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BOOK REVIEWS

Swianiewicz, P. and Teles, F. (eds. 2018), *Intermunicipal Cooperation in Europe. Institutions and Governance*, New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan.

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Introduction

Over the last 50 years, a paradigmatic shift in government functioning at the local level has occurred. This has mainly concerned the increasingly participatory nature of decision-making processes, and the staggering centrality of national governments (Anderson, 1960; Wright, 1974; Peters and Pierre, 2001). Indeed, in the EU, this perspective is affirmed through the principle of *Subsidiarity*; this implies that there should be a decentralised organisation of responsibilities, which never entrusts to a larger unit what could be better achieved by a smaller one (Spicker, 1991).

The shift from government to governance has allowed scholars to investigate new administrative mechanisms, which are characterised by the creation and exploitation of networks of multiple – both public and private – actors (Le Galès, 1998), new forms of collaboration, and the negotiation of the decision-making process (Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009).

Scholars have observed European countries that deal with problems of regional or local governance and institutional, collective action in different ways, both across space and over time (Le Galès, 2016).

This book examines the nature of a very general, and common, means of dealing with problems of scale at the local level, namely Inter-Municipal Cooperation (hereafter IMC). The latter can be defined as the “intrinsic features of governance arrangements and institutions created to generate and maintain collaborative settings between different local governments in a particular territory. Those intrinsic features include motives for cooperation and how their different origins can induce diverse cooperative experiences”. Nowadays, IMC is a widespread phenomenon in the EU, and goes “hand in hand with the emergence of open horizontal and vertical networks of inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral conditions”. Generally, inter-municipal cooperative arrangements (hereafter IMAs) are seen as a way of addressing the challenges of suboptimal municipal size, and can serve as functional substitutes for territorial amalgamation (Hertzog 2010).

Aims and motivations

According to the editors, Pawel Swianiewicz and Filipe Teles, the relevance of studying inter-local cooperation, especially in a comparative way, unfolds in the heterogeneity of institutional arrangements, administrative traditions, roles of the actors involved, democratic aspects and dissimilar competencies in each case. Indeed, despite the challenging diversity within countries and between countries, the authors invite scholars to study this topic in a systematic way. A paucity of comprehensive, comparative studies has resulted in a gap in scholarship. So far, the only comprehensive study (Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007) covers a mere eight European countries, while only one volume – edited by Pawel Swianiewicz (2011) – has been dedicated to Central and Eastern Europe. A number of texts exist where two different countries are compared with one another (e.g. Wollmann, 2010), or where focus is placed on the general aspects of the phenomenon (Teles, 2016). Existing literature, albeit considered quite relevant by the authors, tends to focus on comparative research and tentative typologies based on the identification of general patterns (e.g. Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007). Another approach places cooperation within a wider set of alternative reform paths and ways of addressing the problems of scale and efficiency (e.g. Baldersheim and

Rose, 2010, Le Galès and Vitale, 2013). Specific case studies (e.g. Agranoff, 2009), or two-country comparisons, are also common. It is likely that the gap in scholarly research stems from the complexity of the phenomenon itself. Thus, the main questions regarding the relevance of IMC still have to be answered. Indeed, its main drivers, motivations and determinants are characterised by a multiple nature. Hence, national administrative traditions, governance systems, political culture and the different levels of local autonomy in each country render the development of a comprehensive typology almost impossible. Most of the dimensions that delineate the phenomenon are not the result of a limited number of options; they are more a *continuum* of possibilities. This idea can be interpreted as a subtle criticism of the study and, more specifically, of the typology carried forward by Hulst and Von Monfort (2007); indeed, the authors affirm that the “multiple dimensions needed in order to produce a more complete typology would complexify it to a point where it would not fulfil the task of simplifying existing types”. Their conclusion is that, within the existing literature on this topic, only partial attempts to capture the whole picture can be found. Thus it has mainly investigated drivers and outcomes of cooperation, rather than its functioning. *Governing through cooperation* has nowadays become one of the main challenges for municipalities in Europe (Bell and Warner, 2016). In fact, cooperation is not a simple matter of choosing partners and engaging, but it entails complex negotiation, as well as dedicated institutional arrangements for sharing and delivering common services and collective goods. And it is prone to failure (Vitale 2010). Thus, academia can play a relevant role not only in describing and explaining the mechanisms of cooperation, but also in providing practical reasoning and evidence to make IMC more effective in achieving valued purposes.

To sum up, the main aims of this book are to capture some of the aforementioned research challenges; the effort to shed light on IMC’s main complexities is indeed an important one. The authors’ intention is to explore the dynamics, the experiences and the drivers of IMC in Europe, but also to include unusual suspects: countries which, so far, have been less frequently analysed in international literature. In fact, when cooperative arrangements are typically discussed, the main European countries that are investigated include France, Finland, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. *Intermunicipal Cooperation in Europe. Institutions and Governance* includes some classic case studies (Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland), countries studied in a more limited man-

ner in previous publications on the topic (Greece, Portugal, Spain and the UK), several countries of the hitherto heavily under-explored, EU new member states from the eastern part of the continent (Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania), and finally, non-EU members (Albania, Iceland and Norway). Moreover, the selection also covers several relatively small European countries (Iceland, Slovakia and Slovenia), as opposed to the important comparative study by Hulst and Van Montfort (2007) which focused on mid-sized and large countries (the smallest ones in that study were Finland and Belgium). Hence, the twenty countries studied in the book seem to represent a relevant and diversified source of information and knowledge. Furthermore, the authors adopt a variety of methodological approaches, from surveys to case studies, from financial data analysis to network analysis, from historical and political essays to comparative studies.

Analysis of the chapters

The case studies are divided into four different thematic areas. This division is motivated by the fact that, in this way, the book reflects the most relevant research perspectives used in studying the phenomenon of IMC. In the first part of the book, entitled “Drivers, Democracy and Delivery”, five studies are presented, all of them following a comparative path in which each chapter brings data from two or more countries to a cross-country, comparative and thematic analysis.

Thus, after a first introductory chapter by the two editors, the second chapter looks at the impact of austerity reforms on IMC, using a survey conducted by experts in eleven countries. The aim of this study, by Ringa Raudla and António F. Tavares, is to provide an explanatory analysis of the overall effects of austerity measures, which were implemented after the financial crisis (2008-2009), and the possible effects of these on the use of IMAs in local governance. They conclude that there is not a clear correlation between austerity and increasing use of IMC, because this effect appears evident only in certain countries (i.e. Italy, Portugal, United Kingdom, Netherlands and Iceland). For most of these countries, the process has followed an institutional bottom-up direction, with the exception of Italy, where a strong top-down approach for boosting IMC was adopted. In general, Raudla and Tavares argue that IMC was not regarded as an explicit poli-

cy to address specific austerity issues, but rather as one of the strategies included in a broader set of reforms affecting local governance. This conclusion partially confirms what has also been affirmed by Le Galès (2018).

The third chapter, written by Pawel Swianiewicz, focuses on the role of different political actors in initiating and running these institutions. It does so on the basis of a survey conducted in eight European countries. The results confirm the important role played by mayors, especially in those contexts where the nature of IMC is highly institutionalised; the most important result, though, is that country-specific features are more significant than other characteristics identified at the level of individual IMAs. However, the author's research seems to be biased by the fact that in all the countries analysed, mayors have a very strong position, and are in charge of many tasks and responsibilities. Furthermore, the operationalisation of the hypothesis appears relatively weak, because the database used originates from a survey conducted in IMC offices, not individual municipalities. Consequently, a precise measurement of the variation among municipalities based on their population size was not possible.

The fourth chapter, by Adam Gendźwiłł and Marta Lackowska, is about a well-known issue of IMC: democratic legitimacy. The authors compare the institutional designs of four European countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Portugal and Spain), and with the help of a survey they detect opinions about the basic mechanisms capable of ensuring democratic legitimacy of IMAs. The selection of case studies depends on two factors: firstly, similar cases in legal terms, in order to make cross-country comparisons; secondly, countries from which the necessary data are available. The importance of their contribution lies in the distinction between input, output and throughput legitimacy, and the consequent operationalisation of the variables. In their conclusion they claim that these new arrangements “borrow” their legitimacy from the elected authorities of the member municipalities, in all the investigated countries. Yet, there are also cases of IMC entities which develop their own channels of interactions with residents; the analysis demonstrates that these are usually larger, financially more significant and well-settled unions. However, the evident difficulty that emerges is that of studying the transparency of the decision-making process without using an in-depth examination.

In the fifth chapter, Patrícia Silva and Esther Pano Puey look at the governance capacity issue. Following a comparison between Portugal and Spain, the authors present a cross-case comparative analysis of governance capacity, drawing on the governance index developed by Silva *et al.* (2018). A second, and inter-related, objective of the chapter is to test the validity of the index in different contexts. The authors focus on the features of cooperation that ensure the maintenance of IMAs, and their ability to effectively function as policy actors in the arena of local governance. They distinguish five dimensions of governance capacity: the scope of cooperation, the nature of institutional structures, the efficiency, democracy and accountability, and stability of cooperative arrangements. The authors conclude that the governance capacity index shows a striking ability to be valid in different contexts, and to accurately reflect the situation of the entities in different environments. Furthermore, the chapter suggests that, in order to improve efficiency in service delivery, inter-municipal associations require specific political and organisational resources.

The sixth chapter, which concludes the first part of the book, is written by Grétar Thór Eythórsson, Pekka Kettunen, Jan Erling Klausen, and Siv Sandberg, and is a comparison among three Nordic countries: Finland, Iceland and Norway. What makes these countries interesting is the fact that the functional status of local governments in Nordic countries is more pronounced than in other European countries, due to the decentralised character of the Nordic welfare states. The aim of this chapter is to describe the institutional diversity that captures the motives for engaging in cooperative arrangements. The authors highlight the relevance of legal and constitutional constraints in explaining the emergence of such arrangements. In order to determine IMC, the legal and constitutional explanations seem to matter more than municipal fragmentation and multi-level system of government.

The second part of the book is entitled “Cooperation in Europe”, and comprises eight chapters exclusively focused on single-country case studies, beginning with Robert Hertzog’s chapter on one of the most studied and debated cases: France. Indeed, France is probably the European nation with the richest history of IMC; nowadays, almost all French municipalities are involved in some kind of IMC. IMC developed at the end of the nineteenth century, in order to tackle problems of municipal fragmentation and to avoid amalgamation. From the his-

torical review of all forms of IMC that took place in the country emerges a picture characterised by a deep complexity in cooperative arrangements, in which various variables and needs are taken into account. Hertzog concludes from this that “the taboo of amalgamation” has recently been broken, and surely new territorial reform will take place.

In the eighth chapter, Pieter-Jan Klok, Marcel Boogers, Bas Denters and Maurits Sanders endeavour to describe some of the features of the Dutch way of organising IMC, focusing on the complex networks of overlapping arrangements in the Netherlands. They conclude that the benefits of cooperation are essentially twofold. Firstly, municipalities can benefit from IMC when collaboration enhances their capacity to (efficiently) provide facilities and services for the local community, in order to solve the locality’s problems. Secondly, the benefits of this type of collaboration are selective: their availability is dependent on the contribution of the involved municipalities. Thus, if the overall performance of IMAs is perceived to be high, concerns are raised about the transaction costs that come with cooperation, while democratic legitimacy is not perceived as a big issue, as long as indirect democracy is guaranteed.

The ninth chapter is written by Reto Steiner and Claire Kaiser, and regards IMC in Switzerland which, like many decentralised and fragmented states, is characterised by an extensive proliferation of cooperative arrangements aimed at achieving economies of scale. Moreover, the strong autonomous nature of the local government system amplifies the need of small municipalities to rely on cooperation, in order to overcome fragmentation and scale-related service delivery weaknesses. There are many opportunities for cooperation, from informal arrangements to highly institutionalised ones. Indeed, data confirm that, in Switzerland, smaller municipalities tend to fulfil more tasks in cooperation with one or more neighbouring municipalities. However, different regions of the country work at different speeds, and the outcomes of the study suggest that IMC does not emerge solely as a result of smallness or financially difficult situations. Rather, the drivers behind IMC are to be found in additional, legislated requirements imposed by higher-ranking state levels or cantonal politics. The authors conclude that, for Swiss municipalities, IMC seems to be a successful model of task fulfilment.

The tenth chapter looks at a specific German region, the federal state of Brandenburg, which Jochen Franzke describes as a region that preserved many legacies of communist times. In particular, Franzke refers to those legacies that are relevant in the political culture of Brandenburg, and of its municipalities and counties: for example, a higher concentration of power at the federal state level, as opposed to West Germany, which is characterised by more decentralisation and local autonomy. In this regard, Brandenburg seems to have much in common with Central Eastern European countries, including how IMC performs. These specificities are guaranteed by the national structure of local authorities; moreover, each federal state enjoys full autonomy in issuing and establishing IMC institutions. The analysis proposed in this chapter emphasises the intensive use of different forms of IMAs in Brandenburg, and the territorial reforms affecting the functioning of IMAs and amalgamation. The author concludes by highlighting the existence of a democratic deficit as well as a lack of sustainability, stability and, occasionally, inadequate efficiency.

In Chapter 11, Grétar Thór Eythórsson contributes to the debate with an analysis of the Icelandic case. To better frame the context of local authorities, he explains that, historically, the harsh geographical and weather conditions in Iceland have had an impact on the country's municipal structure, obstructing amalgamations due to problems with communication on land. Nonetheless, IMC was implemented in order to achieve economies of scale and cost reduction. In fact, the main motivation for IMC in Iceland, as reported by mayors, is to promote scale redefinition in order to overcome scale-related problems of municipalities. This reasoning appears particularly evident for smaller municipalities.

The twelfth chapter, written by Julita Łukomska and Katarzyna Szmigiel-Rawska, looks at the Polish case. After describing the complexity of the country's institutional structure, they distinguish three modes of coordination: market, hierarchy and network (Powell 1990). However, the third mode can be considered a hybrid (Williamson 1991), because of its specific features. Next, they perform a test in order to understand if financial transfers between local governments' budgets can be considered a measure of IMC, they address the general lack of quantitative measures of inter-local cooperation. Thus, they produce a typology of inter-local, financial transfers in Poland according to the three modes of coordination. Regrettably, they conclude that it is difficult to establish a clear

distinction between transfer flows based on the market and on networks. The division definitely does not reflect the division between service types; indeed, both modes of coordination can be found in almost all kinds of inter-municipal services and tasks.

The thirteenth chapter discusses the case of Slovenia; Irena Bačlija-Brajnik depicts an institutional context where small municipalities can rely on regions to carry out tasks that would be impossible to fulfil because of scale-related issues. After a discussion of the different legislations that affect local authorities, Bačlija-Brajnik distinguishes different forms of IMC in the country, their scopes, and how they attract funds. Her conclusion is that graduate spill-over effects in the area of service provision do not occur; in fact, the only joint provision is for financed and supported tasks, and generally one small municipality only cooperates with one bigger municipality in one or two services. This might be due to strong municipal fragmentation and rigid legislation. The process of re-defining the system of local self-government seems to have been a *slippery slope*, which does not forecast any asymmetric legislation, capable of facing up to Slovenia's municipal fragmentation.

The fourteenth and last chapter in this second section again looks at a specific autonomous region; Esther Pano Puey, Lluís Medir Tejado, Carla Puiggròs Mussons and Jaume Magre Ferran analyse IMC in Catalonia. Their aim is to study the position of inter-municipal associations within the complex context of different entities engaging in local cooperation. In doing so they focus, particularly, on the needs of smaller municipalities, their claims, memberships and expectations. The results open up a new perspective, namely, the fact that smaller municipalities rely more on counties and consortia than on pure inter-municipal, standing institutions. Consortia bring together municipalities, counties, and provinces, while inter-municipal associations only assemble municipalities. For small municipalities, the possibility of financial entrances is more likely to occur if they use consortia. Another important conclusion that the authors draw, is that although municipal size is a relevant variable, it moves in the opposite direction from what was expected: larger municipalities are more active. This might indicate that there is a minimum threshold of resources that are needed to start cooperation, and that financial leverage plays an important role in cooperation.

The third part of the book, “Success and Failure: Case Studies”, contains short reports on specific case studies regarding individual institutions and IMAs, which are meant to provide information and learning outcomes for research. The section opens with a chapter by Paweł Swianiewicz and Adam Gendźwiłł, who focus on the single case study of an inter-municipal union in southern Poland, which was established in 1994 and went into liquidation in 2009.

Failures, as well as best practices, allow us to learn about the mechanisms of IMC, its facilitators and obstacles. Starting from the scope of, and the drivers behind, the case under examination, the authors reconstruct the entire life process of the joint association of municipalities. They address changing factors in composition, scope, power balance, financial management and incentives; the conclusion they draw is that the problems of the IMAs emerged exactly when much larger (EU) funds became available. Indeed, the European Union was unable to prepare a successful joint application for funding, because of new, divergent interests. This case study shows how a lack of long-term strategies and clear rules of concertation, political changes at a municipal level, and institutional individualism, can bring an initially successful cooperative arrangement to an end.

In the sixteenth chapter, Cristina Stănuș looks at the Oradea Metropolitan Area in Romania. An important aspect of her contribution is that she pays attention to the complex architecture of cooperative arrangements in this country. Among the defining contextual elements for the introduction of IMC there is a very visible tendency towards fragmentation of existing local governments, combined with a constitutional protection of local autonomy, which does not allow the central government to force amalgamations; only a bottom-up process can induce municipalities to merge. The key finding of this brief case study is the significant impact of one of IMC’s greatest organisational complexities in this national context: the role of local political actors in furthering, or hindering, local development and cooperation. The likelihood that IMC works as a middle way toward voluntary, bottom-up amalgamation remains low, as long as it depends on local political actors consciously making decisions that lead to significant change of the local, territorial-administrative and political context.

Chapter 17 focuses on a well-studied ambit of cooperation, namely waste management, in a highly understudied country: Albania.

Alba Dakoli Wilson proposes a very interesting research question: if it is generally assumed that IMC represents an alternative to territorial reform, when these two processes coexist, how can territorial reform (which reduces the number of municipalities) affect the basis and the demand for cooperation?

The proposed case study is on solid waste management, arranged around the city of Korça, which is the main regional centre in the Albanian south-east. The author seems to suggest that IMAs with stronger member municipalities have increased opportunities to provide the necessary financial support, and the reduction of shareholders speeds up the decision-making process. However, if a democratic issue arises, those small communities previously represented in the general assembly now become part of the bigger municipalities; consequently, they do not have direct participation in the decision-making bodies of the IMC.

In the eighteenth chapter, Jakub Lysek and Pavel Šaradín analyse IMC in two successful, Czech micro-regions, both of them with a history of more than 15 years of cooperation among its members. They are organised, structured and operative in various fields. The basic questions guiding this study are as follows: why does local government choose to cooperate, and under what conditions can cooperation work?

Other than the structural and contextual differences between the two cases, the authors conclude that the success of the two cases can be partly attributed to good governance in matters of human capital, and on the reliance on active citizens who are willing to collaborate, and enthusiastic about taking part in the betterment of their communities, even in very peripheral situations. The IMC's size structures seem important as well: the more municipalities, the less efficiency can be achieved.

Lastly, financial means are also very crucial, but seemingly, success itself is conditioned by both the active citizens and their representatives.

The last case study of the book, by Eva Marín Hlynsdóttir, explores how Lilliput municipalities (i.e. smaller than 100 inhabitants) in Iceland manage to survive in the light of legal requirements of the local government; these rule that all municipalities – regardless of size – should provide their citizens with the same level of services on the basis of the fact that Iceland's population rejected, through referenda, the possibility of amalgamating with bigger, neighbouring municipalities. Among the six cases presented here, the focus is on the smallest

municipality (53 inhabitants), where the main source of income is property tax; the latter is paid on 500 second homes owned by people living in the capital city. As the income tax is very low, due to the small number of residents, property tax suffices to fund practically all service provisions.

Discussion and Conclusions

In the concluding chapter of the book, Pawel Swianiewicz and Filipe Teles confirm that the experience of IMC in European countries is an extremely diversified phenomenon. It is important to highlight that what emerges from these pages is the heterogeneity of cooperation across countries, not only in the scope of the arrangements and in their architecture, which is connected to the institutional architecture of the country or region where IMC takes place, but also in the specific forms that cooperation takes on.

On the one hand, we find countries with a heterogeneous, long-lasting variety of forms of IMAs at the local level, while in other countries IMC still represents a rare, and infrequently used, form of innovation in governance.

In France and the Netherlands, specifically, the phenomenon is widespread and cooperation arrangements are used by almost every municipality in the country.

On the other hand, Albania belongs to the group of countries in which IMC is still not a common strategy to deal with scale-related issues. As described in Chapter 17, the case of cooperation in solid waste management that occurs in the region in Albania is an exceptional innovation, and not a common feature of the Albanian local governance landscape.

Between these two extremes, there are a range of countries where IMC is relatively common, but still far from playing an important role in service provision, as in the Finnish case.

Yet, in addition to the strong and evident heterogeneity of the phenomenon, it is possible to find some commonalities and trends in IMC on the European continent.

The first commonality is the fact that we are witnessing a growth of cooperative arrangements as a means and as an element of innovation for local governance; consequently, investments in this area are increasing almost everywhere in the EU.

The second common feature is variety, that is, the forms cooperative institutions take in different countries. A clear piece of evidence to support this affirmation is the total amount of words used in each chapter to describe, and analyse, the different forms of IMC available in the country under examination: formal and informal, single or multi-purpose, based on public or private law, bilateral or multilateral. Needless to remember that this reasoning works to different extents in different countries. Indeed, in some of these the number of options is quite limited, and IMC still doesn't play a relevant role in local governance (e.g. Slovenia). The third feature held in common is a constant evolution. Indeed, cooperation is not a stable phenomenon; it is dynamic. Cooperation is a living process, constantly created and recreated by its users, which can be enforced or hindered, exploited or disrupted. As described in the introduction to the book, the *liquid state* of cooperation appears evident if we focus on the case of France, where for decades IMC has constantly been reinvented through new legal forms, scope and political structures (Lefèvre *et al.*, 2013).

Thus, through this book, the two authors demonstrate that the boundaries and definitions of IMC are extremely fuzzy. Other than the fact that they have gathered case studies which can be considered “pure” examples of IMC (i.e. two or more municipalities that agree to work together in order to achieve mutual benefits), the phenomenon only appears to be part of a wider process of the emergence of collaborative local governance. Furthermore, the book contains examples in which the forms of cooperation under analysis are inter-municipal, but also multi-level (e.g. consortia in Catalonia) or cross-sectoral (e.g. Czech Republic, Poland). If it is not possible to draw a distinctive and clear definition, a loose definition becomes necessary.

Swianiewicz and Teles next move on to consider an important theoretical relation, namely that which connects IMC to the territory; the most appealing relation is the one represented by territorial reforms. As affirmed by Hertzog (2010), IMC is a viable alternative to territorial reforms. This idea is presented by many countries in more or less explicit ways (e.g. France, Czech Republic and Iceland).

Generally, the small scale of local governments is considered a very common condition for entering into cooperative arrangements. Following this assumption, we might expect that IMAs are more popular in countries with more territorially fragmented municipal structures, and in smaller local governments within each country. However, not all data proposed in the book confirm this “rule”; some of

the data confirm it (e.g. Switzerland, France), but many others do not (e.g. Iceland, Finland and the Netherlands).

The study of the Spanish case seems to shed light on the causes of this contradiction, namely, the weak capacity of the smallest local governments to organise and manage their presence in the IMC institutions. Therefore, certain push factors (demand for cooperation due to small scale) but also pull factors (the necessary capacity to be engaged) help explain the variation among local governments. If the explanation provided in this chapter is correct, the claim that IMC can play a substitutive role in territorial reform is undermined.

Another interesting connection is the one proposed for the Albanian case, which seems to partially confirm Olson's idea (1965); the latter states that collective action is more likely to be facilitated in contexts characterised by a smaller group of involved actors, unless incentives and/or (the threat of) coercion force down cooperation.

However, if size is not a sufficient explanation for cooperative endeavour, other drivers that also push local governments towards collaboration with their neighbours have been addressed in the book. In Chapter 2, Raudla and Tavares demonstrate that in some countries, the economic crisis and austerity measures have played an important role in fostering cooperation. This supports what already affirmed by Bolgherini (2015), namely that the spending review process – aimed at limiting expenditure – has shown how controlling and streamlining public spending is strictly connected to processes of administrative levels rationalisation.

Furthermore, the chapter that compares the three Nordic countries suggests that constitutional and legal issues are crucial to understand the variation in the propensity towards cooperation. However, this conclusion can be extended to all contexts in which IMC is operating not only through informal arrangements, but is somehow institutionalised; consequently, it is worth taking institutional architecture into account when we study IMAs.

Another important element for understanding IMC, though under-explored in the book, is its scope. In fact, there are some functions which require coordination across boundaries more than others, and especially if the level of local autonomy is high, local governments are forced to look for solutions in the collaboration with their neighbours. Not all measures create economies of scale, when taken by more municipalities; highly capital-intensive services can reduce their

cost if the number of municipalities increases. On the other hand, labour-intensive services could show diseconomies of scale due to an increase in the size of the catchment area/inter-municipal association (Bocchino 2018).

Another important element is the system of incentives. The authors affirm that there can be strong external incentives which make cooperation a “not to refuse” option. They acknowledge that incentives often have a financial nature, either in the form of specific grants for cooperating municipalities or through the access to alternative financial sources (e.g. taxes). The other type of incentives might be functionally related to transferring additional competencies to local governments, which engage in IMAs.

Thus, if it is true what Post (2004) notes, an important stimulus for local cooperation may appear in the form of financial incentives, offered by state or federal governments. At the same time, in this book a wider approach to incentives seems to be lacking; indeed, as argued by North (1990), political actors respond to a mix of formal and informal institutions, and informal incentives may overtake the formal ones. Thus, any institutional approach that does not deal with informal incentive structures may be missing important explanatory data.

Furthermore, incentives can be analysed as a form of positive coercion; the State, or other senior levels of government, can use legislation to force cities to work together in certain fields, and provide collective goods in not so institutionalised policy sectors, such as health promotion, inclusion policy, socio-cultural animation (Emmeneger and Vitale, 2005; Polizzi *et al.*, 2013). Coercion and incentives from upper levels add a further element of complexity to the picture. The cases need to be analysed also taking into consideration the relationships between tiers of government, and in the context of nested scales. Moreover, one possible problem of coercion is that it is not always explicit, that it can be exercised informally by upper tiers of government and in other ways, such as moral suasion (Bocchino 2018). Thus, it may be difficult to track coercion, and incentives may be considered in two, theoretically different ways: as exogenous variables; or in a more structural perspective, as parts of the institutional arrangement within each joint action that takes place (Barbera, 2001).

In the third chapter it is demonstrated that personal leadership at the municipal level is very important. In the vast majority of the analysed countries, the mayor is the most important actor, having a strong role both in initiating an IMA and in

its management and maintenance. As stated by the two authors of this chapter, the weakness lies in the fact that the samples have been mostly limited to countries with a strong-mayor leadership model.

A missing element in the analysis, which is linked to leadership, is the role of the human capital of mayors. Indeed, networks may develop among city executives in the region, who tend to share the same training and background, and values of professionalism (Feiock *et al.*, 2003). The assumption here is that sharing the same professional values may be key to aligning local leaders.

The “democratic deficit”, that is, the democratic dimension of cooperative operations, is mentioned in many chapters and discussed in depth in the fourth and eighth chapters. The main contribution on this specific subject, from my viewpoint, comes from Adam Gendźwił and Marta Lackowska; they use Schmidt’s (2013) distinction of the three dimensions of IMC institutions’ legitimacy: input, throughput and output. Input and output refer to the concept of democracy as a government by the people (legitimacy through participation), of the people (legitimacy through fair representation) and for the people (legitimacy through the effectiveness and outcomes of enacted policies). The notion of throughput legitimacy, by contrast, refers to the inclusiveness, openness and transparency of the decision-making process: the government with the people (*ibidem*). The problem is that legitimacy is always measured by focusing on a mayor’s perception of legitimacy, and the citizens’ involvement. An analysis based on citizens’ perception is still missing in the literature on IMC.

This book undoubtedly represents an important contribution to the field, by virtue of the comparative analysis it offers. Furthermore, the chapter by Silva and Pano is one of the most valuable and useful studies on this subject matter, because it suggests a robust methodology for empirically measuring and comparing the governance capacity of individual IMC entities. However, much more needs to be explored; studying other, related types of cooperative arrangements can be an interesting way of adding further elements of complexity to the general picture of IMC, such as the more informal IMAs, or those with a multi-level nature.

As stressed by the two editors of the volume, the emerging empirical base is not sufficient to formulate definite conclusions on the factors behind variation

among countries. Thus, in the concluding paragraph, they suggest a series of variables that may be used as a basis for a future research agenda.

The first of these are the conditions of successful cooperation as formulated by Heinelt and Kübler (2015): organisational culture, favourable for cooperation; external incentives; strong leadership. They next add a fourth potential explanatory variable, related to the level of territorial fragmentation/consolidation of municipal tier governments, and a fifth variable linked to the level of functional decentralisation and to the level of local self-reliance in dealing with tasks.

In conclusion, this book has the merit to fill in certain gaps in the academic literature on IMC in Europe. It reinforces the relevance and urgency of IMC, and of new research agendas. At the same time, in spite of a few theoretical deficiencies, it is a great proactive effort toward a comprehensive attitude in studying the phenomenon. This is in virtue of the fact that it suggests methods, variables and hypotheses that can be tested, and that provide some clues to the questions that remain to be answered.

As becomes evident in the volume, IMC is a growing and widespread occurrence in Europe, given that it is one of the most diverse, dynamic and heterogeneous means of local governance. The fuzzy definition this entails, and the research complexity it introduces, should be considered as an incentive for further studies. Mechanisms of functioning, drivers, determinants and intervening variables can be crucial elements not only for the academic debate, but also, and particularly, for practitioners and political actors directly involved in similar debates. Hence, IMC is not just an institutional makeover; it is a deep reshaping of structures, institutions, roles, competencies, borders and scale at the local level (Teles, 2016).

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