

1. Summary of the research plan

The importance of local government for service provision but also for citizens' participation and political stability is hardly questioned. It is also widely accepted that local governments have come under increasing pressure and that they have adopted an impressive range of reform activities to cope with the upcoming challenges. As of now, there is an impressive amount of literature about local government and its reform and the scientific community treating with these questions is large and rather well organized. What is lacking, however, are comparative studies applying the same methodology to a larger number of countries.

The COST action IS1207 "Local Public Sector Reforms: An International Comparison" which actually unites 29 countries and is chaired by Prof. Sabine Kuhlmann and Prof. Geert Bouckaert offers an excellent opportunity to start and coordinate comparative research activities in this field. The main applicant and the co-applicant of this research proposal are both members of the management board of the COST action.

Local government research has a long tradition in Switzerland, mainly through quantitative studies monitoring the most important challenges and reforms in Swiss municipalities. What are lacking are an international comparison and more qualitative oriented studies. The COST action together with this research proposal is a unique possibility to fill these gaps and to continue and complete the monitoring activities.

Are there any signs of convergence when it comes to organizing local public administration, the territorial and functional organization of a country, and the participation of citizens in political processes, and to what extent does Switzerland fit into international patterns and trends, these are the overarching research questions of this project.

The proposal contains three PhD projects, which follow the internal structure of the COST action. The topics of the three projects are: (i) (Post-)New Public Management driven Reforms, (ii) Amalgamations, their effect on performance and the repartition of tasks, and (iii) Participative reforms and direct democracy. All three projects build upon previous research activities.

At the heart of each subproject are international comparative case studies about reform projects in Swiss municipalities and similar projects in a number of specifically selected countries. For the case selection and additional contextual information the project will rely on the international comparative survey organized by a number of participating countries in the COST action. In Switzerland, the comparative international part is integrated in the 6th nationwide survey of Swiss municipalities (research grant application submitted to the SERI). For a more historical perspective the subprojects will draw on the five national surveys conducted since 1988.

We believe that Switzerland is due to the small size of its municipalities, their far reaching financial/fiscal autonomy, and the importance of direct democracy an interesting case to add to the theoretical debate. Furthermore, results will be very interesting for politicians and practitioners on local level.