Sub-Municipal Units (SMU’s)

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Up or down – scaling local government?

• Sub-national scale reforms all over Europe since the 1950s
• Lots of attention and initiatives to up-scaling local government (via municipal mergers, creating additional layers to take over local service delivery, intermunicipal cooperation, ...)
• Repeatedly, upscaling LG drastically has triggered decisions and debate to down-scale again as well
Creating Sub-Municipal Units (SMU’s)

• A classic solution in case a local government is not (perceived as) local anymore

• An organizational reform that enables
  – to bring decision-making processes closer to the citizens
  – to execute tasks in accordance with the specific needs of an area

• To this end, SMU’s dispose over autonomy vis-à-vis local government
Hybrid in nature across and within European countries

• Created by local and/or central government?
• A mere city/urban versus a more country-wide/also rural reform?
• Variance in SMU powers, budget, services, ... on the local scale?
• Similar as well as subordinate to local government in election and administration?
• ...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Institutional basis</strong></th>
<th>SMU’s can be created by the council of eight cities with more than 100 000 inhabitants as foreseen in the Belgian Constitution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number and size</strong></td>
<td>9 districts in the port city of Antwerp, varying from less than 30 000 to more than 60 000 inhabitants</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Powers and competencies</strong></td>
<td>All Antwerp districts execute competencies in the fields of youth, culture and sports policy; senior policy; traffic policy; public works; festivities and communication</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Election and administration</strong></td>
<td>District and local government elections and organization are alike / a locally appointed secretary in every district</td>
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Small as more democratic?

• SMU’s added value according to the Dahl-Tufte – dilemma (1973): large(r) units tend to be more effective providers of public services whilst small(er) ones tend to have more possibilities for citizens to participate in policy-making processes.

• In practice, democratic legitimacy as the dominant rationale behind the SMU – reform.

• But further SMU research is still quite limited in number, scope and focus.
The Antwerp districts under study

• The democratic pros and cons in the early days of their creation
  – E.g. Van Assche (2002): how to reintroduce local government in a big city: the classic instrument of city decentralisation or the instrument of more deliberative democracy?

• Electoral trends and explanations throughout their life-time
  – E.g. Van Aelst e.a. (2013): Do voters vote for the same party at district and municipal level?
  – E.g. De Ceuninck e.a. (2013): Why did the Antwerp districts vote so differently?
The Antwerp districts under study

• Focus on reform evaluation more recently
  – E.g. De Peuter e.a. (2011): What can be said about the criteria that served to underpin this reform and that were used to judge its effects?
  – E.g. Van Dooren e.a. (2012): Did the districts fulfil the expectations of increasing democracy and efficiency? Why (not)?

• Primary document and discourse analysis, little field research so far
Time to find out more about the SMU’s?

• The SMU’s quest for more autonomy and competencies vis-à-vis local government: problem-led or opportunity-led?
• Understanding their role and stake in submunicipal governance e.g. with the rise of the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and the Special Assessment Districts (SADs)
• Their urban renewal and contribution to (amongst others) a more inclusive or entrepreneurial city?
• ...
References


COST WG III - Territorial and Functional Re- Scaling - Dubrovnik, May 2015