

For a Republic of Territories

The health crisis has highlighted the extraordinary ability of local authorities to act quickly and effectively during this unprecedented period, both in form and scope, by maintaining their essential public policies while proposing new solutions.

This ability to respond to the needs of French men and women, as confirmed by a survey conducted by the Elabe Institute last May, took place in a context in which local elected officials often felt, quite rightly, that they were abandoned by the central government, whose management of the crisis was deficient in several respects.

The action taken by local authorities was even praised by the President of the Republic, who announced in June that he wanted to give more freedom and responsibility to local authorities.

Since the beginning of the quinquennium, with each crisis, the President of the Republic and the government seem to become aware of the indispensable role played by the communes, inter-communalities, departments and regions for our fellow citizens. This was the case during the "Yellow Vests" movement, as well as during the current health crisis.

However, the executive's guideline for communities since 2017 is characterized by persistent mistrust. The drastic and brutal drop in assisted employment, the placing of communities under financial trusteeship or the stigmatization of Mayors with the #BalanceTonMaire episode are just three sad illustrations of this.

The experience of the last three years therefore calls for at least some caution as to whether the President of the Republic really wants to embark on a new act of decentralization.

Decentralization deserves much better than that. A true silent revolution initiated in the early 1980s by François Mitterrand, decentralization has today become obvious, even in the eyes of the right, which at the time was fighting it fiercely.

Because the purpose of decentralization is to reoxygenate democracy by bringing elected officials closer to citizens, we believe that it must be deepened. It is even becoming urgent to arm local authorities to face today's deep economic and social crisis.

We Socialists are the heirs of the momentum of 1981. Many of us recently recalled this in an article published in *Le Monde* accessible [here](#). We refuse to abandon the idea of decentralization to the executive and the right. There is no question of yielding to a purely liberal logic that consists of putting territories in competition with each other to the detriment of the most fragile among them. On the contrary, we believe that we must return to the heart of the decentralizing project as conceived by Pierre Mauroy's government: giving citizens the power to act on their daily lives, while guaranteeing solidarity between all the territories.

This democratic and emancipatory project, our local elected officials bring it to life every day, in all territories, and our senators and deputies defend it in Parliament. On this subject, our senators had a motion for a resolution entitled "For a New Era of Decentralization" adopted by the Senate on June 25, which is available [here](#). This contribution is in line with this work.

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This project is at the service of an ambitious and socially just ecological transition. It is in this sense that it aims to contribute to bringing together the left and the ecologists and to make political activists, associative and trade union actors and all committed citizens who recognize themselves in this project work together around local projects.

To be fully implemented, this project requires a new act of decentralization and the return of an ambition that has been abandoned for too long: land use planning.

For France to truly be an indivisible, secular, democratic, social and decentralized Republic, it must have confidence in its territories, rich in their specificities.

This Republic of territories is based on four pillars:

1. Deepening local democracy
2. Adapting community skills to the needs of their territories
3. Empowering Communities to Meet Their Responsibilities
4. Rediscovering the ambition to develop territories

1. Deepening local democracy

With departmental and regional elections looming and the last municipal elections characterized by record abstention, which cannot be explained by the health situation alone, it is imperative to give a new lease of life to local democracy.

The spirit of decentralization is intimately linked to the desire to democratize public action. This is why local and regional authorities have a vocation to be engines for the renewal of democratic practices.

Electoral rules should ensure parity of local assemblies and executives at all levels.

The development of citizen participation throughout the term of office is also an objective: participatory budgets, citizen councils, consultations, petitions, local referendums are all measures that give vitality to local public action.

Deepening local democracy also means assuming responsibility for giving real status to local elected officials, with changes in terms of social and compensation schemes, training and retraining, legal responsibility and ethical obligations, to encourage political commitment, diversity of profiles and exemplary practices.

2. Adapting community skills to the needs of their territories

If decentralization is too often reduced to the sole question of the transfer of powers from the State to local authorities, we cannot speak of a new act of decentralization without thinking about a change in the distribution of these powers and a strengthening of the responsibilities of local authorities.

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Without calling into question the capacity of territories to organize themselves according to their specificities, a point that we will develop a little further on, we put forward the idea of regions piloting the public employment service and apprenticeship policy and coordinating regional planning policies. Departments must obtain increased powers, without this resulting in a disengagement of the State, in terms of hospital and medico-social governance and the territorial organization of access to healthcare, in connection with the deconcentrated services of the State.

The communes, the basic echelons of our democratic life, will always be the sole holders of the general competence clause, to act on a daily basis. Finally, the intermunicipalities must be places of cooperation at the level of living areas. On this subject, we are convinced that it is imperative to give flexibility in the distribution of competences between intercommunalities and communes, in order to take into account local realities. This means, for example, giving EPCIs with their own tax system the possibility of delegating some of their powers to some of their member municipalities.

This differentiated exercise of competences within the communal block makes it possible to make the link with one of the major axes of the new act of decentralization: the recognition of a real right to differentiation for local authorities.

Each territory has its own history and specific needs. It is therefore necessary to allow local elected officials to exercise, in compliance with the law and if there is a political will, the competences that respond to the characteristics of their territories. This right to differentiation is based mainly on two mechanisms: experimentation and the adaptation of standards.

The recourse to experimentation must be simplified and must no longer systematically lead to the current alternative posed by the law: abandonment or generalization of experimentation. The possibility of locally adapting national standards must also be allowed, otherwise public action may sometimes be totally unsuited to certain local realities.

This right to differentiation is also intended to encourage the development of cross-border cooperation between our local authorities and certain foreign authorities, whether such cooperation is European, Mediterranean or ultramarine. Moreover, our overseas collectivities must become the figureheads of this right to differentiation.

Finally, in the near future, a Copernican revolution could be proposed by completely overturning the current institutional logic: the state would see its competences listed restrictively in the Constitution, with all other competences henceforth falling to local authorities. This "revolution" would not be incompatible either with the principle of indivisibility of the Republic or with the existence of a strong state, exercising regalian competences and guaranteeing national unity, social cohesion and territorial justice.

3. Empowering Communities to Meet Their Responsibilities

Without adequate financial means, there can be no free administration of local authorities, nor effective decentralization. Giving local authorities the means to assume their responsibilities is based on three key points: guaranteeing their fiscal autonomy, reducing inequalities in wealth between territories and providing them with visibility over several years.

Since 2017, the government has challenged the fiscal autonomy of local authorities in an unprecedented way, by recentralizing their resources through the abolition of the tax.

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and part of the economic taxes, improperly qualified as "production" taxes. After the regions, it is now the departments that have lost almost all their fiscal autonomy.

This move towards recentralisation has been accompanied by a move to place local authorities under supervision with the introduction in 2018 of a contractualisation system (now suspended due to the crisis) aimed at encouraging the largest local authorities to limit the development of their expenditure or face a financial penalty.

Currently, the government is communicating that it has put in place, as part of this summer's amending budget, financial support for communities to help them weather the crisis. On the one hand, however, these measures only compensate for a small part of the loss of revenue for communities and ignore the explosion in their spending due to the crisis. For example, nothing is offered to departments to cope with the very sharp increase in RSA spending. On the other hand, support for communities is essential for a successful recovery. Indeed, local authorities carry 70% of public investment each year. Without a resumption of local public investment, the government's gamble on recovery through investment will necessarily fail.

The allocations supporting community investment therefore need to be significantly increased. The creation of a support endowment dedicated exclusively to investments in ecological transition is essential. Territories are the driving forces behind this transition. Without proximity and territorial innovation, this transition will remain an empty word. This endowment could therefore support local authorities' investments in the thermal renovation of buildings, the development of short circuits, the local production of renewable energy, the strengthening of public transportation services, the emergence of transitional economic and industrial sectors, etc.

The second axis is the rise of equalization mechanisms to reduce wealth inequalities between territories. Decentralization means accepting that the administration of a community by local elected officials can lead to a public policy being implemented in one community but not in the neighbouring community. Ideally, however, this acceptance should be based on an unconditional requirement: that this situation arises solely from a political will on the part of local elected officials and not from an inequality of means between territories.

However, since 2018, the government has completely frozen the main equalization mechanism for the local bloc. As for the vertical equalization mechanisms, the state reduces their relevance by having them financed by the communities themselves. However, the crisis and its negative effects on the finances of all local governments make it more necessary than ever for the state to finance the increase in vertical equalization.

Finally, the third area of focus is to give communities financial visibility. From now on, with each budget bill, communities ask themselves which tax will be abolished, which endowment will be reduced or which expenditure will be taxed on them. This visibility requires four things:

- The implementation of a multi-year community funding programming act, allowing communities to have visibility over time on their resources ;

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- A reform of the overall operating budget, to simplify its calculation method, which today is based on too many complex and evolving criteria;
- The end of the decrease in certain financial assistance, known as "adjustment variables", decided unilaterally each fall by the government on the pretext of compensating for the increase in other financial assistance ;
- Full and evolving financial compensation for the competences transferred by the State to the collectivities. Until now, these transfers have always been accompanied by a residual burden on local authorities, which has been increasing over time and which then burdens their capacity to finance their other policies.

4. Rediscovering the ambition to develop territories

The new act of decentralization that we are calling for must be accompanied by a renewed ambition, that of regional development.

The abandonment of this ambition marked the victory of a liberal vision that considers that territories must compete to bring out the most attractive or competitive among them.

Moreover, regional development is anything but weakening the financial resources of social landlords, eliminating short railway lines, closing hospital beds and treasuries, infantilizing communities, massively reducing subsidized jobs, forgetting that all ecological taxation goes hand in hand with fiscal justice, or sweeping aside the Borloo report.

Re-establishing a planning policy means restoring meaning to cooperation between the State and local authorities. The future State-Region plan contracts must be the first step in this renewed ambition.

Without real land use planning, there can be no shared progress. For example, while the public debate focuses on the upcoming arrival of 5G and its potential harmful effects on health and the environment (the purpose of this contribution is not to settle this issue), we tend to overlook the fact that our country still has a very large number of white and grey areas, most often in rural areas. Every year, the government announces a plan to eliminate these zones. It is time to carry it out, through massive public investment, in a context where the rise of telework and telemedicine could profoundly modify territorial dynamics.

Regional development means having the ambition to link the country in terms of equipment, infrastructure and public services. It also means encouraging the relocation, particularly of industrial activities, to small and medium-sized towns, and the development of local urban agriculture in large cities.

This networking can be done on the scale of territories centered around catchment areas or These are "territories of equilibrium", where it is considered that every inhabitant must have access to all essential public services (health, transport, education, security, justice, culture, etc.) unless they are able to travel by car within a certain time frame. We could, for example, speak of the "thirty-minute territory".

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This meshing can be done simultaneously on a smaller scale. The concept of the "quarter-hour city", developed by the scientist Carlos Moreno and supported by several socialist lists during the last municipal elections, is an example of this by proposing to organize the city so that each inhabitant can have access to the services that are essential to his or her daily life within a fifteen-minute walking distance.

Developing territories means advocating an alliance of territories and not opposing them. It means not seeing metropolises as responsible for all the imbalances, peri-urban territories as areas of isolation, rural areas as an outdated France and priority districts as places of ensauvage. Regional planning means not being ashamed to use the word "sub-prefecture", it means taking into account the specificities of ultra-marine areas and supporting their catch-up, it means defending the essential role of the departments in terms of social and territorial solidarity and it means giving the city's policy the means to succeed.

To sum up, the Republic of the Territories is to bring the unity of the Republic to life by giving perspectives to each of its territories.