

Cooperate or Not To Cooperate? Czech Municipalities' (De)Motivation as Experience for Other Countries with Space for the Intensification or Professionalisation of IMC

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Abstract

Inter-municipal cooperation is a specific phenomenon in local public administration across the world. It is a concept that has been applied globally, particularly in countries with more fragmented local government. Often its implementation helps to solve problems or challenges associated with the existence of fragmented public administration in the delivery of public services. From the existing investigations dedicated to this specific issue carried out in the Czech Republic, it appears that this model of local public administration is very often mentioned in this country; however, its real use in the territory by public administration even after a long period of its existence in this country still has a great potential for development and use even in comparison with how it is abroad. The aim of this article is to identify and characterise the motivation and willingness of municipalities in the country to cooperate in order to meet the current conditions.

Keywords

inter-municipal cooperation; the Czech Republic; motivation

Introduction

Inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) is a specific phenomenon in the field of local public administration and public finance, which is used in various forms and modifications worldwide, of course taking into account the local specificities of public administration. The theme of cooperation to achieve a public purpose has been addressed, for example, by Sullivan and Skelcher (2002), who saw the changing role of the state in the late 20th and early 21st century as a key explanatory variable in this case. IMC has been addressed in general or partially in the research field for a long time and from different perspectives, such as benefits and costs (Bel and Warner, 2015), governance structure or territorial consolidation (Haveri and Airaksinen, 2007; Franzke, Klimovský and Pinterič, 2016), or public service delivery (Bel and Warner, 2016). The reasons and motivations for what drives municipalities to cooperate will certainly be many and will vary to a greater or lesser extent across countries due to national as well as local specificities. In some countries, the development of IMCs may have been influenced by top-down merger policies, or by the set-up of a redistributive financial mechanism within a top-down revenue distribution framework. Elsewhere, local specificities such as the geographical characteristics of the territory, the poor financial situation, or the (un)willingness of neighbouring municipalities to cooperate may have played a role. Cost savings tend to be a key motivation for IMC (Niaounakis and Blank, 2017). Also, according to other authors, economies of scale are the most important motive for IMC from an economic perspective (Plata-Díaz *et al.*, 2014; Warner and Hefetz, 2003; Warner, 2006; Zullo, 2009).

In some cases, however, the motivation of municipalities to cooperate is not first-rate. Blaeschke (2014) discusses the importance of the impact of fiscal stress on municipalities' willingness to

cooperate. In fact, he argues that the negative financial situation of municipalities leads municipal leaders to seek cost reduction solutions, especially in the mandated part of expenditures. According to this author, municipalities in a worse financial situation are then more likely to be more willing to cooperate and through this to reduce their costs. Also research by Bocchino and Padovani (2021) confirmed the importance of the financial health of member municipalities for IMC. However, as already mentioned, municipalities do not always address only the financial aspect in the IMC issue. Maarten and de Greef (2018) argue, based on their research, that municipal cooperation can sometimes also lead to improvements in the provided public services, especially in the case of small municipalities, where such cooperation can eventually professionalise processes more, improve facilities, or raise the standard of the provided service. As other authors also confirm, the financial motive is not always the only one. According to Galvasová, Binek, Chabičovská, Holeček and Halásek (2007), willingness and interest are at the beginning of such a cooperation of entities to rationally and efficiently use their own available resources or means to achieve the set goals and assume the acquisition of some benefits.

However, studies focusing on motivation, expectations, decision-making, or the perception of IMC are much less frequent, while these so-called soft factors are also important. According to Feiock (2007), behind the motivation of governments to cooperate in service provision is a clarification of public interest based on collective benefits and private interest rooted in the economic or political opportunism of local actors. Silva, Teles and Ferreira (2018) provide an interesting perspective on the motivation to cooperate with other municipalities based on the perception or recognition of the associated benefits and spillover effects when they point out the importance of the awareness of the involved municipalities of the positive effects and benefits of the cooperation (e.g. through education, experience, trust, bill folding, etc.) The results of the empirical study from Soukopová and Vaceková (2018) show that potential benefits from IMC are significantly influenced by internal factors, such as institutional arrangement of inter-municipal cooperation, the participation of municipal representatives in management, and professional managers, all of which have been – according to the authors – investigated only marginally so far.

Aldag, Warner and Bel (2020) point out that service-sharing extends beyond economies of scale and transaction costs, and scholars should direct more attention to organisational form and the broader goals of sharing. Gendźwiłł, Krukowska and Lackowska (2019) tried to identify and assess both motives with the perceived outcomes in their study on IMC entities in Poland. Bakoš, Hrůza, Fiedor and Dolák Klemešová (2021) provided evidence supporting the notion that the perception of IMC by municipal officials could be an important precursor to actual IMC use and future development.

Inter-municipal cooperation in the Czech Republic

Inter-municipal cooperation has been operating in the Czech Republic for several decades in a number of areas and in several specific forms. Only voluntary inter-municipal cooperation is implemented in the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic is one of the countries with a large fragmentation of public administration at the local level, which is reflected in the high number of municipalities, namely 6258 in total (by 2021, according to the Czech Statistical Office). Out of these, 76.1% are municipalities with less than 1000 inhabitants. The total number of municipalities has been more or less stable since 1993 (the establishment of the Czech Republic). During this period, it is possible to identify both unsuccessful top-down amalgamation efforts (from the state's perspective) and the initial fragmentation of municipalities after 1989, and only individual bottom-up amalgamation efforts (from the municipalities' perspective). This is a similar development to that in Slovakia, as illustrated by Klimovský, Mejere, Mikolaityte, Pinterič and Saparniene (2014). The conditions are not suitable for amalgamation on a wider scale as well as in the long term. Galvasová *et al.* (2007) explain this by the negative experience with the merging of municipalities in Czechoslovakia between the 1960s and the 1980s, when the whole process was carried out by a directive decision from the centre. Therefore, inter-municipal cooperation is the main issue in the Czech Republic towards coping with higher fragmentation of public administration at the local level. According to Swianiewicz (2011), the share of Czech municipalities involved in some type of inter-municipal

cooperation is close to 90%, which is indeed very intense in comparison with, for example, countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (around 50%) or Romania (around 40%).

In terms of the degree of bindingness or formality, inter-municipal cooperation is divided into informal and formal. Informal types of cooperation often include cooperation between municipalities in different areas, which does not need any formal aspect to function. These often include, for example, the exchange of experience or the joint implementation of selected individual tasks. Formal cooperation can be further divided into institutionalised and non-institutionalised cooperation, depending on whether a contract between the municipalities is sufficient for its implementation or whether a new legal entity is created in which the cooperating municipalities are involved. Depending on the nature of the entity, the role, and the manner of participation of the cooperating municipalities, the most common entities in the Czech Republic are voluntary associations of municipalities (VAM), jointly owned municipal companies (JC), or local action groups (LAG).

This specific institute has been used in the Czech practice for a long time, as it has been used abroad, but on the basis of our own previous investigations, analyses, and research activities, it has been identified that the degree of use of various instruments of municipal cooperation in the Czech Republic varies greatly. From the institutional point of view, the degree or frequency of use of this instrument in the Czech Republic is at a level comparable internationally, i.e. some form of cooperation with other municipality(s) in the form of either voluntary cooperation, a contract, or the creation of a new legal entity such as a voluntary association of municipalities, local action group. According to our estimates, it is up to 90% of all municipalities in the Czech Republic, which is in line with, for example, Swianiewicz, 2011. Based on our empirical findings, experience, and research conducted so far (see the overview of results below, as well as Mix, Bakoš and Hruža, 2016), we estimate that the Czech Republic is rather average to below average in the use of the potential of inter-municipal cooperation compared to the total volume of activities or expenditures of the municipal sector.

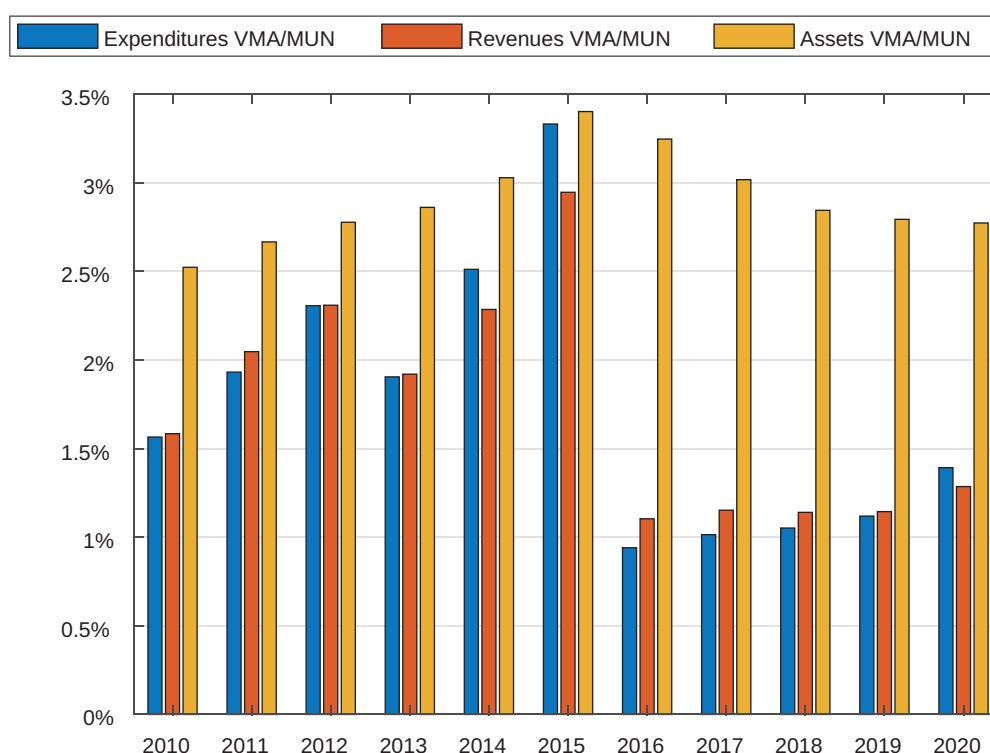


Figure 1. Ratio of expenditures, revenues, and total assets of VAMs to municipalities (in total) in 2010–2020

Source: Own elaboration.

In the Czech Republic, it is thus possible to identify a potential phenomenon of the so-called declared or rhetorical inter-municipal cooperation in contrast to the one actually implemented or

used. Haveri (2008) talks about the term “the rhetorical wall” as a wide gap between intentions as expressed at the rhetorical level, and what actually occurs in the decision-making situation. It is one thing to announce a willingness to cooperate or to cooperate on a very informal basis or with the involvement of a minimum of own resources, and it is another thing to incur certain usually higher transaction costs related to the establishment of inter-municipal cooperation and to involve own resources (financial, personnel, etc.) in such a cooperation, and to deepen it. In addition, attempting to implement or realising inter-municipal cooperation brings with it other potential risks resulting, for example, from a more complex decision-making structure. However, according to theoretical assumptions and the results of relevant studies, greater involvement could lead to potential benefits such as economies of scale, higher quality or level of service provision, etc.

Swianiewicz, Gendźwiłł, Krukowska, Lackowska and Picej (2016) estimate that IMC in Poland represented by *three most significant forms of IMC – i.e. unions, agreements and companies – account for 3.22% of municipal expenditure in Poland*. Based on our calculations from the Czech database MONITOR (provided by the Ministry of Finance of the Czech Republic), the most frequent IMC legal form (VMA) within the examined period is the ratio of total VMA expenditures to total municipal expenditure, which is between 1%–3%, and the similar amounts of revenues. We also counted the ratio between VMA total assets and municipal total assets, which varies within the examined period between 2,5–3,5%. To a certain extent we can argue that the situation with formalised IMC intensity is similar in both countries and that in both countries there is still plenty of space to develop, intensify, or professionalise IMC in general.

Research methodology

The aim of this research was to identify motives, breaking points, and other key aspects that lead municipal representatives to (not) cooperate. This knowledge should help the relevant public policymakers, but also the individual decision-makers in the field, to understand what is at the beginning of any cooperation and what should be taken into account by the entity or person deciding to cooperate.

As part of the survey, we contacted representatives of all municipalities in the Czech Republic. A total of 398 respondents participated in this survey. The target group of respondents included mayors of municipalities as the main movers and decision-makers regarding inter-municipal cooperation in the territory. The survey was conducted online using an electronic questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: 1) the identification and basic characteristics of the subjects; 2) the identification and characterisation of motives, perceptions, turning points, financing or legal aspects of inter-municipal cooperation from the point of view of the respondents (subjects), but also the reasons why they do not cooperate. The second part of the questionnaire was divided according to three important thematic areas in which inter-municipal cooperation is implemented in the Czech Republic.

The selection of thematic areas was based on the findings of existing surveys in the field of inter-municipal cooperation in the Czech Republic (e.g. Lysek and Šaradín, 2018). Three out of the most frequent areas where inter-municipal cooperation is implemented in the Czech Republic were selected. The first area was education (selected forms: local action plans for the development of education; joint schools/kindergartens; joint transport to schools), followed by social services (selected forms: provision of social care; provision of transport, senior taxis; joint operation of social facilities), and waste management together with technical infrastructure (selected forms: waste collection; sewerage + sewage treatment plant; cycle paths). In each of these thematic areas, the respondents then referred to each specific form of inter-municipal cooperation in terms of each aspect separately. Where the respondents indicated that they were actively cooperating in that form, a series of questions followed that were the same across all forms. In the case that the municipality did not cooperate in the form we defined, we were interested in the factors that explain this behaviour. After answering questions related to the specific form, space was also left for the respondent to add any additional forms of cooperation in each area, and we also asked the same series of questions as for the forms we defined.

Sample description

The collected sample includes municipalities of all sizes. The largest group of municipalities (about a quarter of the sample) are those with more than 1000 inhabitants and less than 2500 inhabitants. The next three population groups fall in the 3rd to 5th interval, i.e. municipalities with 251 to 1000 inhabitants. The most frequent forms of cooperation are clearly Local Action Plans in Education (LAPs), construction of cycle paths, and cooperation on waste collection. The least mentioned forms include shared transport for education, running a senior taxi, and running a social facility.

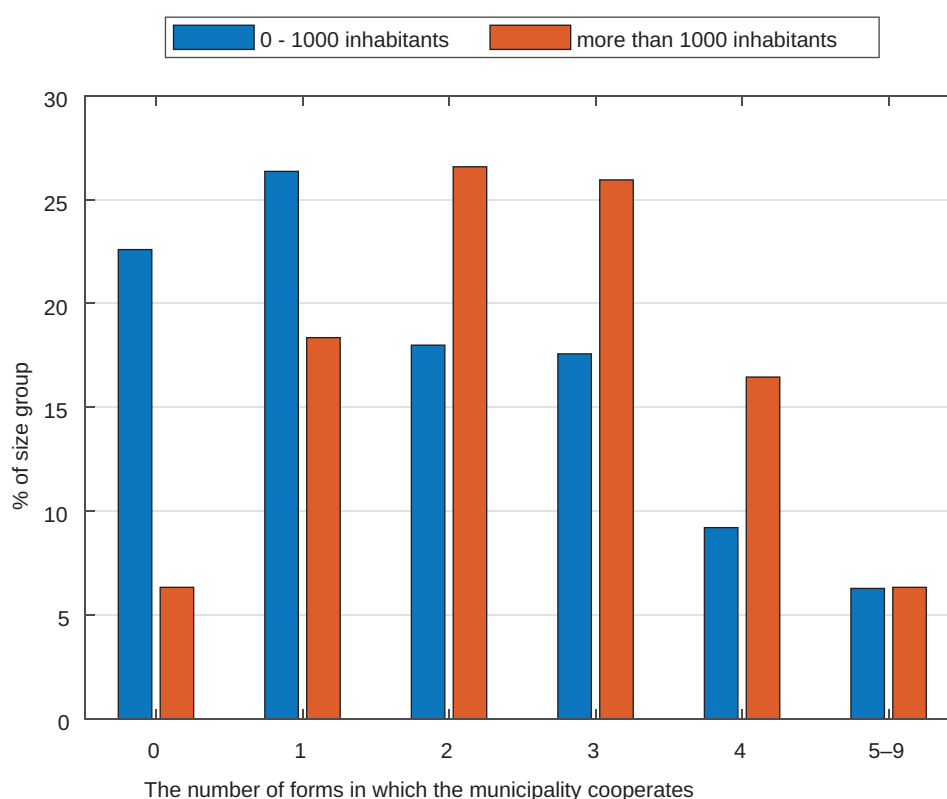


Figure 2. Difference in IMC frequency according to the population size in the sample

Source: Own elaboration.

Many studies show that municipal size plays a role in the inter-municipal cooperation setting (e.g. Giacomini, 2018; Soukopová and Vaceková, 2018; Baba and Asami, 2020). Figure 2 shows a comparison of two groups of municipalities by population (up to 1000 and over 1000). We can see that the largest part of smaller municipalities (26%) cooperate in only one of the forms of cooperation we had defined. The second largest group of smaller municipalities (23%) are those that do not cooperate in either form. Municipalities with a population of over 1000 inhabitants most often cooperate in two (27%) and three (26%) of the forms we have defined. In both size groups, just over 6% of municipalities cooperate in 5 or more forms. Thus, it can be seen in this limited sample that smaller municipalities tend to have fewer areas and forms in which they implement inter-municipal cooperation, while larger municipalities tend to implement inter-municipal cooperation in more areas or forms. On the other hand, according to Sorrentino and Simonetta (2013), *the Policy Evaluation framework considers inter-municipal cooperation as a logical response to the problems faced by small municipalities*. It is, therefore, assumed that smaller municipalities, which have the systemic prerequisites to do so, should make more use of inter-municipal cooperation, but this is not fully confirmed in this study and in the given sample, and there are also significant differences across size categories of municipalities according to areas of use.

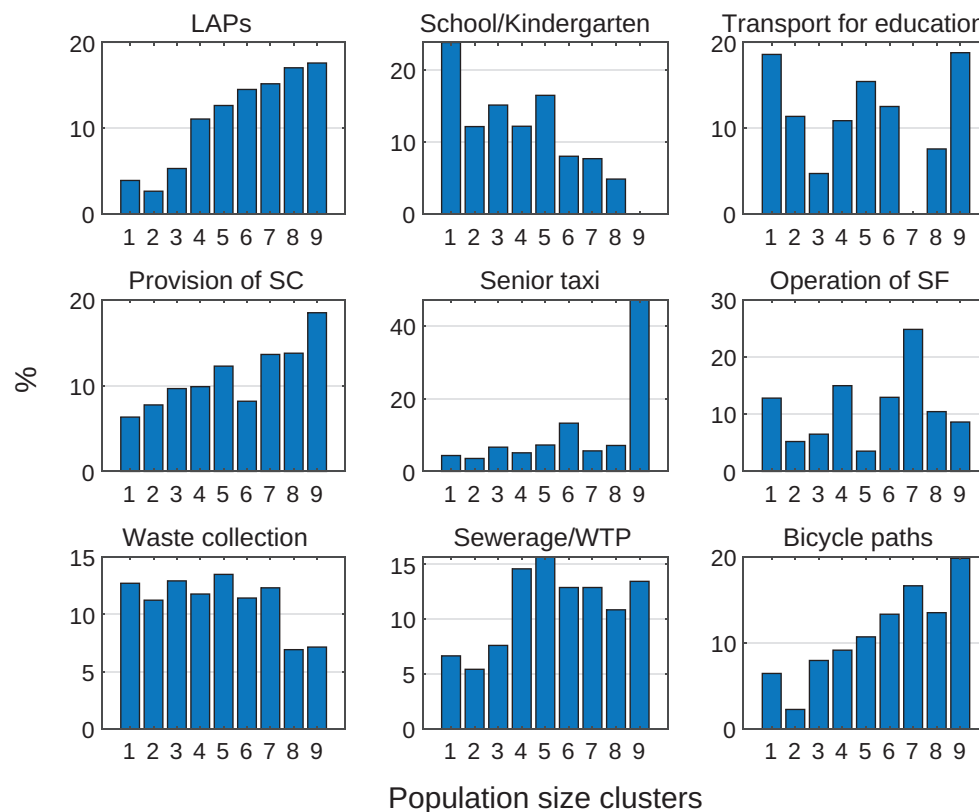


Figure 3. Distribution according to population size clusters in each form (population size clusters: 1 = 0-150, 2 = 151-250, 3 = 251-400, 4 = 401-600, 5 = 601-1000, 6 = 1001-2500, 7 = 2501-5000, 8 = 5001-10,000, and 9 = more than 10,000)

Source: Own elaboration.

The values are recalculated to avoid distortion due to different frequencies within each size (by population) group. For the three forms of cooperation – namely LAPs, provision of social care, and building cycle paths – there is an increasing trend, i.e. the cooperation in question is more frequent in municipalities with a higher population. Waste collection is similarly represented in the first seven intervals, but is less frequent in the largest municipalities (more than 5,000 inhabitants). Less than 50% of municipalities operating senior taxis have more than 10,000 inhabitants.

Motives for cooperation

According to the existing literature (see literature review), the financial aspects appear to be often dominant ones for assessing inter-municipal cooperation, along with the quality or quantity of provided services. However, e.g. Négrier (2005) argues via the French context that the effect of financial incentives to communes should not be exaggerated as other factors or incentive seems to be also important and in some particular case also more important (e.g. pre-existing networks of inter-communal cooperation, political leadership). Based on the German experience, Fürst (2005) argues that cooperation of municipalities within metropolitan areas is fuelled not only by state incentives granted for areawide cooperation, but, most notably, by a “paradigm change” at the level of local authorities, who have become increasingly aware of their mutual interdependence as well as of the benefits of the regional scale. On the other hand, Swianiewicz (2011) points out that examples of countries in which IMC is really widespread (such as France or Finland) are cases in which external incentives to cooperate are very powerful. Swianiewicz (2011) also adds that if IMCs are abundant somewhere, it is usually due to an incentive programme, such as in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary at the time.

Therefore, motives of municipalities to engage in specific forms of inter-municipal cooperation were investigated in three questions concerning how important a given factor was for the realisation of the cooperation; the motives included: 1) suitable subsidy or grant title (DON); 2) financial efficiency of the solution (FIN); and 3) an increase in demand for the service or goods (DEM). We examined significance on the Likert scale from 1 (not significant) to 5 (significant). A higher number indicates that a given motive was more significant in the respondents' decisions about potential collaboration. The averaged significance values for each motive for each form of inter-municipal cooperation we defined are contained in Figure 4.

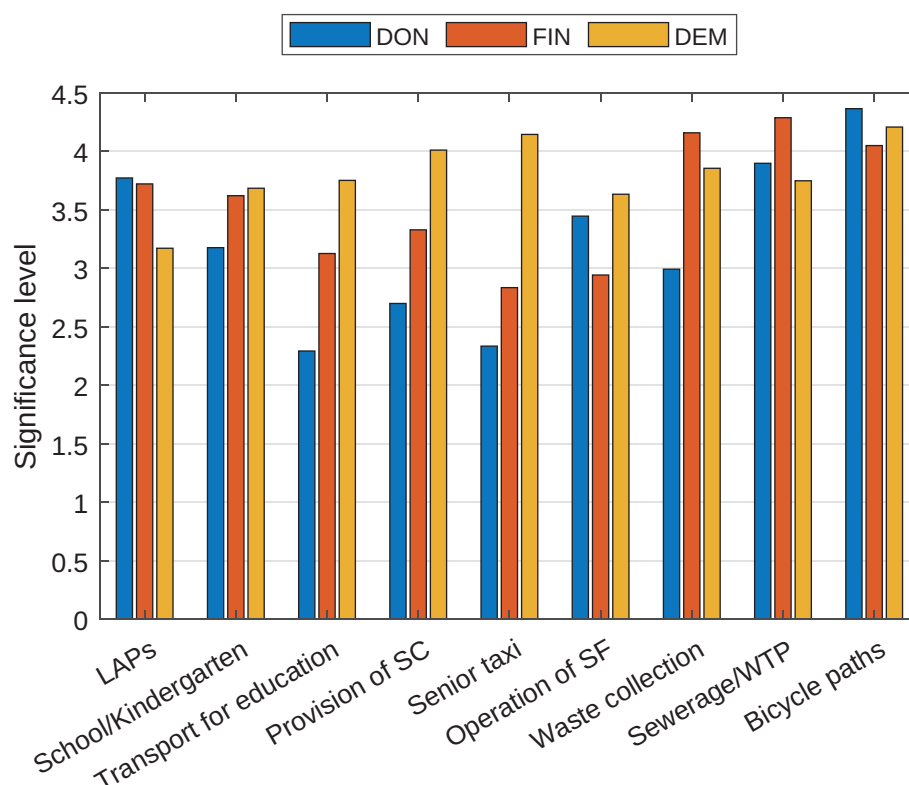


Figure 4. Motivation for each form

Source: Own elaboration

A suitable subsidy title was the biggest motive in the case of cooperation in LAPS and in the construction of cycle paths. Conversely, in the case of transport for education and operating a senior taxi, the motive of appropriate subsidy title was the least important. The respondents attributed the importance of the financial efficiency motive to the solution in the case of waste collection and the construction of a sewerage or wastewater treatment plant. In the case of joint construction of cycle paths, the increase in demand for this infrastructure was also very significant. The increase in demand also played a significant role for senior taxis or social care provision. In the case of services such as transport for education, provision of social care, or provision of senior taxis, it is interesting to observe the large difference in the importance of the different motives.

Breaking points

According to previously mentioned Haveri (2008), the “rhetoric wall” is expressed as a conflict between intentions, beliefs, and the implemented development, and is an essential element of the process of change in local governance. In contrast to the motives usually associated with initial decision-making processes within long-term and stable IMC, the breaking points are the turning points when the municipal leadership actually decided to implement the cooperation on a stable and long-term basis. As Haveri (2008) adds, within the initial stage of the networking process

before the IMC is realised, not all the problems or everyday aspects are visible and the networking process can be seen as a sort of cooperation honeymoon that is followed by cooperation on a daily basis. Therefore, it is important to separate the initial motivation or impulse to cooperate from the actual conversion of the cooperation mode into a real and long-term one. Swianiewicz (2011) also points out that it is not sufficient to initiate IMC with the assumption that benefits would be evident and success might be taken for granted; thus, we can find examples of failures in every country.

Three likely possibilities were defined, and the respondents were free to add another reason (OTH), if necessary: 1) financial – FIN (e.g. a suitable grant, financial efficiency); 2) personal – PER (e.g. leadership of a IMC body or municipal leader); and 3) informational – INF (e.g. inspiration from good practice).

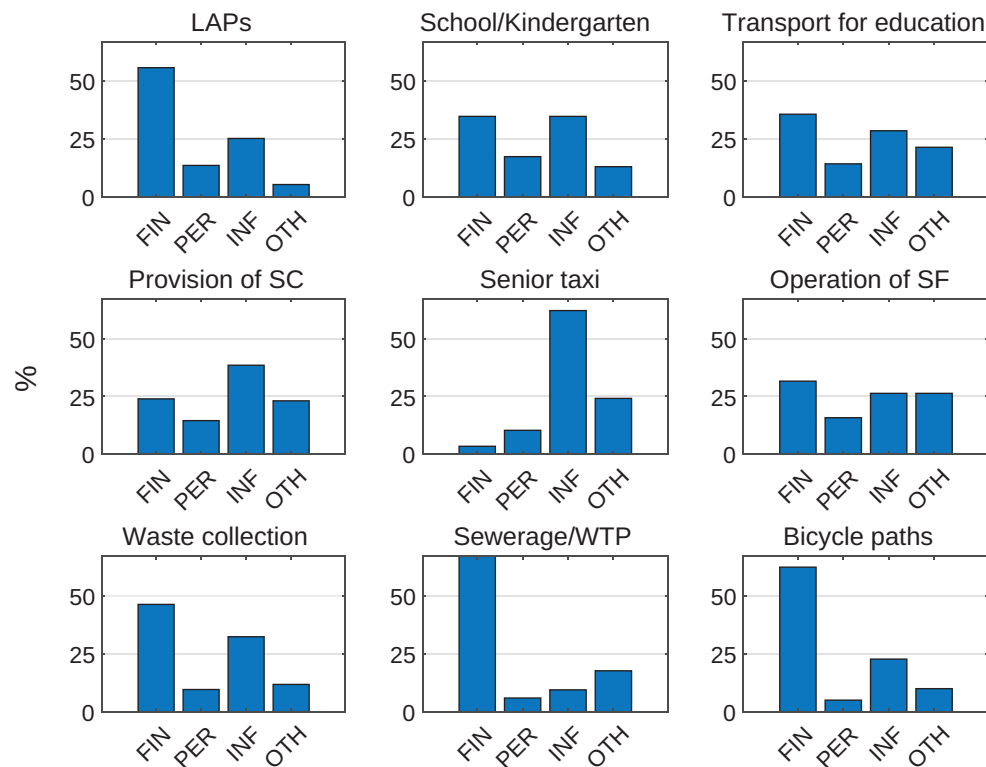


Figure 5. Breaking point for each form

Source: Own elaboration

In the group of bar charts, it can be seen that these breakpoints vary across the different forms. In the case of collaboration on LAPs, waste collection, sewerage/wastewater, or cycle paths, the tipping point was financial, i.e., e.g., the presence of a favourable grant to kick-start such a collaboration. A tipping point of an informative nature was most often given for senior taxis. In terms of staffing issues, they do not seem to have played a major role in any of the observed forms of cooperation.

Reasons for not cooperating

Not every cooperation between municipalities, whether in terms of mere intention or actual implementation, is actually implemented and works in a long-term and stable way. With this regards, we examined the importance of five factors from the respondents' perspective. The factors were: 1) the lack of finance (FIN); 2) the lack of people (PER); 3) negative experience (EXP); 4) not needed (NEC); and 5) not a suitable partner (PAR). For each of the five factors, the respondents identified a number on the Likert scale 1–5. The importance of the factor increased with higher numbers.

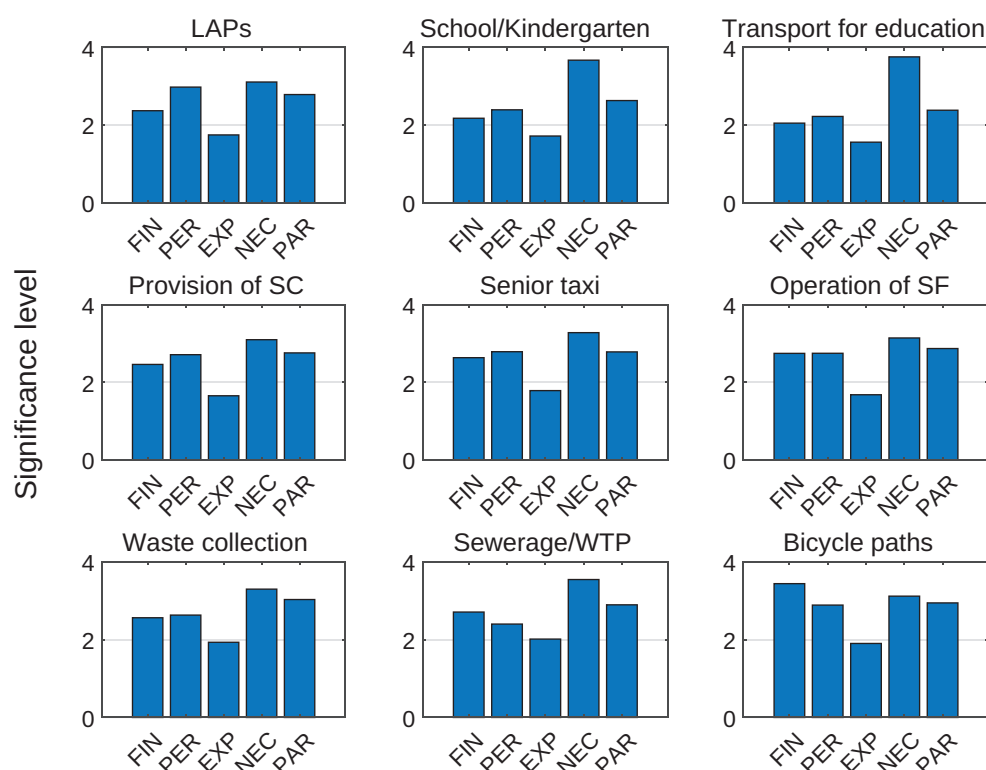


Figure 6. Reasons for non-cooperation

Source: Own elaboration.

The most important reason for non-cooperation in a given area is the fact that a given asset or service is not needed in the municipality. This means that there was insufficient demand for the asset or service from municipalities or residents. This partial result is to some extent in line with the partial findings in the case of motives for cooperation, where the demand factor played a significant and often primary role in terms of importance for most of the surveyed services. A significant difference is particularly noticeable in the case of a common nursery/school or transport for education. Conversely, negative experience appears to be the least significant factor across the different forms of inter-municipal cooperation. However, this may mean that the municipalities have not had a negative experience or that they have had a negative experience, but this is not a reason for them to not implement further cooperation.

Concluding remarks

Although overall figures and overviews at first glance often show that municipalities in the Czech Republic cooperate a lot (see above, i.e. the number of municipalities involved in some form of inter-municipal cooperation, the number of voluntary associations of municipalities, etc.), a closer look and additional information in the relevant context shows that there is still a lot of room for intensification of inter-municipal cooperation in the Czech Republic. Even from the literature and from experience in different countries, there are probably many different reasons why this is the case, and there are multiple perspectives on this issue. This study has focused on the perspective of municipal representatives and the process of their thinking and decision-making regarding whether or not they want to cooperate, but also whether or not they actually do, or why not specifically. Based on previous developments and available information, the issue of top-down and reverse amalgamation of municipalities is a very marginal topic in the Czech Republic nowadays. Inter-municipal cooperation is, therefore, the only relevant and functional alternative in such an environment of highly-fragmented public administration. In the Czech environment, a great and positive willingness of municipalities and their representatives to cooperate can be identified in the long term, but the

real intensification of such cooperation is still missing, and the question is why. Some of the studies mentioned in this study point to the need for strong incentives or even comprehensive incentive programmes, while others highlight other factors as equally important or decisive when agreeing on inter-municipal cooperation or even its actual implementation. According to Haveri (2008), the rhetorical wall indicates an overly positive interpretation of reality and an emphasis on possibilities and plans rather than what happens on the ground.

The research on the sample showed, for example, that smaller municipalities tend to have fewer areas and forms in which they implement inter-municipal cooperation, while larger municipalities tend to implement inter-municipal cooperation in more areas or forms. Some specificities such as the thematic area also emerged in this respect. However, it is the smaller municipalities that are more likely to suffer from a lack of staff or financial capacity and, therefore, in general, inter-municipal cooperation is an instrument suitable for them. In terms of motives to cooperate, differences emerged both between the different incentives and between the different thematic areas. Thus, for example, as some areas (e.g. transport for education, senior taxi, or provision of social services) showed in the sample, the financial incentive in the form of a subsidy is not necessarily the main motive for implementation. At the same time, an external financial incentive from other higher public budgets can at first sight be a very effective tool for municipal representatives or public policymakers at higher levels to incentivise cooperation. However, there are areas where such an incentive is effective in kick-starting cooperation, according to the respondents. In addition to this, there are also areas where demand for the service is important for potential implementers of inter-municipal cooperation.

Although one might expect that external non-repayable financial motives (e.g. subsidies or grants) would clearly prevail, the overall and partial results for the sample of municipalities show that extra finance is not always the main or only motivator for considering the realisation of cooperation from the perspective of the relevant decision-makers (municipal representatives). For example, in her mapping of motives (incentives and barriers) for establishing or implementing inter-municipal cooperation in a sample of Hungarian municipalities, Kovács (2019) identifies joint application for development projects and funds or delivering mandatory tasks and services as the prevailing motivators, across selected size groups of municipalities (small, medium, large). The incentives were dominated by the financial motive associated with extra funds. The findings are to a certain extent consistent with the sub-conclusions reached in this paper. A limitation of the comparison is the absence of a breakdown of cooperation by sector or agenda. It can be said that, as in Poland, for example, according to the study by Gendźwiłł, Krukowska and Lackowska (2019), financial motives generally prevail in the Czech Republic (in the studied sample) when deciding on the implementation of inter-municipal cooperation, but they are not the only or sole factor, and their significance may vary across thematic areas where inter-municipal cooperation is implemented. The reason why external non-repayable financial incentive – e.g. in the form of subsidies – does not play a dominant role in the Czech Republic as in other countries can probably be found behind the setting of the tax-sharing system or the financial management of municipalities. According to Sorrentino and Simonetta (2013), subsidies are attractive tools for those with budget problems. The Czech municipal sector is generally very liquid (high average financial liquidity) over the long term, with very low indebtedness and very few cases of municipalities with financial problems (Ministry of Finance CR, 2022).

There is also some consensus in our survey that negative experiences of implementing inter-municipal cooperation are not that common, but we do not have such a strong evidence to support this claim. A limitation of our research in this case is the lack of mapping of the whole process of implementing inter-municipal cooperation, i.e. we do not know if it is a successful cooperation, which could influence the way of looking at the interpretation of the results. Also, the analysed sample is of a limited size.

As can be seen, inter-municipal cooperation still has in the Czech Republic a great potential for development and could be the solution – especially where amalgamation is not an option – because of many factors (political, personal, financial, past experience, etc.) In addition, Garlatti, Fedele and Iacuzzi (2020) show that even amalgamation faces certain barriers and it is crucial, according

to them, to study pre-existing institutional and administrative arrangements. Therefore, a deeper understanding of inter-municipal cooperation and its sub-aspects is necessary.

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