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Is local always better? Strengths and limitations of local governance for service delivery

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1. Is local always better? Strengths and limitations of local governance for service delivery

Introduction

Globally, local authorities are significant players in the provision of public services, and increasingly there has been a strong impetus to improve local service delivery (Koprić *et al.*, 2017; Dollery *et al.*, 2008; United Cities and Local Governments, 2008) and citizen satisfaction with public services (Van de Walle, 2018). In recent decades decentralization, usually with the support of international organizations, has become an important reform strategy in many countries. Traditional arguments in favor of such reforms suggest that efficiency and quality gains in the provision of public services are achieved through decentralization along with greater expectations of accountability and responsiveness. But is local really always better? Some scholars warn that there are significant dangers involved in decentralization. For example, local administrations might be understaffed, or financially weak, or they could be captured by local political elites, which could all potentially lead to poorer public service provision.

There have been claims for more research on the challenges of local service delivery and the related tension between quality, efficiency and output-legitimacy (Bouckaert and Kuhlmann, 2016). Furthermore, there is still no framework which specifies which powers, public roles and activities each level of government should apply in different systems of decentralisation (Hughes, 2017).

The aim of this special issue is to discuss the extent to which local government might be considered the most suitable tier of government for public service delivery and what its limitations might be. To that end, the articles in this special issue address such questions as: what functions should be performed at the local tier of government? Whether managerial and territorial reforms improve service delivery at the local level? How might local governments be better organized in order to provide effective and efficient public services? What are the key elements necessary for effective intergovernmental relations between national, state/provincial, and local governments in order to improve service delivery at the local level? Does decentralization lead to better input legitimacy, and how can we measure local autonomy?

This introduction has two main objectives: first, it attempts to develop an analytical framework for the assessment of local government service delivery and, second, it attempts to locate the cases discussed in the different articles of this issue within this framework. In that respect, the subject of local-level service delivery may be looked at from a variety of different academic backgrounds and disciplines and particularly from economics, political science or public management perspectives. Recognizing this fact, cognizance is taken of the different disciplinary understandings of decentralization both in the development of the analytical framework and in the analysis of the contributing articles which follows.

The article is divided into two parts: in the first, the conceptual foundations of service delivery in the public sector are discussed along with a theoretical reflection on the factors used to explain the strengths and limitations of local service delivery. In the second, which forms the center piece of the article, an analytical framework of local service delivery in a multi-level context is presented based on relevant literature. In a further step, the articles which make up this issue are assessed in terms of this theoretical background and are located in the analytical framework developed. Finally, some conclusions are drawn in



regard to some emerging trends in local government service provision, and, in this way, the article aims to contribute to the ongoing theoretical debate on whether local is always better for the delivery of public services.

2. Explanatory factors, strengths and limitations of local service delivery

One of the overarching questions in this special issue is whether or not social services are best provided locally. This forms part of a long scholarly debate about the advantages and disadvantages of (de)centralization, elements of which are discussed below with a particular focus on their implications for effective service delivery.

From a political science perspective, possible explanations for the factors leading to decentralization may be grouped into the three different approaches, as described by Mueller (2015, p. 16 et seq.), namely, a socio-cultural approach, a structural approach and a political approach. In the first of these, the socio-cultural approach, it is suggested that decentralization occurs more often when there is societal diversity, for example, cleavages based on language, religion or ethnicity. Furthermore, it is argued, federalism is more likely to occur when there is a political culture of subsidiarity. Under the structural approach, it is asserted that such factors as the area, distance between settlements, and population size explain levels of (de)centralization. The proposition in this instance is that there are more variations in citizens' preferences in larger areas and consequently, decentralization is capable of achieving a better balance between costs and benefits. In terms of the center-periphery paradigm (Rokkan and Urwin, 1982), more decentralization occurs when peripheral localities display more resistance to the center, and this is more likely when there are remote and inaccessible regions with their own strong urban centers. Population size is also assumed to be a driving factor for more decentralization (Dahl and Tufte, 1973). The debate on the scale of local government and its implications for local democracy is still an ongoing one (Denters *et al.*, 2014). Under the political approach, (de)centralization is seen to depend on political ideology, the political right is believed to prefer a decentralized system based on a system of elite bargaining.

Many arguments have been raised for and against the provision of services at the local level, some of which have been highly contentious and contradictory (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014). What is striking is these exchanges, is that advantages of increased efficiency and effectiveness have been claimed by both those in favor of centralization and those advocating for decentralization and that their positions have often changed over the course of time (De Vries, 2000).

A prominent argument raised in favor of providing services locally has long been that of greater efficiency and effectiveness in the allocation of public services. It is also argued that the local population can influence decisions relating to the type, level, quality and mix of local services, as well as the price they are willing to pay for them, and that this ultimately leads to greater citizen satisfaction (Miller, 2002). However, this argument is disputed on the grounds that lower costs are often achieved by providing fewer or lower quality services at the local level, rather than achieving the same standards and goals at lower costs. Decentralized service provision is therefore said to be favorable for allocative efficiency, while centralization enhances cost-efficiency because it avoids duplication and "reinvention of the wheel" by many local governments (De Vries, 2000) and economies of scale can be achieved.

Another central argument advanced in favor of decentralized structures is the democratic dimension, and the fact that it facilitates greater political participation by local populations (Sharpe, 1970). Local governments are closer to the people than a distant central government, and participation at the local level brings together a variety of stakeholders and enhances collaboration and social cohesion. Furthermore, it is stated, it fosters accountability, transparency and openness (Miller, 2002). However, the extent to which

effective democracy is enhanced in small local units is contested (Newton, 1982), and the advocates of centralization contend that national government holds the greatest legitimacy in that the turnout rates in national elections are routinely higher (De Vries, 2000).

Further arguments advanced in favor of decentralization assert that local service delivery stimulates the local economy, brain drain is reduced, and technical and managerial skills remain in the region. It is also maintained that there is more opportunity for innovation and that competition between local governments is stimulated, leading to improved service delivery (Tiebout, 1956). Local capacity to handle local affairs is enhanced, as municipal officials assume responsibility for local affairs and take the initiative in advancing their own development. This frees up the central government to concentrate on higher level functions in a context where strong municipalities are capable of managing their own local affairs (Miller, 2000; Osborne and Gaebler, 1993).

When services are provided locally, it is further maintained, policies and solutions can be tailored to suit local circumstances and problems. Decentralized institutions are also more flexible and can respond more quickly to the changing needs of citizens (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993; Miller, 2000). However, it is contended, when services are provided by local governments, there is also the risk that this will give rise to more inequality between regions and to political fragmentation (De Vries, 2000). It may also lead to conflicts between local and national interests, although, if properly managed, these might not necessarily be harmful (Miller, 2000).

Local service delivery is based on the greater knowledge which local authorities have about local preferences (Ranson and Stuart, 1994) and local circumstances. However, it is also argued that officials in smaller municipalities have less training and professional knowledge and this is because the recruitment of highly educated and skilled officials is only possible in larger municipalities and cities and that, as consequence, small local government are unable to handle complex problems (Segal, 1997; Miller, 2000).

A further issue raised when discussing decentralization is that of vertical coordination. With decentralization, it is stated, power is a better balanced and there is a counterweight to the domination of the central government (Weingast, 1995). However, there may also be coordination deficits and asymmetries between different administrative hierarchies. Intergovernmental collaboration also runs the risk of fueling conflict and contestation over authority and resources (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014). This is because governance becomes more complex in a multi-level setting, particularly in regard to the definition of roles, functions, relationships, power sharing and revenue.

3. An analytical framework of local service delivery in a multi-level context

In this section, an analytical framework for service delivery at the local level is elaborated (Figure 1). In doing so, it is important to emphasize that the framework is based on Northern hemisphere experience and that some of its tenets may not hold true in emerging democracies or in states in transition from prolonged periods of authoritarian rule. Having so stated, in an increasingly globalized world where citizen demands for democratic representation and effective service delivery are growing exponentially, there is an increasing convergence of approaches toward decentralization in states in the South. Thus, whilst not all aspects of the framework presented here might apply to emerging democracies in the South, many do.

Amongst the factors taken into consideration in developing the framework, we distinguish between, what might be considered, contextual and internal factors. Contextual factors relate to the specific contexts which confront local governments, such as, for example, their institutional relations with other levels of the governing hierarchy as well as their dealings with private institutions and citizens. Internal factors refer to those directly located within local government systems, such as the size and type of the municipality, the form of local service delivery, financial regimes, local services, and reform processes.

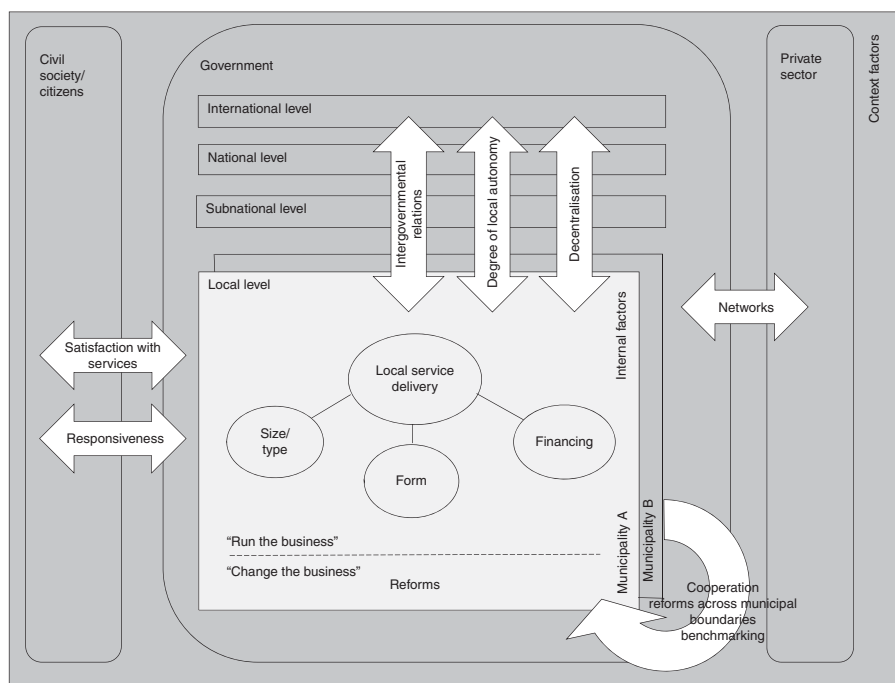


Figure 1.
Analytical framework
of local service
delivery in a
multi-level context

3.1 Context factors: horizontal and vertical dimension and relations

Contextual factors relating to local service delivery may be subdivided into the horizontal dimension, which comprises citizens/civil society, government, and the private sector, and the vertical dimension, which consists of the different state levels and relations between them.

The horizontal dimension. In the horizontal dimension, as intimated, citizens/civil society, government and the private sector are identified as the three main actors in the system. This configuration is of particular significance in the co-production of service delivery (Rosenbaum, 2006) which has gained prominence in recent years. It implies that the public sector contracts civil society and the private sector to create, manage and deliver public goods and services on its behalf. Such relationships between government, civil society and the private sector are complex, numerous, and growing in number, not only at the national level, but also significantly at the local level (Schwab *et al.*, 2017). Local authorities face the need for more collaboration in policy-making and implementation, both with higher orders of government as well as with the private sector and voluntary institutions, as illustrated, for example, in the establishment of one-stop-shops and public-private partnerships (Bovaird and Löffler, 2002). The reasons behind this increased emphasis on collaborative service delivery include the increased capacity provided by networks, the greater managerial efficiency of the private sector, and, significantly, the lack of adequate public funding necessary to provide for public services due to external shocks (economic crises) or demographic trends (aging populations) (Steen *et al.*, 2017). They also include the willingness of NGOs to work in difficult policy areas and the increasing political influence of civil society and the private sector in deliberative processes (Rosenbaum, 2006).

When considering the relationship between government and civil society, it is stating the obvious that citizen satisfaction with the services provided and the responsiveness

of state agencies is of paramount importance. Efficiently provided services are of little value if they do not meet the demands of the local population. However, despite this, citizens' opinions and preferences are often given insufficient weight, particularly in the measurement of municipal performance (Boyne, 2002). In that respect, responsiveness may be understood as the extent to which services meet the preferences of their "direct consumers" or their "representatives" or the "wider community of local citizens" (Boyne, 2002, p. 18).

The vertical dimension. In the vertical dimension, which forms part of the system of multi-level governance (MLG), the government component is further subdivided into international, national, regional, and local levels (Eckersley, 2017), the last of which being the primary focus of the analytical framework which will be presented below. The proposition that local government alone is responsible for local service delivery, it has been argued, is patently false in that there is typically a vast network of actors involved in local service delivery (Shah and Shah, 2006). Rather than the specific allocation of tasks to a single administrative tier, responsibilities are generally shared between levels of government. We speak of MLG when more than one government level is involved in a political or administrative process. In such systems, institutional actors from different levels of the political system interact, are dependent on each other, and must, of necessity, coordinate their decisions and activities (Benz, 2007). These levels may include states or state-like institutions (e.g. international organizations or forms of inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) with minimal institutional standards and rules). In multi-level structures, competences and resources are distributed between different territorial units, and this, consequently, requires an appropriate system of multi-level governance, and an effective system of coordination (OECD, 2017).

Intergovernmental relations. In multi-level contexts, the framework of intergovernmental relations is especially important in when it comes to the delivery of public services. The term intergovernmental relations is commonly understood as the "relations between central, regional, and local governments (as well as between governments within any one sphere) that facilitate the attainment of common goals through cooperation" (Opeskin, 1999, p. 1). However, the term may also be used in a broader sense, which includes the mechanisms and agreements that enable effective relations and interaction between these units of government, for example, those relating to executive, legislative and judicial mechanisms, and cooperative agreements (Isioma, 2010), and, importantly, to efficient and effective public service delivery.

Several well-established theoretical principles provide a strong rationale for local service delivery, among them are the decentralization theorem principle and the subsidiarity principle (see Shah and Shah, 2006). The decentralization theorem, described by Oates (1972), is concerned with the question of how the territorial structure of a state should be designed in order to correspond to the preferences of its citizens. In that respect, it is stated, "Decentralization refers to the delegation of responsibilities, political decision-making and fiscal powers to lower levels of government" (OECD, 2017, p. 5). In the case of service delivery, there are possibilities for a better match between local preferences and needs and the services which are provided. It is also maintained that decentralization stimulates competition between local authorities and this enhances innovation and performance. There is, however, the risk that decentralization may adversely affect the quality of services delivered due to diseconomies of scale (OECD, 2017). The main assumption of Oates' decentralization theorem (1972), nevertheless, is that there are geographical differences in the preferences of citizens and, therefore, the demand for public services differs according to the locality. This is because it is assumed that local governments have a better understanding of the concerns of local residents (Shah and Shah, 2006). In his theorem,

Oates asserts that small territorial units are preferable to larger ones, assuming that there are no external effects and no issues of economies of scale. Decentralized service provision leads to improved efficiency if each circle of beneficiaries receives the quantity of services it requires rather than an equal quantity of services supplied to all circles of beneficiaries. In a decentralized system, service provision, ideally, corresponds to the preferences of the voters and this leads to the efficient allocation of public services. The subsidiarity principle (Pope Pius XI, 1931) is used as a guiding principle in the separation of tasks between higher and lower levels of the state. The subsidiarity principle has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension: the horizontal dimension relates to the functions which the public sector should fulfill. It requires that, as far as possible, all tasks should be fulfilled by the private sector and that only in specific instances should the state intervene. In its vertical component it relates to service provision within the state, and stipulates that public functions should be implemented at the lowest possible level and only if a convincing case can be made should they be assigned to a higher level of the state. In this framing, local governments should undertake as many tasks as practically possible as this is likely to lead to the delivery of services of an adequate quality and quantity. Implementing the subsidiarity principle, it is argued, leads to greater legitimacy and more efficient and effective fulfillment of functions. However, the division of functions between different levels of the state is often the outcome of historically determined developments and political power relations. As a consequence, the principle of subsidiarity often does not apply, neither is it a model for the division of functions and responsibilities which is universally applicable in different countries and over time. This is because the significance and the complexity of functions may alter fundamentally alter over time (Steiner and Kaiser, 2013).

Central-local relations and decentralization are also intertwined with the autonomy of local authorities. Local autonomy may be understood as the functional responsibility of local authorities and the degree of discretion they possess when deciding about public services (Ladner *et al.*, 2015; Page and Goldsmith, 1987; Kersting and Vetter, 2003). In that respect, based on a multi-faceted understanding of local autonomy, Ladner *et al.* (2016) have developed a local autonomy index, which is a comprehensive methodology used measure local autonomy among European countries. Scholars more or less agree that local autonomy relates to the legal standing of local governments within the state and the extent to which they have the right to self-governance and to organize themselves independently. The issue of local autonomy also relates to the range of functions undertaken by local governments and the extent to which they are able to determine which services to provide and how they might be provided. A further factor relates to the degree of control which local governments have over their own financial resources, and the level of independence they have from higher echelons both in the generation and expenditure of finances. It has been shown that levels of local autonomy are particularly high in Switzerland, the Nordic countries, Germany and Poland, and that they have increased in the newly constituted Central and Eastern European countries in the period between 1990 and 2005 (Ladner *et al.*, 2016).

Relations between two or more local governments may also influence local service provision. This may occur when two or more municipalities, that share common boundaries, cooperate to fulfill local tasks, or several municipalities may be amalgamated as part of a local government reform strategy (Teles, 2016).

3.2 Internal factors: “run the business” and “change the business”

Internal factors relating to local service delivery may be subdivided into two segments, Concerning the state of the art, or “running the business,” and factors concerning reforms, or “changing the business.” The size and type of a local government, the form of service delivery, and its funding may be seen as state-of-the-art factors or, in management terms,

as “running the business,” while reforms and changes in this state of the art may be seen as factors “changing the business.”

Size/type of local governments. There are great differences in the size and type of local governments within countries as well as across countries. In terms of size, they can range from small rural municipalities and urban local governments to large metropolitan governments. Small municipalities are often inadequately equipped to provide local services on their own, so they seek to offer them through Inter Municipal Cooperation (IMC). Different political systems grant different degrees of autonomy to local governments (Ladner *et al.*, 2016). More autonomous local governments are responsible for a broader set of services (health, education, care functions, transport, police, etc.) and normally have the financial means to implement them effectively.

The case of metropolitan areas and cities is interesting in this respect, in that they often provide a broader set of public goods than those provided by rural municipalities. This, for example, might include care for the homeless and unemployed, public transport, or childcare, which are provided in addition to such basic services as water and waste disposal (Mueller, 2015). In the debates surrounding metropolitan government and whether or not such entities should have their own institutions, three different schools of thought be discerned: the metropolitan reform tradition, the public choice approach, and “new regionalism” (Kübler and Heinelt, 2005).

The metropolitan reform approach is based on welfare economics. The proponents of this approach ascribe the problems of suburban areas to high levels of institutional fragmentation. They support the consolidation of territorial authorities in metropolitan areas and hold that institutional boundaries should match the territorial extension of economic and societal conditions (Kübler and Heinelt, 2005).

The public choice approach uses economic theory to explain political behavior and decision-making processes and structures. In contrast to the metropolitan reform approach, it argues in favor of institutional fragmentation in metropolitan areas. It draws on Tiebout’s model of horizontal competition, according to which municipalities can be regarded as enterprises that compete for tax-paying inhabitants. The citizens choose their place of residence based on their individual preferences (“voting with their feet”). According to the supporters of this approach, this leads to more effective and efficient service delivery in metropolitan areas (Tiebout, 1956; Kübler and Heinelt, 2005).

The new regionalism approach was developed in the 1990s. Its starting point was the observation that, in reality, problems in metropolitan areas are often addressed “through purpose-oriented networks of coordination and cooperation, involving municipalities, governmental agencies at various levels, as well as private service providers” (Kübler and Heinelt, 2005, p. 9 *et seq.*). According to this approach, institutional consolidation is unnecessary. Instead, metropolitan areas can be governed through cooperative arrangements and networks between existing institutions. Political steering and regulation takes place in so-called “soft institutions,” which are more or less formally stable systems of players and agencies that deliver urban services. Their composition and design is geared toward the circumstances and interests prevailing in a specific urban area. Public-private partnerships and network organizations are examples of “soft institutions”.

Forms. There are different forms of service delivery in local governments. Besides providing services on their own, municipalities may provide public services in cooperation with others. IMC is understood as “the fulfillment of a public municipal task by an individual municipality, by two or more municipalities jointly or by a third legal entity, whereby the task fulfillment simultaneously serves at least two municipalities and the participating municipalities participate directly (‘performing’) or indirectly (‘organizing’)” (Steiner, 2003, p. 553; see also Arn and Friederich, 1994, p. 5).

There is a wide range of different forms of cooperation between local governments, which some have gone so far as to call a “cooperation jungle” (Wanner, 2006). A number of forms of IMC are possible and they vary in terms of their intensity, number of collaborative activities, financial scope, and other factors (De Spindler, 1998). Even within a single municipality there can be a range of forms of cooperation depending on the extent to which it participates in joint projects with different partners. Thus, depending on the activity, a variable geometry of forms of cooperation may be pursued (Iff *et al.*, 2010). Possible forms of service-delivery-related inter-municipal arrangements range from a simple exchange of opinions and experiences among administrative staff to legally binding cooperation that restricts the municipalities’ autonomy, and to arrangements which sometimes may be imposed by higher-ranking state levels. European countries typically provide a range of for various arrangements for informal or formal IMC arrangements, and these may be divided into four main categories: informal IMC, weakly formalized IMC, IMC in functional “enterprises,” and IMC as a model of integrated territorial cooperation (CoE, UNDP and LGI, 2010, p. 13).

Informal IMC is a relationship between municipalities which is not based on a legal arrangement. It occurs when mayors or senior bureaucrats at the local-level arrange meetings or exchange opinions and experiences with their counterparts about municipal issues. This is often an easy way to find answers to questions, to coordinate current issues, or to solve problems between neighboring municipalities.

In weakly formalized IMC, cooperation is based on agreements or contracts. Either one municipality fulfills the tasks on its own for the other municipalities (*Sitzgemeindemodell*) or two or more local governments fulfill their tasks together in joint task fulfillment (Friederich, 1997; Steiner, 2016, p. 899). IMC in functional “enterprises” involves IMC arrangements which need an appropriate legal status (CoE, UNDP and LGI, 2010). They are common for public utility services such as water supply, sewage treatment, or waste management. “IMC as a model of integrated territorial cooperation” is understood as a form of cooperative arrangement that “look like second level self-government authorities” (CoE, UNDP and LGI, 2010, p. 14). Governance in metropolitan areas is included in this category.

Financing. In regarding the financing of public services, the principle of fiscal equivalence (Olsen, 1969) is of particular interest. This principle emerged from public choice literature and holds that, in a federal structure, the beneficiaries of a service should also be responsible for its financing. With political jurisdiction and beneficial area matching, it is maintained, the problem of freeriding is overcome and an optimal provision of public services is ensured. The principle of fiscal equivalence requires a separate jurisdiction for each public service (Shah and Shah, 2006).

The functional, overlapping, and competing jurisdictions (FOCJ) principle proposed by Frey and Eichenberger (1999) is related to the principle of fiscal equivalence. According to the FOCJ approach, the geographical extension of a municipality is not defined according to historical municipal boundaries but according to the present or future spatial dispersion of a problem. Because each task requires its own spatial dispersion, their areas may overlap. FOCJs are understood as functionally formal political units that regulate affairs, levy taxes, and compete with each other. These networks are based on voluntary IMC. They create more flexibility and are better able to correspond to peoples’ preferences. Economies of scale can be utilized and spillovers minimized. Disadvantages, however, among others, include exit and coordination costs as well as the overburdening of citizens with excessive layering of administrative systems. It is of interest to note that the FOCJ approach does not exist in its purest form even in Switzerland, despite the fact that the idea was first developed there (Frey and Eichenberger, 1999).

Reforms. Local government reform has entered the public sector reform agenda of many European countries (Kersting and Vetter, 2003; Schwab *et al.*, 2017). These reforms consist of politico-administrative changes within individual municipalities, as well as contextual reforms which extend across municipal boundaries. Amalgamation reforms have been implemented in various countries in Europe and worldwide, especially since World War II, and they remain on the reform agenda of national and subnational governments. These reforms are generally intended to lead to an improvement of public service delivery and the financial situation of local governments (Steiner and Kaiser, 2017).

A distinction may be made between top-down and bottom-up strategies (Baldersheim and Rose, 2010a, b). A top-down strategy implies that subnational or central governments intervenes and that a reform is imposed on local government, and that it may be implemented against its will. Bottom-up approaches involve ideas about boundary changes that are proposed by local governments themselves and these are, as a rule, entered into on a voluntary basis. Local governments and their citizens decide independently whether or not they want to merge with one or more neighboring municipalities (Baldersheim and Rose, 2010a, b; Kaiser, 2015). Mixed strategies are also fairly common, for example, in the semi-voluntary “carrot and stick” approach. In a first phase, bottom-up proposals for mergers may be made by the municipalities themselves, and if they fail to reach agreement, top-down interventions may follow in a second phase (see, e.g. Wollmann, 2010).

4. Current topics/trends in local service delivery and discussion of contributions

In this special issue of the *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, scholars studying the delivery of services by local authorities from various countries across the globe share their empirical research and the theoretical insights which they have gained in the process. Their articles, some of which are comparative in nature, deal with local service delivery across different policy fields and tiers of government, in different organizational contexts, and in varied national contexts.

In the section which follows, we discuss these contributions in the light of the theoretical framework outlined above and reflections made earlier. In particular, we consider what the empirical evidence presented suggests, what commonalities and differences emerge and the extent to which they assist us in better understanding current trends in local service delivery.

4.1 Intergovernmental relations in a multi-level context

The first article in this issue deals with the dimension of intergovernmental relations presented in the analytical framework.

Implementation of public policies and public service provision often affects more than one state level, highlighting the importance of multi-level governance and central-local relations in the context of local service delivery. In their article, Lluís Medir Tejado and Esther Pano (2018) developed and tested a model of cooperative relations within the two main axes of “local autonomy-dependence” and “flexibility-rigidity.” The authors developed a theoretical model with four possible types of intergovernmental relations. These are, the agreeing position, in which local autonomy is greatly respected and the parties are more or less on equal terms; the partner model with stable instruments of cooperation; the bargaining type, where there is no equality between the parties and local governments try to negotiate better conditions; and the strong center model, which has a clear central leadership and strong central control.

These types of intergovernmental relations were found to have significant implications for public service delivery and the role of local governments, and, in that respect, the article, contributes to the literature on cooperative relations. While the model has been

tested in the context of local government in Southern Europe, an expanded range of comparative empirical studies is likely to provide further validation of the propositions which it advances.

4.2 *Autonomy and local government reform initiative*

The article by Nicolas Keuffer (2018), looks at the issue of local autonomy, which constitutes another dimension of the analytical framework outlined above.

Keuffer's article examines whether higher levels of autonomy facilitate local government reform. Empirical evidence derived from Swiss local government data sets was analyzed using a multi-level model. In so doing the article distinguishes between three different reform types in Swiss municipalities – managerial, political, and territorial reforms –and between different types of autonomy: that based on autonomy of the local economy, of local interests, and that derived from an overall cantonal index of municipal autonomy comprising seven dimensions of local autonomy. The findings show that local governments with a higher level of autonomy are indeed more proactive in initiating reforms. In the case of territorial reforms, however, more local autonomy was not found to be a significant driver.

The article provides important insights into the relationship between local autonomy and local government reforms in Swiss municipalities, concluding that policymakers in Swiss local governments with sufficient room to maneuver are more likely to take the initiative in introducing reforms aimed at improving local service provision.

4.3 *Compulsory or voluntary local government reforms*

Against the background of the analytical framework described earlier, the contribution by Silvia Bolgherini *et al.* (2018) touches on factors relating to intergovernmental relations, the degree of local autonomy, the extent of reforms, and cooperation between municipalities.

Whether reforms are imposed on local government in a top-down manner by higher echelons of the state or whether local governments autonomously decide to implement reforms has been a long-standing debate (Swianiewicz, 2010). A rescaling policy recently introduced in Italy obliges small municipalities to manage basic tasks jointly in a form of IMC known as compulsory joint management (CJM). In their article, Bolgherini *et al.* (2018) examined how small municipalities reacted to this policy, the extent to which they were effective in managing their joint functions together, the type of cooperation they adopted, and whether local governments resisted the reforms introduced. Quantitative data from official sources as well as qualitative data, generated by a semi-structured questionnaire, were analyzed and it was found that, in general, Italian local governments, complied poorly with the CJM requirements. Furthermore, those that did comply chose the simplest form of IMC. The reasons cited for this included a lack of consistency and political will at the national level and a poor “mind set” at the local level which inhibited cooperation. In order to improve service delivery, a better balance between local autonomy, flexibility, and differentiation on the one hand, and a common national framework and commitment, on the other hand, was proposed for future reforms.

The article aptly addresses two important components of current local government theorizing, namely: the debate about the appropriate size of local governments necessary to provide services effectively and efficiently (Keating, 1995), and the debate whether local government reforms should be voluntary or should be imposed by higher levels of the state (Swianiewicz, 2010).

4.4 *Amalgamation reforms*

The article by Elona Guga (2018) on local government modernization and territorial reform in Albania also touches on different components of the analytical framework, especially in

regard to reforms and the relationship between two or more local governments, as well as that between municipalities and higher levels of the state.

The article analyzes the historical development of local authorities in Albania and the current territorial administrative reforms of 2015-2020 in order to shed light on the decentralization process. It suggests that the reform has not delivered the expected results in that unconditional transfers from central government still account for almost 90 percent of local revenues. The reform is still ongoing, however, and the longer-term effects on service delivery may only emerge at a later stage. Problems in the implementation process were also assessed, and it is concluded that government employees require more training, and that the state should take advantage of the international assistance which Albania is currently receiving.

The contribution of this article to this special issue stems from the fact that it broadens the case base through its analysis of a reform process aimed at improving service delivery, transparency, and accountability in an Eastern Europe state.

4.5 Service provision in metropolitan areas

Focusing on megacities in a multi-level context, the article by Marco Salm (2018), addresses yet further dimensions of the analytical framework and includes discussion on the size and type of local authority, specifically in metropolitan areas, in different multi-level governance settings.

Continuing urban sprawl raises questions about the efficacy of metropolitan governance and its ability to deliver efficient services in mega cities. In this article which looks at the financing of megacities, Salm examines tax revenue and expenditure power in the context of multi-level BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa). Employing a mixed method design, he focused on case studies of megacities in India (Bangalore Brazil (Sao Paulo), China (Shanghai), and South Africa (Johannesburg), and applied a most similar case design for comparative evaluation. His findings suggest that increased efficiency in these megacities cannot be achieved by size alone, and neither can the quality of services be improved by simply extending their territorial boundaries. He concludes that decentralization and the devolution of power in megacities is necessary in instances where they outgrow their original boundaries, and that the fiscal frameworks should be reconsidered in order to improve local finances. Greater self-funding might be possible in megacities and more functional and fiscal responsibilities could be assigned to them, for example, through asymmetric federalism.

Megacities, as the article points out, often play a key role in a country's development, but many also suffer as a result of weak financial resources, policy problems, and governance challenges (Kübler and Lefèvre, 2017).

4.6 Satisfaction of citizens with local services

The relationship between government and citizens/civil society within the analytical framework is addressed in the article, by Jurga Bucaite Vilke and Mantas Vilkas (2018), which focuses on citizen satisfaction with local service delivery.

When discussing the quality of local services, the perceptions of the inhabitants of municipalities are of critical importance. This article looks at citizen satisfaction with municipal service delivery in Lithuania as well as the factors which might be influencing this. In so doing, it examines the relationship between the demography of a locality, the extent to which its citizens support the objectives of the municipality, their satisfaction with the services provided, and their perceived quality of life. The article is based on an analysis of a public opinion survey conducted in Lithuania in 2016 and makes use of confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. Its main findings include the fact that there is a positive relationship between citizens' satisfaction with services and infrastructure and their perceived quality of life. Socio-economic factors such as age or place of residence

also influence citizens' satisfaction with local service provision. For practical purposes, this implies that local government policy makers should take into consideration differences between socio-economic groups when designing and providing services.

In terms of the long standing debate on the optimal size of local governments (Dahl/Tufte, 1973; King, 1996), the Lithuanian study finds that residents living in towns and rural areas are more satisfied with local services than people living in cities, a result which supports the "small is beautiful" thesis. It also underscores the importance of citizens' perceptions when assessing the quality of public service delivery (Folz, 2004).

4.7 Improving local service delivery through benchmarking

The article by Sabine Kuhlmann and Joerg Bogumil (2018) uses a comparative approach in addressing the issue of benchmarking among local governments.

In so doing it discusses performance measurement and benchmarking as "reflexive institutions" for local government in a comparative study of Germany, Sweden, and England. Benchmarking, they maintain, may be used to identify and adopt more efficient and effective practices in the quest to improve local service delivery. Among European countries, as the article indicates, performance measurement and benchmarking systems differ. The article is based on the theory of institutional reflexivity and focuses on the connection between reflexive institutions and innovative capacity. The data used in the analysis is based on two research projects drawing on expert interviews and on a survey conducted in German municipalities. The article identifies three country-specific types of reflexive institutions in Germany, Sweden, and England. It also demonstrates that the impact of benchmarking on local innovation depends on specific institutional features and conditions at the local level, on the one hand, and on politico-administrative and cultural factors on the other.

Benchmarking is an important instrument of local government reform (Bovaird and Löffler, 2002), enabling local governments to learn more efficient and effective practices and to improve local service delivery. The article also considers factors that can impede or foster local government innovation through benchmarking.

5. Conclusion

This article has looked at the overarching question whether or not services are most effectively and efficiently delivered at the local level. In so doing it presented an analytical framework for local service delivery and the contributions to this special issue are discussed with reference to this analytical framework, which defines both contextual and internal factors. In regard to the contextual factors, the analytical framework is comprised of a horizontal and a vertical dimension – the horizontal being composed of the three main players in the system (civil society/citizens, government, and the private sector) and the vertical dimension consisting of the different levels of government in a multi-level system. The framework identifies relationships between the different players and between the local level and higher levels of government. In terms of the internal factors, the analytical framework takes into consideration the type, size, form, and financing of local service delivery as well as the possible reforms they might undergo.

Some overall conclusions that can be drawn from this special issue on local service delivery would include the following:

A shift from government to governance can be observed in service delivery implying a more collaborative and inclusive approach than in the past. In cases where problems and functions are complex, responsibilities are often shared between levels of government, and, as a consequence, the effectiveness of public service delivery needs to be understood in the context of multi-level governance. This is because it is not only government players who are concerned with public service delivery, but also a vast network of stakeholders.

As a result, there is a trend toward more collaborative governance, involving key players and stakeholders from government, civil society, and the private sector. As a consequence of this, there are calls for more engagement by citizens in local decision-making and local service delivery, and for relevant stakeholders to be consulted when designing and implementing local services.

Citizens' views on local services are of central importance and cannot be ignored in this process as it makes sense to deliver services in ways that meet local preferences. If local citizens are satisfied with a slightly lower service standard delivered at a lower cost, this may be acceptable, provided that minimum standards are maintained. In a fragmented municipal landscape, competition should, in this sense, lead to more efficient allocation of resources.

Service provision at the local level remains a hotly debated topic not only in different academic disciplines, but also very much so in practice. International institutions, governments, and practitioners, in different ways, are concerned with, and engaged, in issues relating to local service delivery, and it is an issue which affects all countries and their citizens alike.

Further knowledge and insights still need to be gained about local service delivery, and despite the fact that the topic has been studied extensively in recent decades, we still lack a general framework for the analysis of local service delivery. This article has attempted develop such an analytical framework and this has been put up for debate. In the interim, many questions remain unanswered, especially those relating to governance, organization, performance, and accountability in the field of local services and further research on these issues is clearly called for. This might include a comparative analysis of best practices in local service delivery conducted across a variety of different countries.

In the final instance, we have endeavored to respond to the overarching question whether local is always better. Having assessed the strengths and limitations of local service delivery in the context of both the wider literature and in light of the articles included in this issue, we can conclude that local is in some cases better but that this does not hold true in others. Depending on the nature of the public service provided, service delivery at the local level may be more appropriate in that local authorities are closer to their citizens than other levels of government and, as a consequence, the services which they provide are more likely to accord with local preferences. However, in the case of complex challenges that extend across municipal boundaries, service delivery in cooperation with other municipalities, in networks, or even by higher echelons of the state may be more appropriate, as long as the principle of subsidiarity is respected.

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