrated into the PDOT. The lack of an ordinance that formalizes the strategy limits its inclusion and articulation in this Plan, which could ensure structured projects and better coordination.

The city of Cuenca faces significant challenges regarding specific resources for the DRIC. The lack of an assigned budget and dependence on external funds limit its capacity for action. In contrast, Medellín has assigned budgets and a management model that maximizes resources for the benefit of the city, demonstrating the importance of independent and robust financial management.

Medellín handles the issue of national alliances from a more business investment and redirection perspective, which differs from a direction of cooperation only, as is the case with Cuenca. Strategic alliances, both national and international, are fundamental for the development of city internationalization. The results show that Cuenca needs to improve its alliance management to enhance the benefits of cooperation.

Añorve et al. (2024) analyze the twinnings of Guanajuato and Oaxaca in four dimensions of study: visibility, functionality, rationality, and institutionality. They conclude that there are scant effective results in perceiving a benefit. However, there are conflicting opinions on this, as other authors argue that this type of paradiplomatic activity strengthens Latin American cities among international allies through joint actions (Sharif, 2017).

This work corroborates what Añorve indicates; as for Cuenca, these have not been of great relevance in the field of acquiring cooperation or significant benefits from this practice beyond finding cities with similarities. Cuenca must manage these twinnings as tools that truly serve the city and be more selective in this type of relationship; otherwise, choose another type of relationship, such as networks.

As can be seen on some pages of the Municipal Corporation, relevant news related to its management has been published. However, for Cuenca to be considered a city with the capacity to offer cooperation, it is highly important to improve its digital archive by publishing a compilation of the achievements reached by the different directorates and public companies on the GAD web pages. This coincides with the work of Cabezas, which indicates:

The analysis of the elements discussed above warns of the need to adopt new management forms that ensure the perpetuation and sustainability of cities. The scarce culture on the application of merchandising, resistance to change in tenants, fear of entrepreneurship, lack of financing, non-preservation of heritage, underutilization of ICT, and non-commitment of public authorities in creating comprehensive development strategies are issues that affect today more than ever, the attractiveness of cities and their consolidation... (Cabezas, 2018, p. 3).

Similarly, research results on the construction of the Strategy indicate that the lack of information and data collection over the years did not allow for better corroboration of the processes carried out. Coinciding with what Cabezas indicated, all these processes of digitalization and utilization of ICT give Cuenca visibility in the world and allow it to stand out among other cities.

As future lines of research, it is recommended to analyze the internationalization process without the use of a strategy that guides this process in an articulated way.

6. Conclusion

The research conducted reveals a structured approach to Cuenca's internationalization process with a view to global cooperation synergy. From the creation of the Protocol Unit in 1999 to the formulation of the

Internationalization Strategy 2021-2025, Cuenca has demonstrated an evolution of continuous commitment to improving the city's international relations and cooperation through the Municipal GAD of Cuenca Canton. It has also unveiled the efforts and achievements of the DRIC's management for the city's international growth.

The internationalization process of Cuenca has been characterized by a series of milestones that have marked the importance of this process, such as the reception of diplomatic authorities and the establishment of relations with embassies and consulates, and then the creation of the DRIC in 2016, strengthening its capacity to manage cooperation projects and establish strategic alliances both nationally and internationally through city networks, participation with international organizations, and twinnings.

The Internationalization Strategy, built with the support of the United Nations Development Programme, has been a vital determinant in guiding future internationalization actions in an articulated manner, as it is based on four main axes that guide international action and define priority areas for the ecumenical development of the city with the goal of improving the quality of life of its inhabitants and promoting sustainable growth.

An evaluation of the strategy's construction has been carried out, thus revealing the efforts and achievements in managing the improvement of international relations and cooperation, as well as the specific actions carried out for the city's international growth through an increase in actors participating in the Strategy.

In the comparative analysis of the internationalization of Cuenca and Medellín, similarities and differences in their internationalization processes have been identified. Medellín, with its maturity in its international cooperation model, also directed towards investment, serves as a valuable reference for Cuenca. The comparison emphasizes the importance of having consistent support from the municipal authority and a defined structure to elevate the benefits of internationalization.

This research's contribution lies in its chronological and comprehensive approach. It details the processes that Cuenca has undergone to internationalize and provides a clear vision of the strategy through a SWOT analysis. This analysis aims to guide the city to continue its process on solid foundations toward structured and articulated international management. It is also important to note the need for organized international management and the integration of global practices for local development since benefits such as improving overall quality of life can be achieved.

Finally, it is crucial to manage these processes carefully to mitigate any negative effects they may have on the population. Cuenca's experience demonstrates that a defined strategy and active cooperation with various actors promote the growth of several sectors through the collaboration of various international actors for the success of the city's internationalization. Following the strategy to strengthen the internationalization process again and seeking an ordinance that guarantees its continuity is of crucial importance for Cuenca's development on the future global stage.

7. References

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