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The perception of inter-municipal cooperation by local officials and managers

ABSTRACT: *Though the exploration of inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) is very widespread in contemporary literature worldwide, the perception of IMC by municipal officials is rarely examined. We focused this paper on revealing the relationship between the perceptions of municipal public officials and the realized benefits of municipal cooperation. Our research combines primary data from a survey of municipalities engaged in a form of IMC and in-depth interviews of both municipal officials and managers who coordinate IMC. Our survey results show that agreement with the statement that IMC helps solve administrative capacity problems tends to vary with the size of the municipality. This study detected considerable obstacles to IMC use, with one set of respondents indicating that they had tried cooperation and found that it did not yield significant, positive financial or non-financial benefits for them. Our in-depth interviews revealed that strong political leadership and experienced managerial staff can contribute to the development of municipal cooperation. In summary, our research provides evidence supporting the notion that the perception of IMC by municipal officials could be an important precursor to actual IMC use and future development.*

KEYWORDS: perception, inter-municipal cooperation, public officials, managers

RECEIVED 29 October 2020; **ACCEPTED** 11 November 2020.

INTRODUCTION

Inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) is an ongoing issue in the structure of public administration in many countries, with particular interest in those settings with high levels of municipal fragmentation (Soukopová & Vaceková, 2018). Although IMC has been explored in light of numerous economic, geographic, spatial, political, and institutional settings, questions remain about the suitability of this approach for providing public services and the extent to which it is generally accepted and considered to be advantageous by local officials. The perceived costs and benefits of collaborative action may be important factors in determining the outcomes of instances of IMC. Further, although the institutional context of cooperation in the European Union is relatively well examined and described (Casula, 2019; Franzke, Klimovsky & Pinteric, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Hulst & Montfort 2012; Swianiewicz & Teles, 2019; Tavares & Feiock, 2018; Wollman, 2010), considerations of the approach from the perspective of local officials—especially in Central and Eastern Europe—are rather rare (Klimovský, Mejere, Mikolaityte, Pinterič & Saparniene, 2014, Gendźwiłł, Krukowska & Lackowska, 2019; Swianiewicz & Teles, 2019) and deserving of more attention.

With the perspective of local officials in mind, several questions are worth consideration: Are municipal mayors or managers aware of all costs, revenues, or benefits IMC could bring to both the entire cooperative unit (i.e., associations) and individual entities of the unit (i.e., member municipalities)? Do they appreciate the rationality principles (Teles, 2016) hidden behind the pure IMC theoretical concept, or do they perceive the IMC concept only to obtain additional resources? Are their opinions on IMC influenced by external factors (Swianiewicz, 2010) or effects, such as perceived or actual negative experiences or complicated institutional settings?

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IMC use in the Czech Republic is based solely on voluntary principles and is dependent only on the initiative and intention of each municipality. As such, understanding the local perception of and motivation for using IMC may be particularly important for explaining the incidence and impact of IMC in this context. Several empirical studies have been carried out in the Czech environment to examine the perspectives of leaders on the potential merging of municipalities or IMC structures (Jetmar et al., 2015; Ježek, Malast, Kopecký, & Kaňka, 2015; Škrabal & Ryšavý, 2005). This paper departs from these earlier works by drawing from financial data on current expenditures and investments associated with IMC (Sedmíhradská, 2018). These expenditures are low relative to aggregate municipal budgets, suggesting that Czech municipalities do not treat IMC as an important policy focus from the financial perspective. Therefore, the main intent of this paper is to reveal public officials' perceptions of IMC, with a focus on IMC in the form of Voluntary Associations of Municipalities (VAMs). An additional, partial goal is to describe the potential benefits of IMC for member municipalities.

The perception of IMC can vary according to the original motives of agents (mayors, managers) involved in the IMC scheme. Especially in the case of local officials, it may be distorted by internal or external factors. Internal factors can be influenced by the individual settings of the municipality (e.g., size, property, historical experience), with the willingness to cooperate potentially dependent on trust, reciprocity, and political settings. External factors depend on the larger regional or geopolitical environment of the municipality, including the structure of neighbors' spatial conditions or inter-governmental schemes and public policy settings. This paper addresses the following research questions, which take into account the size of municipalities and political leverage. We used a questionnaire survey (see below) of a relevant sample of municipalities to develop answers to the questions. Further, in-depth interviews were also conducted to provide additional qualitative information that helps to illustrate the overall perception of municipal cooperation and supplement findings from the questionnaire survey by providing more in-depth reflections on the Czech IMC context.

RQ1: How important do municipal officials believe IMC is for providing services for municipalities?

RQ2: Does the size of the municipality affect the perception of public officials about the benefits of IMC?

RQ3: Do mayors with long service tenures believe IMC is important?

Although at first look, the total number of IMCs suggests that municipalities are cooperating to a significant degree, deeper analysis via financial data about VAMs (Sedmíhradská, 2018) shows that this is not always the case, and the extent of cooperation is limited. By addressing our first research question, we seek to assess whether municipalities consider cooperation to be of limited value—as the financial data suggest—or if municipalities attribute an outsized level of importance to cooperation.

Relative to the second research question, we hypothetically assume that the smaller the municipality, the greater the willingness to cooperate (see discussion in Lackey, Freshwater, & Rupasingha, 2002). The presumption is that representatives of small municipalities will perceive cooperation as more important and beneficial, and the reason is perspicuous—a small community with less than 2,000 inhabitants may need cooperation to ensure adequate public services and reduce municipal expenditures. Conversely, larger municipalities with more than 2,000 inhabitants may have more resources to provide for the independent provision of public services. Though defining rural areas by population size is quite contentious, we have decided to use a value that is traditional in our country and corresponds to a settlement structure (see discussion about size of municipalities in rural areas in Perlín, Kučerová, & Kučera, 2010).

The third research question focuses on the importance of political will and context. Political factors are often perceived as one of the factors that have an impact on the institutional structure of local government, as in Zeemering's (2016) discussion of the role of elected officials and their concerns about interlocal agreements. The basic assumption is that officials will not emphasize inter-municipal cooperation because they tend to perceive and defend their community (municipality) rather than the broader context of the region. Zeemering's (2016) study concluded that this traditional political jurisdictions approach could be refined and researched in future, providing one of our motivations for testing the following assumption: The longer public officials (e.g., mayors) are in office, the more they are experienced in and aware of various management issues of municipalities. Further, this experience and awareness allow them to realize the potential for benefits from cooperation and leads experienced officials to attach more importance to IMC engagement than less experienced officials do. For example, from the benefit of experience in office, a mayor could realize how difficult it is to provide certain type of services without resorting to IMC. This idea implies that experienced politicians should be more likely than relatively inexperienced politicians to promote the use of IMC and not just defend the interests of their community.

PERCEPTION OF IMC BY LOCAL OFFICIALS

Several empirical investigations examined the perception of IMC by public officials and what factors shape these perceptions. Lackey et al. (2002) carried out a detailed survey of IMC in the rural Tennessee Valley area and assessed factors that both develop or hinder regional economic development cooperation. Chen and Thurmaier (2009) suggested that IMC structures are created to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of local services. The impetus for IMC structures provides a focusing effect. Efficiency of local services could be perceived by public officials in the case of the Czech Republic as one of the stimuli for IMC because they play an important role in the daily life of community representatives and their relationship with citizens.

Kwon and Feiock (2010) offer a different explanation of the factors that influence local governments' decision-making at two different but sequential stages. By modeling a two-stage process, they were able to identify how political institutions, particularly the structure of council representation, shape political incentives to adopt interlocal agreements. Moreover, LeRoux and Pandey (2011) investigated political variables - the role of council managers in supporting initiatives to increase intergovernmental service delivery. They proposed two theoretical explanations grounded in the behavior of council managers – personal ambitions and altruism. The first explanation implies that council managers want to increase their visibility in the region to support their advancement to a higher position, such as managing a larger city. The altruistic explanation implies that some city managers may favor intergovernmental service delivery as a way of improving service quality and levels, as well as increasing social equity. Another view is offered by Lee, Feiock, and Lee (2012), who examined the role of competition and cooperation with other governments. While the logic of benefits accruing from cooperation is compelling, benefits are not a foregone conclusion, as the authors find similar outcomes from competitive and collaborative environments. Further, LeRoux, Brandenburger, and Pandey (2010) assert that the organizational and managerial skills of municipal representatives and professional staff serving as IMC managers play a significant role in both the choice to engage in IMC and the outcomes from these actions.

Zeemering (2012) researched the perception of public officials, which showed that community leaders are interested in the benefits of cooperation within their community and understand the benefits of such cooperation. In a later paper, Zeemering (2016) embeds the problem of public officials' perception in the institutional role theory for studying interlocal politics. Using a survey of case study in the San Francisco Bay Area, he identified the scope of public officials' concerns about the use of inter-local agreements.

Silva, Teles, and Ferreira (2018) examined the role of governance capacity—scope of cooperation, efficiency, nature of institutional structures, democracy, and stability—in the IMC. Their results on the example of IMC cooperation in Portugal show that IMC organizations emerged from purely instrumental involvement with the relatively fragile appropriation of the cooperative arrangements. In spite of this fact, IMC organizations can efficiently fulfill the aims they were designed to achieve. They further mentioned that the efficiency of cooperation could be derived from the perception of members as active and demonstratively to reaching an objective set.

Finally, several empirical pieces of research (Jetmar et al., 2015; Ježek et al., 2015; Perlín, 2006; Škrabal & Ryšavý, 2005) have been directed on IMC in the Czech Republic. These studies focused mainly on mapping areas for cooperation based on their importance for individual actors at the regional level. Moreover, they try to identify the willingness to cooperate on different areas in the future. However, it is not entirely clear from these pieces of research how public officials perceive contemporary cooperation and what it means for them.

MUNICIPAL COOPERATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The Czech Republic is notorious for its fragmentation, which has its roots in the Czech Republic's history as part of the Austrian-Hungary Empire (Bakoš, Soukopová, & Šelešovský, 2015; Klimovský, Pinterič, & Jüptner, 2019). In the past 100 years, effort has been made to address this fragmentation through the use of numerous institutional frameworks and tools. The most significant pursuit was undertaken as part of comprehensive reform in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, the Czech Republic operated a centrally planned economy, and municipalities were forced to merge through administrative measures. Forceful merging of municipalities during the 1970s and 1980s resulted in municipalities viewing voluntary mergers with considerable suspicion after

the Velvet Revolution⁴. This persistent fragmentation could be seen as a benefit from the point of democratic decision-making. Each municipality has its own mayor and council and can directly influence the extent and quality of public services. However, viewed with economies of scale in mind, fragmentation can result in arrangements for providing certain public services (e.g., waste management) that are overly complicated and costly. IMC is one potential solution to fragmented, inefficient service delivery that is also viewed as a relatively acceptable alternative compared to municipal consolidation (Hertzog, 2010; Swianiewicz, 2002).

VAMs in the Czech Republic began as so-called “microregions,” which are one of the most common types of IMC in the Czech Republic (Teles & Swianiewicz, 2018). These “microregions” are legally formed as VAMs and represent one of the most common forms of IMC in the Czech Republic. Since these forms of cooperation, unlike the local action groups (LAGs), represent only cooperation between municipalities, they will be further examined in more detail through interviews.

DATA AND METHODS

This paper uses primary data collected from a survey of and interviews with municipal representatives who are members or potential members of certain municipal collaboration forms. This approach was chosen to provide a comprehensive view of the perception of municipal collaborations and whether implementation is recognized as successful.

The structured survey was administered using the online portal [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com). Potential respondents from all municipalities (total number 6,258) were contacted via the municipality’s official e-mail address with a link to complete the online questionnaire form during May and June 2018. Overall, 1,557 responses were received (approximately 25%). The representativeness of the survey has been verified according to municipal size groups (see Table 1)⁵. Using the χ^2 test, the null hypothesis on the conformity of the size structure of municipalities in the Czech Republic and the size structure of municipalities whose statements were obtained in the questionnaire were not rejected at the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$ (p-value = 0.78). The structure of municipalities’ answers corresponds to the real structure of municipalities in the Czech Republic. As was expected, only a few responses were gained from the smallest municipalities according to the municipal size structure of public administration (expressed by number of inhabitants). Likewise, the largest municipalities represented only a small number of respondents. About 80% of all answers were received from municipal mayors, which suggests that cooperation could be considered relatively salient because the mayors found the time to respond to the survey. Further, this could indicate that they are to some extent aware of the potential attainment of IMC.

These data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Specifically, the Kruskal–Wallis nonparametric ANOVA test was used to analyze the differences of the medians with respect to the ordinal character of the data. For the same reason, the Spearman rank order coefficient was used for capturing the strength of the relationship between variables. All the analyses were performed in STATISTICA software.

To comprehensively examine municipal collaboration via the VAM form, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with selected VAM representatives (chairman or manager). We completed a total of eight in-depth interviews⁶. The selection of interview subjects was guided by the following criteria: the size of association, multipurpose engagement in cooperation, dynamics of municipal collaboration within the association, or spatial location (to avoid the bias of one locality influence)⁷. Interview subjects were selected from cases of progressive, steady, or regressive VAMs based on these criteria. The interview sample includes representatives of both

⁴ In fact, a post-Velvet Revolution backlash occurred, with some municipalities being split and smaller municipalities formed as a result. The number of municipalities stabilized after the adoption of legal limits.

⁵ This relatively low return on the questionnaire survey is typical for this group of respondents (municipal representatives (Fiedor, erý, Frajer, & Szczyrba, 2019). Therefore, inferential statistics will be used to generalize the results, but at the same time, it will be necessary to view the results with prudence.

⁶ Within this sample, we take into consideration only polyfunctional VAMs based on previous evidence and findings. The rest of VAMs are only monothematic, with only one sole purpose. Such VAMs do not usually intend to develop the potential of municipal cooperation for the development part of the region. Therefore, the perception of their representatives is supposed to be biased according to their purpose or specifics. Some might doubt why such a small sample of in-depth interviews when there are several hundreds of VAMs. One simple reason is that even though there are so many VAMs, in reality, only a few of them actually have an interest in developing part of the regions. This is also evidenced by the involvement of VAM (83 in total) in the real operation through the project of the Center of Common Services sponsored by the Union of Towns and Municipalities.

⁷ The dynamics of municipal cooperation are determined by the following factors: VAM budget trends, size of VAM administrative capacity in terms of FTE, and diversity of activities realized for member municipalities through VAMs.

Tab. 1: Representativeness of survey

Number of inhabitants	Czech Republic		Survey	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
0–199	1,432	22.9	236	15.2
200–499	1,992	31.8	483	31.0
500–999	1,379	22.0	368	23.6
1,000–1,999	755	12.1	230	14.8
2,000–4,999	427	6.8	134	8.6
5,000–9,999	142	2.3	52	3.3
10,000–19,999	69	1.1	26	1.7
20,000–49,999	44	0.7	19	1.2
50,000–99,999	12	0.2	8	0.5
100,000 and more	6	0.1	1	0.1
Total	6,258	100.0	1,557	100.0

Source: Authors, based on the data from Czech Statistical Office

larger associations consisting of 20 or more municipalities and smaller ones consisting of no more than 10 municipalities to avoid the bias of the VAM size. Attention was paid to varying the geographical locations of VAMs chosen for interviews, with both internal and border regions selected.

The interviews were designed as semi-structured, with an emphasis on open-ended questions to gain information on not only the perception of IMC, but also to be able to identify and describe the key factors based on the empirical experience of respondents. Some interviews were conducted with only the administrative employees of an association (e.g., executive manager/project manager), while others included an executive representative (e.g., chairman of the association/mayor of the municipality), and a few cases included both these groups where possible. Interviews were conducted from fall 2017 until fall 2018. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain information that better and more closely captures the functioning of each selected VAM and points out possible problems that cannot be otherwise identified. The interview template was designed to extract findings on the following aspects of IMC: the level of the leadership and experience in public administration field represented by the chairman or the manager of the VAM; variability (scope) or depth of activities realized by the VAM body; VAM membership fee policy (construction, time development, principles) and fees on additional services for stakeholders; new projects acquisition; accountability principles for implementation (marketing of the VAM, presentation of outcomes realized by VAM to the general public or member municipalities; identification of VAM member municipalities from the perspective of their size, presence and influence on IMC of large municipality in VAM area); acknowledgment of LAG or its functioning/activities by VAM (presence of LAG in VAM area, potential forms of cooperation or competition between these two structures).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the survey outcomes, only a few (3.7% or 58 municipalities) municipalities indicated that they do not engage in any form of cooperation. Several key points were mentioned as reasons for not pursuing cooperation. One set of respondents indicated that they had tried cooperation and found that this kind of cooperation does not yield significant, positive non-financial or financial benefits for them. Additional barriers to cooperation cited by respondents included insufficient resources, lack of time, perceived non-existence of partners, financial “burden,” and cumbersome decision-making processes. However, the vast majority of responding public officials indicated that their municipality actively cooperates or has cooperated with other municipalities (see Table 2).

More than half of municipal representatives indicated that the VAM was their preferred form of IMC. About a quarter of officials favored LAGs, with only 10% of the respondents indicating that contracts between municipalities were their preferred IMC form and

Tab. 2: Preferred form of cooperation according to municipal size groups

	Count	VAMs %	LAG %	Contracts %	A joint venture %
0–199	224	65.63	57.14	20.98	0.89
200–499	460	68.48	67.83	22.17	3.91
500–999	360	76.39	76.67	25.56	8.61
1,000–1,999	223	76.23	84.30	30.94	10.31
2,000–4,999	130	70.00	76.92	31.54	9.23
5,000–9,999	49	75.51	77.55	40.82	16.33
10,000–19,999	26	61.54	61.54	34.62	23.08
20,000–49,999	18	55.56	50.00	61.11	22.22
50,000–99,999	8	50.00	12.50	62.50	25.00
100,000 and more	1	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00
Total	1,499	71.05	71.25	26.48	7.07

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Note: Although there is only one representative in the last group (100,000 and more), it represents basically six cities out of the total sample of municipalities in the Czech Republic. These municipalities are clearly the largest and their functioning differs significantly from the others.

even fewer preferring joint ventures. These responses seem to be aligned with a logical analysis of the situations facing municipalities. For many small municipalities, it is simply too difficult to run their own business, especially in the form of the joint venture or hybrid organization. Cooperation via VAMs is very common and flexible, particularly in rural areas where individual small municipalities identify themselves with a larger area.

The most preferred forms of cooperation are LAGs and VAMs, with bilateral or multilateral contracts reported as a distant third preference. LAGs and VAMs are characterized by the background, structure, and historical development of these cooperative forms, which has been dependent on two main ideas: voluntary and obligatory cooperation and the possibility of gaining funding via external grants. Obligatory cooperation is preferred in the form of LAGs. This form does not mean that cooperation is strictly obligatory, but if the municipalities want to support the economic development of the region, they could be a part of the LAG with a community-led local development approach. Additional added value that can be counted as obligatory is the possibility to win some grants via LAGs that can be considered as a transmitter of subsidies. Unlike LAGs, VAMs are fully voluntary and are formed according to the needs of municipalities in some geographical conditions. The detailed characteristics of VAMs have already been described (Sedmířradská, 2018), and there is no need for further explanation.

PERCEPTION OF IMC COOPERATION BY MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS – SURVEY RESULTS

The methodology used in this paper to assess the interests of local officials in IMC is inspired by Zeemering (2008; 2016). This inspiration is reflected in the use of a scoring methodology and the evaluation of individual statements concerning the perception of IMC. However, the individual statements were not copied from the original author, but were modified for the purpose of the Czech Republic.

As listed and summarized in Table 3, respondents were asked to report their agreement with several statements about perceived benefits from the use of any type of IMC related to increasing administrative capacity and efficiency, reducing costs, broadening the scope of public services, enabling the development of municipalities, and acquiring grant funding. Respondents used a seven-point Likert scale to report their agreement, with one indicating complete agreement with the statement and seven indicating complete disagreement. Short and direct statements were used to encourage participation by busy municipal officials.

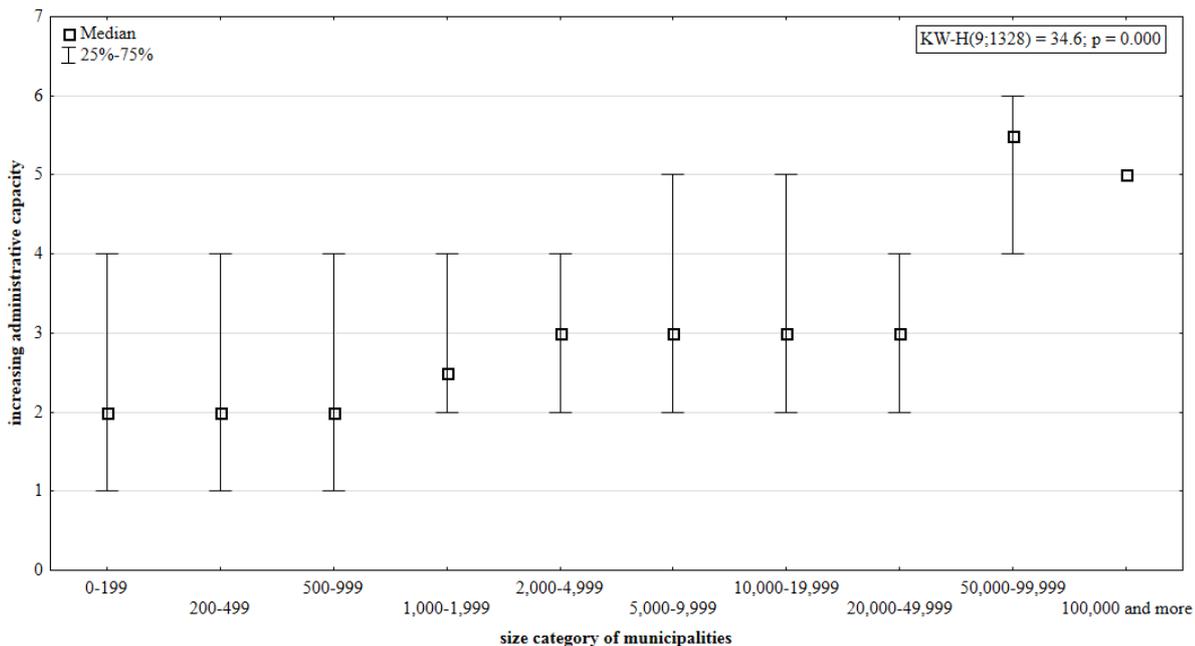
Using the Kruskal–Wallis test, hypotheses on the median equality of respondents with these statements were tested by municipal size category at the 0.05 significance level. These hypotheses were rejected for the increasing administrative capacity and reducing

Tab. 3: Preferred benefits from using the IMC form

Perceived benefit	Statement	Average value
Increasing administrative capacity	IMC allows us to solve those problems so that we lack sufficient capacity because of their complexity (HR, knowledge, etc.).	2.75
Reducing costs	IMC helps us to reduce costs on services provided by the municipality.	2.91
Efficiency of services	IMC helps increase the efficiency of municipal administration.	3.11
Scope of services	IMC allows for increasing the scope of public services provided.	3.05
Development of municipalities	IMC supports the development of your municipality.	2.65
Grants	IMC helps in obtaining subsidies/grants/additional funding to finance projects in the territory of our municipality.	2.81

Source: Authors’ own elaboration

Fig. 1: Increasing administrative capacity according to municipality size



Source: Authors own elaboration

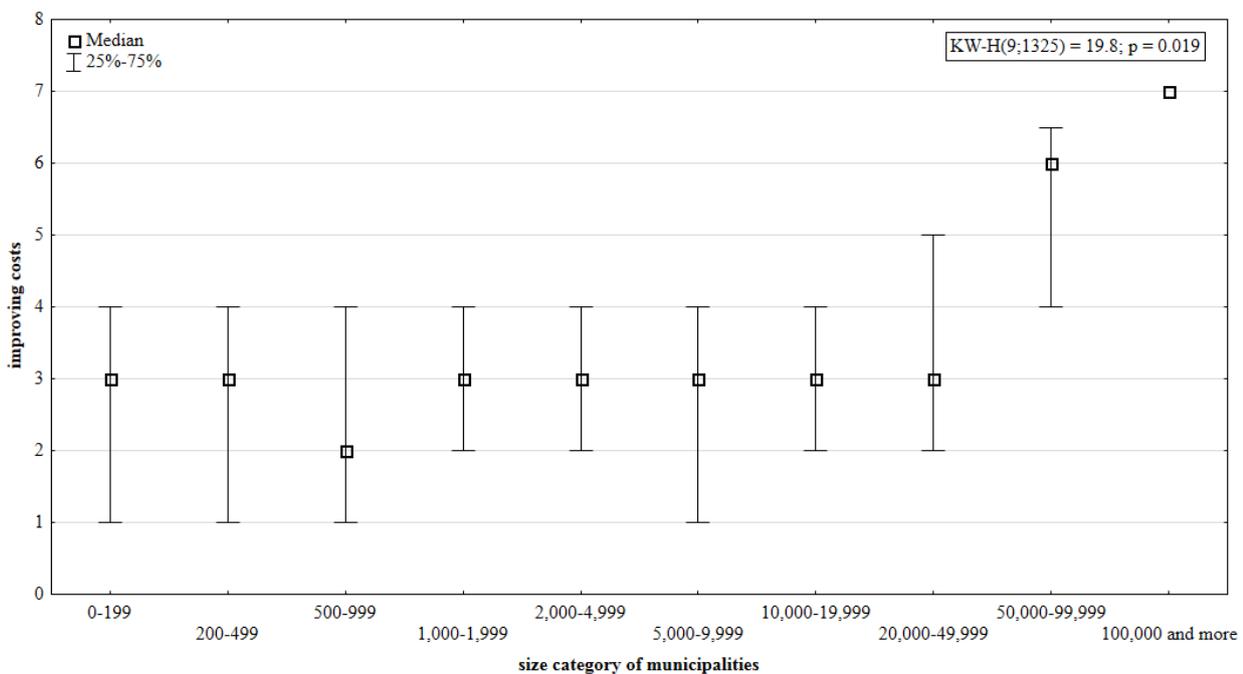
costs statements, which indicates that the mayors of small municipalities, in particular, realize the benefits of IMC in relation to these two statements.

Figure 1 shows that representatives of smaller municipalities agreed to a greater degree than their counterparts from larger municipalities that IMC helps them to solve for public service delivery challenges for which they do not have sufficient administrative capacity. According to the Kruskal–Wallis test, we reject, at the significance level of 0.05, the hypothesis that the median-perceived benefits of IMC for this topic are equal across small and large municipalities. Further, municipalities in the 50,000–99,999 category differ significantly from the municipalities in the smaller three size categories.

The evaluation of IMC on the question of reduction of costs for services provided by municipalities differed across the size categories of municipalities (see Figure 2) to a statistically significant degree (at the significance level of 0.05). For municipalities with less than 50,000 inhabitants, half of all respondents rated IMC in the area of services provided by municipalities with a maximum

of three (one means that they fully agree on the usefulness of IMC in this area). Moreover, 75% of all respondents of municipalities up to this population size rated IMC on a scale of 1 to 7, with a maximum of 4, that is, neutral or better. The respondents from largest municipalities (more than 50,000 inhabitants) do not consider IMC to be cost-effective. These results imply that the mayors of smaller municipalities are more aware of the possibilities of cost savings or acquiring capacity help through IMC than the mayors of larger municipalities are. This seems logical because larger municipalities have more assets than small municipalities and, in their opinion, IMC is less important. For the sake of completeness, it must be mentioned that respondents' opinions may reflect their subjective views and not just their objective considerations as municipal representatives, a situation that could affect survey results to unknown degrees.

Fig. 2: Reducing costs according to municipality size



Source: Authors own elaboration

The last survey question focused on the importance of political will to support IMC. The assumption was that the longer public officials (e.g., mayors) are in office, the more they will realize the potential for benefits from cooperation and, thus, the more importance they will attach to engaging in IMC. In the cases of both increasing administrative capacity issues and perceived reduction of costs for rural municipalities, the Spearman coefficient was at very low values (increasing administrative capacity 0.10 / costs 0.06), but it is statistically significant at a significance level of 0.05 (p-value = 0.00/0.03). The explanation of these coefficients could be that to a certain extent, the longer a mayor is in office, the less he/she reflects that IMC produces better administration and reduced costs. This result seems to confirm the original hypothesis (Zeemering, 2016) that views municipal representatives as inward focused and relatively less concerned about conditions in the broader region.

INTERVIEWS WITH MANAGERS AND CHAIRMEN OF VAMS ABOUT THEIR PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE OF IMC

In-depth interviews with selected representatives of VAMs (chairman and/or manager) were carried out to achieve a more comprehensive picture of the functioning and development of VAMs (see Table 4). Interviews provided anecdotal evidence based on the experiences of VAM chairmen or managers to identify key factors that influence VAM collaboration and its development.

Based on interview results, for a VAM to operate, it is appropriate to have a sufficiently large geographical area or population. The suitability of the territory should be assessed on the basis of the specific characteristics of the region (e.g. number and size of municipalities, their mutual distance, altitude, cultural values, historical identity with the territory, etc.). Further, a well-defined, sustainable, and diversified mix of funding (e.g., membership fees, grants, other own revenues, etc.) is a must. The setting and strategy of VAM funding (like membership fees, fee policy for provided services, or new grants acquisition strategy)⁸ are helpful for achieving the goal of organizational sustainability in the long term and can also influence the direction of continuous development (positive, steady, or negative) of the VAM organization. Thus, it may prevent the stagnation or even termination of VAM. The amount of membership fees and its development over time often does not reflect only the will or trust to invest in collaborative governance via IMC, but it also reflects the commitment and confidence of stakeholders involved in the collaborative scheme, both factors that are crucial for the further development of IMC. Although membership fees are usually the most important type of revenue source for VAMs, they are not the only one. Other revenue sources can be drawn from VAM operations or business activities (e.g., consultancy services in the fields of grants and subsidies, public procurements, projects, etc.) and external funding from national or international sources. Without diverse funding sources, VAMs can struggle to achieve and maintain sustainability in the long term.

Representatives of member municipalities, including the mayors and councilpersons of member municipalities, need to be persuaded about the benefits, meaningfulness, and expediency of cooperation during the whole period of IMC. Further, it is very difficult to establish and maintain IMC without a strong personality able to bring together all the actors/municipalities in the region and convince them of the meaningfulness of cooperation for the short or long term. If cooperation were established without strong leadership, it could slip into formalism and long-term stagnation. On the other hand, in regions where we found an example of both a strong politician or manager—ideally complementary cooperation of both—and reasonably high member fee policy, IMC tends to be developing well and serving as an example of the potential benefits for other players in the region. These positive illustrations show that cooperation is possible and potentially beneficial for all stakeholders. As evidenced by our interviews, it appears that strong personalities are not only satisfied with the positive behavior of their cooperative activities within a given region but also seek to cross the borders of regions through educational activities and to market such forms of cooperation outside the region.

Principal findings from the interviews with VAM representatives included:

- Strong leadership and level of experience of association representatives (both political and managerial) had a positive influence on the further development of the IMC organization and structure of VAM. Particular VAMs with steady development lack the presence of leadership either from a chairman or executive manager.
- Wider and deeper scope of additional, social or educational, activities (inside and outside of association) is associated with more developed VAMs and seems to have a positive influence on accountability principles implementation.
- Sustainability is positively achieved by VAMs that develop member fee policies while also implementing a fee policy for other provided services and strategies for developing and winning grants.
- Cooperation within the region is not only the case of municipalities but can also entail VAMs and LAGs, which cooperate or complement each other. Several cases showed successful cooperation between these two kinds of IMC entities in the field, but usually, the cooperation is still limited according to cases like sharing space or capacities. In more developed cases, such cooperation goes further to include service or counselling provision.
- Personnel stability and development in VAM organization seems to be one of the crucial points for the positive development of VAM organization and the eventual success in achieving particular goals. Unfortunately, there are still many VAMs with fragile personnel capacity (long-term presence of 0.5–1 FTE), which is associated with their further development and

⁸ Proper level of individual VAM own funding sources means to have reasonable high-level fee policy according to the stage of the VAM development and its outcomes achieved and also fulfilling principles of sustainability or continuous development.

Tab. 4: Selected respondents for interviews with different characteristics

No. of case	Number of VAM member municipalities	Total population in VAM area	Average municipal population in VAM area	Interviewed representative	FTE	Presence of ORP in VAM organization	Membership fee policy	Fee for other services provision implementation	CSS
1	12	8,500	708	CH, EM	5.7	No	5 € per inhabitant	Yes	Yes
2	27	34,700	1,285	EM, PM	3	Yes	Initial rate of 0.8 € per inhabitant, then floating level with the average rate about 1.2 € per inhabitant	Yes	Yes
3	14	13,000	929	CH	0.5*	No	0.8 € per inhabitant (occasionally is collected extraordinary contribution)	Yes	No
4	10	9,000	900	CH	2.4	No	0.4 € per inhabitant (occasionally is collected extraordinary contribution)	No	Yes
5	9	4,000	444	EM	3 (1)	No	Approximately 4 € per inhabitant	Yes	Yes
6	26	34,000	1,308	EM, PM	12.2 (8)	Yes	Approximately 0.7 € per inhabitant (occasionally is collected extraordinary contribution)	Yes	Yes
7	42	55,000	1,310	EM	6 (3)	Yes	0 (revenues from other economic activities)	No	Yes
8	22	8,500	386	CH	6	Yes	Approximately 2.4 € per inhabitant	Yes	Yes

Note: CH = Chairman, EM = Executive manager, PM = Project manager, CSS - Center for common services

* FTE estimate based on the total expenditure on employee's salary

Source: Authors' own elaboration

sustainability. On the other side, there are also VAMs with relatively robust personnel capacity, which can be distinguished in the long term in two general types – with or without significant projects granted by external subject (e.g., European Union subsidy programs, etc.). Based on these findings, we can identify for further research three types of VAMs from the perspective of personnel capacity – weak/fragile, stable/steady, and expansive.

- Income policy from the perspective of functioning and further development of VAM organization and associated activities can be characterized by three main categories – 1) membership fee policy, 2) fee policy for other services provided by VAM, and 3) acquisition of grants. Each of these listed categories has a particular meaning and significance for VAM and its short- or long-term functioning. It also has other implications for future IMC research. Based on the selected cases, we can identify that membership fee policy is the essential part of VAM funding, and its setting and development is both one of the key IMC factors and a representation of member satisfaction or understanding of IMC functions in practice. The form and development of member fee policy seems to be associated with the level or successfulness of accountability principles implementation in VAM structure. Implementation of other fees, usually on other services provision either for member municipalities or other subjects (firms, NGOs), shows the commitment of the VAM to achieve the sustainability principle. Acquisition of new grants confirms this also, but it can also positively influence regional development. However, its realization is usually associated with VAM personnel capacity, experience, or education.
- Financial resilience could be strengthened via some cases of VAMs with the provision of additional services (e.g., grant counseling or administration, internet provision, other type of services provision, etc.).
- Built on empirical anecdotal evidence, it seems that the structure or size of VAM or member municipalities does not have to be an obstacle in efforts to acquire new projects or grants. The size of the member municipalities does not have to be a barrier in setting or developing a reasonable member fee policy, which is one of the sustainability and development keys for such organizations.
- Some of the interviewed VAMs revealed themselves as suitable centers in the regional territory (out of large cities) while ensuring a suitable workforce to ensure public administration and development in the regions (spatial effect).
- VAMs with experienced personnel and significant capacity are helpful in the joint planning of member municipalities in a VAM region.

CONCLUSION

The globally recognized public administration approach of IMC exists in the Czech Republic in several forms: informal cooperation, contracts between municipalities, VAM, LAG, and hybrid organizations. The most identifiable form of formal or institutional cooperation among municipalities is VAM. Municipal officials surveyed for this study identified VAM as a one of the preferred forms of cooperation. This paper used a survey of a full sample dataset containing all municipalities in the Czech Republic to answer three questions about IMC.

In addressing the first question on the importance of IMC, we found that municipal officials do not precisely distinguish among the various forms of cooperation and consider any form of cooperation as a subject of collaborative action. Yet, they have identified the most significant collaborations as VAMs and LAGs. Only 10% of all respondents identified the use of contracts between municipalities, and few claimed to run a joint venture. These responses seem to resonate with the practicalities of administration, as, especially for small municipalities, it is very challenging to organize a business-like effort such as a joint venture or a hybrid organization. We identify a few reasons for lack of cooperation – absence of strong advocates for cooperative projects, suspicion of neighboring communities, and differentials in available resources that impede collaboration. These factors deserve deeper exploration and further research.

To address the second question on the influence of municipality size, we developed six different statements about perceived impacts of IMC on administrative capacity, reducing costs, enhancing efficiency and scope of services, development of municipalities, and acquisition of grants. Our survey results show that agreement with the statement that IMC helps solve administrative capacity problems tends to vary according to the size category of municipalities. When comparing medians, the representatives of municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants agree with this statement more than the inhabitants of the larger municipalities. On the other hand,

the representatives of large cities over 50,000 were usually on the opposite side. This could be justified by the capacity possibilities of different municipalities. Obviously, larger municipalities have far greater resources than small municipalities. Therefore, they may not consider cooperation to be as critically important for achieving economies of scale in service and infrastructure provision.

In addressing the third question on political context, we build on the assumption that the longer the public official (i.e., the mayor) is in his/her position, the more he or she would consider IMC to be important and beneficial. This result supports the hypothesis that the mayors do not consider cooperative agreements as important as one might expect. A positive Spearman coefficient value suggests that, to a certain extent, the longer a mayor is in office, the more he/she disagrees with the statement. In other words, long-tenured public officials are rather skeptical about the potential benefits that IMC can bring to municipalities. This kind of approach could be theoretically reasonable in the case of municipalities that do not have positive experiences with IMC, but it is quite surprising to find this trend generally in a representative sample. Rather, it confirms the original hypothesis that the representatives see their priority in the municipality itself (Zeemering, 2016) and not in cooperation with others. Hypothetically, it could be one of the reasons why municipalities generally do not implement or realize IMC to a greater and deeper extent via institutionalized forms (VAM, LAG, contracts) that result in a larger proportion of shared budgets among member municipalities. On the other hand, it could be interpreted that according to the actual state of IMC in the Czech Republic, the longer the mayor is in the office, the more he/she experiences that reality does not meet potentially overhyped expectations.

Anecdotal evidence from interviews with VAM representatives provides support for several conditions that are necessary to fulfill when looking for the creation and maintenance of VAM cooperation: sufficiently large spatial area, importance of leadership and experience or capacity of the VAM staff, diversified mix of own funding, and suitable external funding (grants).

Although some preliminary secondary data (e.g., number of VAMs, LAGs or contracts, etc.) indicate an increased use of IMC across the Czech Republic that deeply affects the functioning of municipalities, in reality, the actual use of IMC is still limited or underdeveloped relative to its logical potential for addressing issues of fragmentation. Findings from in-depth interviews reveal that strong political or executive leadership and experienced managerial staff can reasonably contribute to the successful development of VAM organization or the region and create space for intensive cooperation across boundaries. Our research identified fee setting policies (e.g., IMC membership fee or fees for other services provided by VAM) as potential breaking points for IMC, with these policies playing a key role in determining. However, we still need a better understanding of how these particular factors influence the perception or continuous development of IMC within municipal networks. There are still other areas where municipalities can cooperate, and there is a potentially large space for the transformation of Czech municipal sector to be more collaborative.

Generally, it still seems that Czech municipalities have not uncovered all the secrets and potential benefits of IMC. From our observation and experience, it is evident that the pure IMC idea is practiced and developed only by some individual VAMs and central authorities (e.g., Ministry of Interior or Unions of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic) who are trying to promote or expand the concept in the territory via rather intensive funding schemes, projects, or programs. While this is a logical, top-down approach, more flexible or non-binding tools could be more successful in promoting the IMC idea to individual municipalities in a more natural way.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation under Grant no. GA17- 15887S ‘Identifying key factors of successful inter-municipal cooperation.’ We would like to thank Troy Mix and Lucie Sedmihradská for their comments and suggestions on this paper.

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