

Exploring Collaborative Arrangements in Local Governance: Inter-Municipal Cooperation in Europe

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Guest editors:

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The aim of this special issue is to explore the dynamics, experiences and drivers of Inter-municipal cooperation in Europe, given its increasing incidence in contemporary local governance. The relevance and originalities of the suggested special issue are explained in depth in the first sections of this proposal.

Both the increasing incidence of the phenomenon and the lack of systematized research covering several new countries are important justifications for the relevance of publishing a special issue on IMC in Europe. IRAS is, definitely, the right journal to do it, given its aims and scope, and the opportunity this will give to several scholars and practitioners to get in touch with the most recent and novel research on inter-local collaborative arrangements. More than a long neglected topic, this will certainly become a fast growing field of research in public administration and political sciences, with expected impacts both on scholars' research interests, and on practitioners and policy makers agendas.

Theme and relevance:

Inter-Municipal Cooperation (IMC) has been an important topic of debates in European academic literature for a long time. It is well rooted in more general theories of co-operation, which are present in sociology, psychology, organization theory and game theory. On a theoretical level cooperation of local governments as a means to achieve additional gains or a method to respond for problems of coordination, was present (e.g. in public choice) already in 1950's within the debate with reform theory suggesting new organization of metropolitan areas. A comprehensive summary of debates and related empirical research may be found in Dowding and Feiock (2012).

However, studies of IMC in Europe suffer from deficit of comprehensive, international comparative studies. So far the only comprehensive study covering 8 European countries has been undertaken by Hulst and van Montfort (2007). In Central and Eastern Europe the volume comparing scope and forms of IMC in 5 countries (but excluding Poland) has been edited by Swianiewicz (2011). There are also publications comparing IMC in two different countries (e.g. Wollmann 2007, 2010 on Germany and France, Bolgherini 2011 on Italy and Germany) or reviewing evidences on the impact of IMC on costs in a single local service (e.g. Bel, Fageda, Mur 2014; Bel, Warner 2015 – both on waste management). We believe that our study may contribute to filling the gap in international comparative studies of IMC.

In addition to bringing up-to date information our study contributes new knowledge on three ways (dimensions):

- (1) We add new countries (not researched comparatively before) and new "after crisis" knowledge (as discussed before).

- (2) Thanks to uniform methodology of research in individual involved countries, some of our analysis may go down from country by country level to the level of individual IMC institutions.
- (3) We look for factors explaining variation among countries.

We expect, as a consequence of the reviewing process, that one or more articles get rejected for publication. However, precisely because there is a common methodological framework, this will not affect significantly the overall structure of the special issue. Most of the cross-country conclusions will be addressed at the co-editors' article, which will refer to the overall project (and to the data collected in all involved countries, even if the articles on them are eventually rejected). The country case articles will illustrate different national experiences and address particular aspects of inter-municipal cooperation, with significant differences between them.

Suggested articles:

Paweł Swianiewicz, Filipe Teles – Inter-Municipal Cooperation: Explaining Differences Across Europe.

The article sets conceptual framework for analysis in the remaining part of the issue. It formulates joint research questions and hypothesis to be verified in national studies as well as in the concluding article. On the second part, it compares results of the research in individual national contexts and explores the expectations formulated in the general framework, which are related to inter-country as well as to intra-country variations.

The main objective of the special issue and of the hypotheses it explores is indirectly related the general debate on upscaling or decentralization reforms in Europe, and the role that inter-municipal cooperation plays in that setting. In fact, the suggested article co-authored by the guest editors, besides addressing the general conceptual framework and the cross-country analysis resulting from the common survey used in this research protocol, will also provide further information on the impact of these collaborative arrangements on national and regional governance.

One could say that the theme is about the institutional aspects of “collaborative governance” in local government systems, which is – as one hypothesis tries to address – related to decentralization. Therefore, local-level decentralization and inter-local collaboration are considered in this special issue as the general framework wherein collaboration occurs.

Pekka Kettunen – Inter-municipal cooperation in Finland: does it really work?

In Finland inter-municipal cooperation is very common, because of the small size of some municipalities. Many regional level services (e.g. hospitals) are based on compulsory membership. There are also several of IMCs based on voluntary membership too and the article will analyse them closer. The data will concern typical forms of IMCs.

Jochen Franzke – Old instrument, new challenges: IMC in the German federal state Brandenburg

The article analyses both voluntary and compulsory forms of IMC in Brandenburg, with a special focus on 52 associations of municipalities (quasi regional governments). It discusses also inter-relationship between IMC and territorial amalgamations of local governments.

Grétar Þór Eypórssón – Inter-municipal cooperation in Iceland: The alternative to municipal amalgamations?

The article presents an analysis of the types of cooperation. It stresses the increasing role of cooperation in the political agenda and how it is becoming more important as an alternative to municipal amalgamations.

Adam Gendźwiłł, Joanna Krukowska, Marta Lackowska, Paweł Swianiewicz – No Trust, No Incentives, Inter-Municipal Cooperation in Poland in the Low Social Capital Context.

The article analysis emerging and evolution of IMC in an environment of relatively big municipal governments and no significant incentives from the central level. It discusses also the role EU funds have had in stimulating the IMC's institutions during the most recent years.

Patrícia Silva, Joana Ferreira, Filipe Teles – Collaboration and local government reform in Portugal: different arguments, the same result

The article explores the new forms of institutionalized cooperative arrangements between municipalities in Portugal, implemented after the local government reform in 2013. It discusses the degree and intensity of cooperation between engaged local authorities, and their motivation.

Daniel Klimovský, Juraj Nemec – Maintaining the Fragmentation through the IMC in Slovakia: Survival rather than Amalgamation

This article is focused on evolution and impacts of various IMC forms in the decentralized and highly territorially fragmented environment, where significant number of local governments have to cooperate because individually they are incapable to perform their tasks. But other factors/incentives of IMC are analysed as well, e.g. greater capacity to apply for external resources.

Irena Bačlija – Nobody is taking the bait: dead-end amalgamation stimulation through IMCs in Slovenia.

The article explains development of IMCs in Slovenian local self-government system, focusing on motives for establishment that are mostly linked to state incentives. The analyses provide an answer to emerging paradox of further establishment of even smaller municipalities instead of promoting amalgamation through IMCs.

Esther Pano-Puey – Beyond size: overcoming fragmentation by inter-municipal associations in Spain. The case of Catalonia.

The Spanish local system is characterised by a strong territorial fragmentation. IMC is one of the possible ways of compensating the small size; it may empower its members for a better provision of services. In this article, we explore the IMC in Catalonia in order to identify the key factors explaining their existence and diversified forms.

Notes:

The article titles presented in this proposal are still tentative. These will be later articulated in a way that better 'translate' its content, as well as the suggested abstracts. We will try to ensure that the final titles are attractive (and reflecting particular "country issues").

As mentioned above, the differences between the 8 papers go much further than the differences in country focus. All the relevant similarities, resulting from the same research project (COST action LocRef), conceptual framework and survey's empirical data will be addressed in the guest-editors article. The other country papers will address particular aspects of inter-municipal cooperation, which will help in illustrating the relevance of this topic for contemporary research in public administration.