

EVALUATING LOCAL PARTNERSHIP INCENTIVE POLICIES: ROADMAP OF A RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract

To our knowledge, no frameworks currently exist to address the evaluation of public policies to incentivise the setting up of local government partnerships. This paper, the first in an ongoing research, aims to delineate an evaluation model based on the principles of the 'realist approach', which assigns a key analysis role to the context in which the mechanisms of a public programme work (or not). To illustrate the potential of this approach, a fragment of analysis related to the most distinctive phase of the realist evaluation (i.e., eliciting and formalising the policy theories to be tested) is presented and discussed.

Keywords: Local government, governance, evidence-based evaluation, incentive policies, implementation, intermunicipal cooperation, public partnerships.

1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence (indeed dominance) of joint initiatives to address multifaceted social problems is a widespread phenomenon (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007a, 8; 2007b; Isett, Mergel, LeRoux, Mischen, & Rethemeyer, 2011; O'Toole, 1993) that has received considerable attention in the current debate on transformational government (Irani, Sahraoui, Ozkan, Ghoneim, & Elliman, 2007; King & Cotterill, 2007; Klievink & Janssen, 2009; Weerakkody, Dwivedi, Dhillon, & Williams, 2007). At the local level, such initiatives involve bringing together two or more distinct and autonomous public bodies/agencies to cooperate in achieving a common goal (e.g. to provide services and/or implement policies) and as an alternative to traditional hierarchical governance (Kenis & Provan, 2009). When the area of collaboration is not only operational (e.g. limited to the delivery of services) but also encompasses policy formulation and planning, the joint action has more ambitious aims and objectives (i.e., "co-design", in the words of Ranade & Hudson, 2003).

All European countries have, at some point, actively promoted inter-municipal cooperation through the use of statutory obligations and financial incentives (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007b). Italy, for example, introduced an associative form in 1990 called the *Unione dei Comuni* (Union of Municipalities or "UM"), which, in certain aspects, differs from the traditional forms of collaboration (e.g., Partnering Agreements, Consortia, Mountain Communities). In fact, as confirmed by Legislative Decree No. 267/00, the UM a) adds a new body to those already in existence (the provincial and regional governments); b) has full autonomy, both from a juridical and an operational standpoint, over all the functions delegated by the municipalities involved; and c) is mandated with important territorial governance functions at a supra-municipal level.

Until now, the processes for establishing the 313 Italian UM (Testa, 2010) have been voluntary and benefit from state and regional financial contributions for a period of 8-10 years from start-up. We are

still in the dark as to the potential effects of the controversial Law 122/2010 enacted by the Italian government, which introduces new obligations for municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants and requires the UM to share important functions such as administration and control, local police and social services. Basically, the small municipalities are obliged to adhere to Partnering Agreements or to a UM. However, only the UM have access to the financial support provided by the upper institutional levels; this corroborates the idea that Italy's central and regional governments intend to support only the strongest forms of cooperation, i.e., those oriented to joint planning and policy coordination, enhancing the quality of services and managing local area development.

In a previous article on voluntary collaborations among Lombard municipalities in Italy (Sorrentino & Simonetta, 2011), we advanced some preliminary reflections to understand the impact of incentive policies on the implementation of cooperative arrangements at the local level. We described a mixed scenario of negligible impact and disappointing results. Our research approach, which can be summed up by the question '*What works* in incentive programmes (or why do they fail)?', enabled us to hypothesise some possible explanations for the fact that (despite the funding and support offered by the regional administration) solely 16% of the municipal services are delivered in associative form.

Starting with the theoretical and methodological questions left open by that exploratory study – among which, the complex mapping of the social contexts, mechanisms and outcomes in multi-organisational settings – this paper argues that the success of an evaluation effort (in essence, the answer to the question '*What works*' in respect of a public policy) largely depends on the research design and, in particular, on the assumptions that underpin the design itself. We suggest that the so-called '*realist approach*' (Pawson, 2002a; Pawson, 2002b, 2003; Pawson, Greenhalgh, Harvey, & Walshe, 2005; Pawson & Tilley, 1997) is useful to address the policy evaluation puzzle in multi-organisational settings. First, the realist approach assumes that the intrinsic complexity that is the reality that a public policy sets out to modify influences the behaviour of the actors. Second, the realist design seeks to understand what in a policy makes it work or not in specific contexts and not in others. Therefore, the question '*What works?*' becomes '*What works for whom, in what circumstances and in what respects, and how?*'. Third, it is a '*middle-range theory*' that does not aspire to provide '*formulas or recipes*' to address the problem in hand. It is also sensitive to diversity and change in programme delivery and development. Fourth, it is highly versatile because the research path combines qualitative with quantitative data and is not tied to specific methods of data collection and processing. Any kind of strategy and method useful to verifying the hypotheses formulated is allowed.

This paper seeks to enhance our understanding of policy implementation first by cumulating knowledge on formal networks as indicated by Isett et al. (2011: 169), that is, describe '*the consistent findings that do exist [in the extant literature] and areas that seem to clash with one another*'; and, second, by applying the realist approach to the evaluation of local partnerships. This approach – at least to our knowledge – has never been used to address the policy evaluation puzzle in inter-municipal collaboration initiatives.

In terms of the second, the paper illustrates a concrete experience of evaluation research – just embarked on – in which the authors are directly involved. Therefore, as members of a team responsible for developing an evidence-based framework for assessing public policies to promote and support inter-municipal partnerships in the Italian Region of Sardinia, our objective here is to:

- get a clear picture of what is going on in the scientific debate by exploring the relevant literature;
- outline the research path for the development of an evidence-based framework to assess public policies that promote and support the UM. The framework is intended to be a tool to assist and inform - in a logic of summative evaluation - future policymaking and practice;
- highlight the research phases in which the contribution of the realist approach appears particularly significant; and sketch – through an illustrative example – a possible context of use for the theory.

The paper is structured as follows. After the introduction, Section 2 reviews selected literature about evaluation, public administration and inter-organisational studies. Section 3 presents the key tenets of the realist evaluation, seen as a means to address the evaluation puzzle of policies (such as those that promote inter-municipal cooperation) which, in the implementation phase, require multifaceted

interventions, like the setting up of new service practices and organisational restructuring. In Section 4, the paper charts the roadmap of a project commissioned by the Sardinia Region and describes how the realist approach will be applied. To illustrate the potential of this approach, a fragment of the analysis of the most distinctive phase of the realist evaluation (i.e., eliciting and formalising the policy theories to be tested) is presented Section 5. Ultimately, Section 6 sets out some conclusions and the implications for the next steps of the research path.

2 RELATED LITERATURE AND MOTIVATION

It is no easy task to form a clear picture of the literature that seeks to assess the public incentive policies implemented to spur the growth of cooperation at the local level as these are covered by two different yet parallel research streams. To gather relevant and useful information to achieve the research aims according to the realist approach, this section reviews the literature that focuses on the influence exerted by governments on the decisions made by the local authorities to set up and develop partnerships. The studies selected here refer to various combinations of public, private, and non-profit organisations pursuing a variety of service objectives and functions.

A characteristic of research into inter-organisational collaboration (other common terms used interchangeably include: collaborations, partnerships, inter-organisational relations and networks) is the wide variety of disciplines, paradigms, theoretical perspectives and sectorial focuses from which the subject is tackled (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Huxham, 2003; Mandell & Steelman, 2003). Another peculiar aspect is that, until now, the scholars have made no significant effort to develop, integrate and test systematically the insights generated in previous works (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007b; Kenis & Provan, 2009; O'Toole, 1986). The general understanding is that there is still much to learn about partnership assessment (Jacobs, 2010; O'Leary & Bingham, 2009; Oliver, 1990). This is especially so when the selection of the partnership's governance typology and the choice of services that the municipalities are asked to deliver arises, directly or indirectly, from external pressure, e.g., laws and policy programmes.

The research of Hulst and van Montfort (2007b) and Hulst, van Montfort, Haveri, Airaksinen & Kelly (2009), who made an in-depth comparative analysis of several collaborative arrangements across eight European countries (Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom), provides an important springboard from which to start our discussion. The authors adopted a new-institutionalist perspective according to a line of reasoning that can be synthesised as follows (Hulst et al., 2009). First, behaviour and decisions are the result of interaction between institutional values, norms, informal rules and beliefs and actor rationality. Second, institutions provide meaning and influence the way actors define their interests and preferences. Third, the institutional context shapes the opportunities and constraints actors face and sets the game rules for actors pursuing their goals. While existing institutions shape the strategies and conduct of actors, in turn, action and actors can materialise in new institutions. Ultimately, path dependency plays a crucial role: strategic choices made at one point in history limit the range of possibilities for later strategic choices as much as existing institutions leave their tracks in new institutions.

The research findings on the strategies to promote local collaborations (Hulst et al. (2009)) suggest that statutory obligations and conditions to drive cooperation frequently face resistance from local governments, leading the individual municipalities to devise avoidance strategies. The study shows the development of many different types of cooperation in the countries in question: from single purpose to multi-purpose; from mutual consultation to the joint operation of inter-municipal agencies, involving small and large groups of municipalities and encompassing different territorial scales, sometimes involving private sector organisations and upper government levels (ibidem: 7). However, policies that use financial incentives to promote cooperation seem more effective, although there are cases in which the cooperation is more symbolic than real.

Statutory obligations and financial incentives to promote inter-municipal cooperation are normative and coercive pressures brought by European governments to persuade local governments to adopt collaboration initiatives. Significant variations can be observed between one country and another and,

while it is possible to document good practices in the field of incentivisation, according to the authors, the overall picture is not stable. Over the past decades, shifts (between single-purpose and multi-purpose arrangements, between horizontal and vertical forms of cooperation, and between standing bureaucratic organisations and contractual agreements) have occurred. How can these shifts be explained? What determines whether local bodies set up single-purpose or multi-purpose arrangements? The authors recognise the role played by national legislation and incentive structures – alongside that of local preferences and environmental factors - in shaping collaborative forms and their subsequent development over time.

eGovernment initiatives demand a high degree of collaboration among organisations. Dawes & Préfontaine (2003) recognise the need to put digital government collaboration initiatives in a suitable institutional framework. More often, legitimacy begins with a basis in law or regulation, but, in a study of the implementation of new inter-municipal structures to support the development of eGovernment in Italy's peripheral areas, Ferro and Sorrentino (2010) uphold the effectiveness of the incentive policies to reward voluntary collaborative behaviour. When the municipalities involved consider the funding allocated by the central or regional governments insufficient, the start up of new initiatives may become problematic. Moreover, the authors state that despite the enabling role of the public funds in advancing the creation of voluntary joint initiatives, the result of these latter is not certain once the public resources expire. Rodriguez, Langley, Beland, & Denis (2007), focusing exclusively on the analysis of mandates among public healthcare organisations, demonstrated that an inappropriate use of the economic incentives by the mandating agency led to disappointing results in two different joint initiatives out of three.

Also the model proposed by Ansell and Gash (2008) assigns a crucial role to incentives, whereby these critically influence whether or not this form of governance will produce successful voluntary collaboration. Further “mandated forms of collaboration may be critical where incentives to participate are weak, but mandated cooperation can also disguise the lack of real commitment on the part of stakeholders. Therefore, even when collaborative governance is mandated, achieving “buy in is still an essential aspect of the collaborative process” (ibidem, p. 560). “The incentives that stakeholders have to enter into collaboration will loom large as a factor in explaining whether collaborative governance can be successful. Incentives to participate are low when stakeholders can achieve their goals unilaterally or through alternative means” (ibidem, p. 552).

The form of the network, the type of inception – whether the network was initially formed as voluntary or mandated – and the developmental stage of the network are the three exogenous factors identified by Kenis and Provan (2009) in an article that investigates network performance. These authors argue that where a network stands on each of these factors will determine the appropriateness of specific criteria for assessing the overall performance of the collaborative arrangement.

The “potential robust effects” that external, incentive-based programmes can have in precipitating collaboration among institutional entities in a highly-fragmented policy area, i.e., the healthcare sector, have been illustrated by Berry, Krutz, Langner, & Budetti (2008). The authors conclude that even a modest level of external support and technical assistance can stimulate significant programmatic change and inter-organisational linkages within public agencies to enhance the provision of services.

To sum up, while the abovementioned studies shed significant light on the institutional design processes of cooperative arrangements and so help us to better understand the effects of the incentive policies in a variety of contexts and from a wide range of empirical, theoretical, and methodological perspectives, clearly, they do not allow for generalisation. While of unquestionable interest, the cases analysed are specific, unique and not repeatable.

Most of the authors agree on the fact that the availability of funds and other incentive mechanisms is a necessary but insufficient condition for public agencies to launch and develop collaborative arrangements. The review also suggests that public policies to promote cooperation help to motivate joint efforts but is unable to provide much guidance on the conditions for their use or functioning, i.e., it does not help to respond to the question: in what contexts do the public actors embark on collaboration and why, in other similar contexts and *despite* the financial incentives, do they fail to launch collaborative initiatives? To reply to that question, we propose adopting an evaluation approach

that expressly acknowledges the impact of the contextual conditions and the complexity that distinguishes the assessment of policies (such as those that promote inter-municipal cooperation) which, in the implementation phase, require multifaceted interventions and investments in resources that go beyond joint action.

3 REALIST EVALUATION IN A NUTSHELL

This section outlines the key tenets of the realist evaluation. We present the basic concepts of this multifaceted approach, identifying the aspects most useful to achieve the paper's aims in the available space and focusing on the need for clarity. The guidelines to this approach can be found in the original texts (Pawson, 2002b, 2003; Pawson et al., 2005; Pawson & Tilley, 1997, 2004).

The realist approach falls into the category of theory-oriented approaches (Stame, 2004), meant as evaluation approaches that require an understanding of the theoretical assumptions on which the policy or programme in question is based to verify its efficacy. More simply, the theoretical assumptions are the whole of the beliefs that underpin the action, i.e., the assumptions of causal relationship between the inputs and outputs of a policy.

The realist approach adopts a peculiar research design (Pawson et al., 2005; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). The first assumption is that the social conditions are indispensable prerequisites to determine the value of a public policy because these can significantly alter the effects observed. Therefore, more than studying the cause-effect relationship between programme and results, it is appropriate to investigate the interaction (or what is called the *mechanism* (M)) between the implementation of the policy and the contingent conditions into which it is introduced and implemented. The meaning of *context* (C) is broad and varied according to the analysis level considered. It is not only the temporal space-place where the programme is carried out, but also the whole of the rules, norms and values that that place permeates, as well as the limits and possibilities that characterise it. If the various contexts regularly show a positive interaction with that programme then it means that it 'works'. The evaluative feedback to the policymakers will be positive or negative solely after regular successes have been observed in multiple contexts. The *outcome* (O), which consists of the intended and unintended consequences of programmes, is generated by the activation of different mechanisms in different contexts (Pawson & Tilley, 2004, 8), according to the formula: $O = C + M$.

Therefore "[realist] evaluation is based on the CMO configuration" (Stame, 2004, p. 62). This contingent view generates two important consequences. First, no public policy can be considered a planned action that, almost mechanically, produces results. Each policy, along with the various intervention programmes that it foresees, is more of an opportunity that agents can choose to take, being, in their turn, conditioned by the context in which they act. In practice, public policies only rarely take into account that interaction, rather, each aspect is addressed separately. Second, given the complexity of the different contexts, it is always difficult to say whether a single input (i.e. additional funding) caused a given output: an input never works alone (Stame, 2004). Providing evaluative feedback about comprehensive reform continues to challenge evaluators (Yin & Davis, 2006).

4 PROJECT BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The project commissioned by the Sardinian regional administration has the objective of introducing policies to incentivise collaborative initiatives, an area in which the Region has dedicated substantial programmes and policy instruments. The UM are an important presence in the institutional landscape of this region. Currently, Sardinia has 30 UM in operation (Testa, 2010) and, while 48.8% of Sardinian municipalities belong to a UM, the most significant data is that 32.6% of the region's population live in a UM partner municipality (versus a national average of 9.5%).

The project is based on summative evaluation logic and has a dual goal. As a *learning* exercise, it aims to make the regional policymakers aware of the results of the actions undertaken and to show them how to improve their decisions and practice through experience. In terms of *accountability*, on the

other hand, the client needs to highlight the level of the results achieved in meeting the needs and/or solving the problems that led to the regional administration’s intervention.

The purpose of this paper is not to describe the project in detail so we will provide just a brief sketch of the work ahead of us to highlight the added value of the research method proposed.

4.1 Research design

We chose a multiple-case study methodology, that is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries within phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1994: 13). Case studies have a distinctive place in evaluation research (ibidem: 15).

Two Italian regions (Sardinia and Lombardy) will be analysed from a comparative perspective. The choice of two regions so different in economic, socio-demographic and institutional terms (Sardinia is a special charter region, while Lombardy – the country’s most advanced region – has an ordinary charter) can be explained by the process of institutional reform (based on decentralisation and federalism) underway in Italy. The structural change of the state to a more federalist matrix – once up and running – should translate into: 1) the municipalities’ adoption of public service production and management methods oriented to productivity and economic efficiency; and 2) the progressive narrowing of the gaps between the different areas of the country. As a result of this latter, the most advanced regions in the various spheres will act as benchmarks for the others. Therefore, in the future, the standard costs of the best performers will be the primary criterion adopted by the state when allocating the Regions with the funds needed to operate and deliver the local services.

The adoption of a comparative approach is meant to provide useful information on the effects produced by the policies under investigation and to help to understand the “patterns of winners and losers” (Pawson et al., 2005) in both the contexts analysed. The project will be developed in four phases, according to the realist evaluation approach (Pawson and Tilley, 2004). Figure 1, below, provides an overview of the research design and shows the specific object of this paper in the box with the bold border.

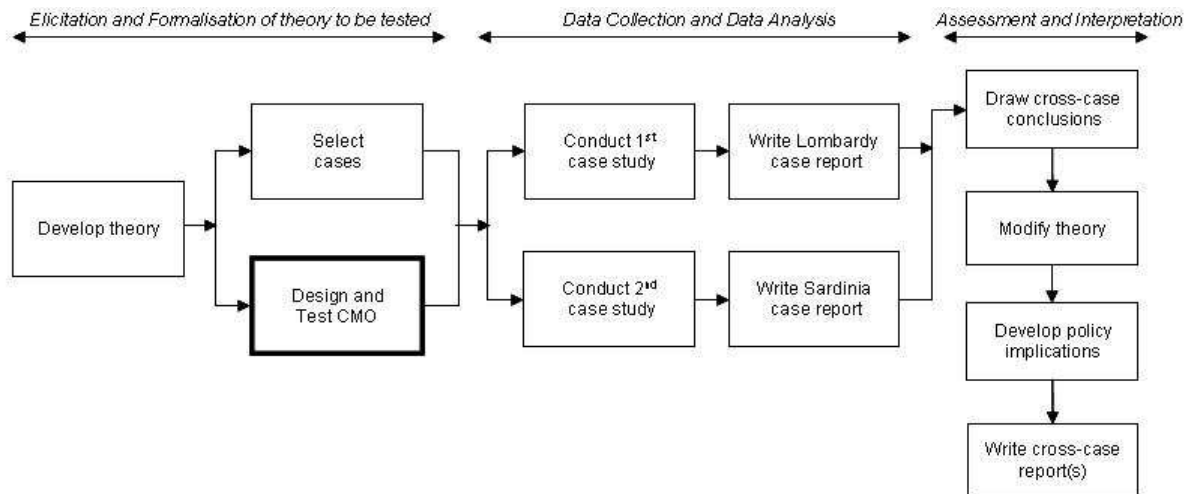


Figure 1. The research design [adapted from Yin (1994); Pawson & Tilley (2004)].

The *first phase* (eliciting and formalising the policy theories to be tested) will be carried out drawing on multiple sources of evidence, including academic and professional literature, reports, and other documents. The formulation of the programme theory in CMO (Context, Mechanisms, Outcomes) terms – based on the analysis of documentation and interviews with the policymakers, programme architects and practitioners – will serve to discuss the shifts, failures and unintended effects. At the end of this step we will formulate preliminary hypotheses.

The *second phase* (data collection) consists of “collecting data that will allow interrogation of these embryonic hypotheses” (ibidem). Data-gathering (both qualitative and quantitative from multiple sources of evidence) has the task of trying to match information to these various leads. Interviews and focus groups (FG) with UM managers and secretaries will enable us to develop new concepts and test the preliminary (and rival) hypotheses. The researchers “constant comparison” and categorisation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994) of the interviews and FGs will lead to a deeper conceptualization through a bottom-up approach (Cicognani, 2002). After we have coded this material, we will formulate a structured questionnaire to put to a wider sample of UM managers and secretaries.

The *third phase* (data analysis) consists of recombining the evidence through explanation-building techniques (Yin, 1994). Our main expectation is that there will be a nuanced outcome pattern within and across the UM and relative interventions.

The *last phase* (assessment and interpretation) aims to verify whether or not the analysis supports or refutes the theories about how the policy worked. In this phase it is likely that some outcomes will remain contradictory and rather blurred, but we expect the analysis to provide the pillars on which to build an evaluation framework that can guide the Regional policymakers to design programmes more in tune with the contexts in which they want to implement them.

5 ILLUSTRATIVE CMO CONFIGURATIONS

Reflection on earlier research cases and the extant literature have convinced us of the usefulness of the contribution of the realist evaluation to the themes addressed in the research project outlined in Section 4. Our task here is to attempt to demonstrate “on paper” this contribution in the elicitation and formulation phase, the ‘most distinctive phase’ (Pawson & Tilley, 2004: 11) of the realist evaluation.

Given that, at the time of writing, the data-collection phase had not yet begun, we will selectively use the findings of an earlier research on the Lombard partnerships (Sorrentino & Simonetta, 2011). In particular, we will select themes that appear to cut across the different cases.

The Lombard policy to stimulate voluntary inter-municipal partnerships will be broken down into its component mechanisms and their surrounding contexts and outcomes. This will enable us to formulate a few (purposely limited for reasons of space) hypotheses (i.e., CMO configurations) “in order to come up with some mechanisms through which [such a policy] might work, and to highlight some differing contexts which might shape which mechanisms are activated, and thus to suggest an outcome pattern of potential successes and failures” (Pawson & Tilley, 2004: 26). Nevertheless, we point out that these configurations (outlined in Table 1, below) are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

5.1 Evaluating the Lombardy Case

In Italy, municipal collaborative arrangements are considered essential to defend the historical role of the small municipalities. Therefore, incentivisation is seen as a necessary tool to build a municipal system that is generally more balanced and more capable of responding not only to the requests of the citizens, but also to the needs of good functioning of an overall system that is structured across several territorial levels (Pizzetti, 2008).

Over the past few years, each of Italy’s 20 Regions has enacted its own legislation on inter-municipal incentive policies. In Lombardy, for example, access to the resources allocated to such policies requires the applicants to present a project that illustrates, among other things: the goals of the collaboration, the area of intervention and the expected results. The projects to be financed are then selected by a regional commission. The financial contributions disbursed to the UM of the Lombardy Region vary in line with the following criteria: population density; total number of participating municipalities; number of staff; and the number of functions and services managed by the UM. To obtain the financing, the Lombard UM are required to manage in association at least three of the following functions and/or services: information systems; technical office; economic-financial management; tax management; urban planning and safeguarding of the local area; staff; local police;

and social care services. Further, the UM receive an initial extraordinary contribution to cover the cost of the design and launch phase and then an annual contribution for a maximum period of 10 years. The subsidy system is designed to mainly favour the small municipalities, but leaves the local administrations with much freedom of action to make their choices.

The monitoring of the projects that qualify for the funding is carried out by the Region, it is also assumed that the outputs will be assessed through self-evaluation (i.e., by each UM).

The **programme theory** assumes that the incentives encourage the municipalities to create joint activities in which, otherwise, they would have little interest. The intention of the legislator is to spur the growth of the inter-municipal collaborative processes (through both the creation of new UM and the participation of municipalities in existing UM).

We shall now start to identify some of the **mechanisms** (M) that come into play:

- Cooperation between municipalities translates – over time - into a better capacity for joint strategic and policy planning;
- The reorganisation of public services into a larger area aims to achieve economies of scale in the production and delivery phases;
- Cooperation is the means to induce a propositional attitude in the entities and their staff, which could then be extended to other environments and/or policy domains;
- The UM makes it easier to speak and negotiate with other entities and opens the door to state and European Union funding categories;
- Collaboration heightens the visibility of the public interventions to citizens;
- Collaboration requires an investment of resources that goes beyond joint action.

And the **contexts** (C):

- In terms of political consensus, the collaboration payoff is low because the citizens are used to dealing directly with their own municipality (or even the mayor in the case of the small municipalities). The elected officials do not rank the UM high on the vote-winning agenda.
- The expected benefits of the UM fail to concretise within the political lifecycle of each partner municipality.
- The small municipalities rarely have the organisational resources and skills needed to implement a dynamic UM.
- The Lombardy Region – like Italy's PA environment – has no advanced evaluation capabilities. Its monitoring of the UM mainly focuses on their administrative/formal aspects.
- The fairly unselective requirements to obtain funding means there is no competition over the quality of the aggregation projects.
- When the collaboration commitment is poor, the partner municipalities transfer to the UM only basic services (e.g., public lighting, billboard advertising, tourism promotional initiatives).
- The amount of the funding from the Region is deemed inadequate to offset the 'costs' of the collaboration. Joining or setting up a UM leads to a loss of autonomy and hits especially the lead municipality with a work overload (administrative, management and relational).

While the **outcomes** (O) show mixed success:

- Only 16% of local public services are delivered in associative form through different types of partnerships.
- Lombardy has about 500 collaborative initiatives governed by different contractual arrangements depending on the theme/service involved. Generally, the dominant trend is to create 'light' forms (e.g., bilateral agreements between two neighbouring municipalities) as opposed to a consortium or a standing organisation.

- Lombardy is the Italian region with the highest number (60) of UM.
- 71% of the UM are made up of no more than three municipalities, most of which, once established, make no progress and so stagnate.
- The most dynamic UM are those found in areas that have already implemented collaborative forms (e.g. district healthcare plans).
- Only in rare cases do the partnerships implemented by the Lombard municipalities deal with “internal” functions, such as financial, administrative and personnel management.
- Most UM are created to manage public services and not to address local area planning and development in a concerted way.
- The average size of the UM is too small, making it hard to achieve economies of scale or improve service efficacy.

Plausible Mechanisms	Potential Contexts	Possible Outcomes
Incentives encourage local collaboration and joint policy planning (M1)	Municipalities are keen to commit (C1)	The UM develops and grows (O1)
Incentives encourage local collaboration and joint policy planning (M1)	The municipalities have previous collaboration experience (C2)	The UM is likely to be successful (O2)
Collaboration is a positive value (normative pressure) (M2)	The political payoff of collaborative initiatives is low for the elected officials (C3)	“Paper” implementation (O3)
Collaboration is a positive value (normative pressure) (M2)	The Region lacks adequate evaluation capabilities (C4)	Average low quality of the collaboration projects presented by the municipalities (O4) Merely formal monitoring (O4.1)
Collaboration is a positive value (normative pressure) (M2)	There is no clear overview of the incentive policies launched by the Region (C5)	Dispersion/waste of public funds (O5) The gap between the local areas widens (O6)
The reorganisation of public services into a larger area aims to achieve economies of scale and a better use of resources (M3)	The benefits fail to concretise within the political lifecycle of each partner municipality (C6)	The UM is likely to end up stagnating (O7)
Collaboration enables the small municipalities to fill the gap between the larger municipalities (M4)	The scarce organisational and managerial skills of the smallest municipalities is a hurdle to UM implementation (C7)	The UM manages only basic services (O8)
Union equates to stronger (M5)	The smallest municipalities fear losing their autonomy (C8)	Bilateral agreements (other than the UM) are dominant (O9)
The UM makes it easier to negotiate with other entities and opens the door to state and EU funding categories (M6)	Trust and commitment among partners (C9)	The UM spurs innovation at the local level (O10)
Additional funds are always useful when resources are scarce (M7)	Collusive behaviour by the partner municipalities (C10)	Stagnation/Less critical services are transferred to the UM (O11)
Additional funds are always useful when resources are scarce (M7)	Funding deemed inadequate (C11)	No collaboration (O12)
Additional funds are always useful when resources are scarce (M7)	Availability of other forms of funding from upper government levels (C12)	Consortia or other standing organisations are set up (O13)
Collaboration requires an investment that goes beyond joint action (M8)	Substantial pressure on lead municipality (C13)	The UM stagnates (O14)

Table 1. Illustrative CMO Configurations

The 13 CMO configurations outlined in Table 1, above, are a reworking of the above lists. The grid should be considered purely as a simulated attempt to develop a “middle-range evaluation theory” (Pawson, 2002: 349). As indicated in Section 4, the CMO configurations are a preliminary hypothesis that has yet to be tested and fine-tuned.

The example proposed above not only suggests that the policy in question does not operate in the same way everywhere, but also that the same outcome can, in reality, be the result of highly diverse implementation paths. Further, “the decision to establish relationship is commonly based on multiple contingency” (Oliver, 1990, 242). Consequently, at the moment of evaluation, it makes no sense to aggregate the data on the collaborations set up in a given territory and declare the success or failure of the programme according to how much the results meet the expectations of the policymakers. The real challenge is to understand why the incentive programme “works” in a given geographical, economic and social context but not in others, and vice versa, or how the different policy instruments (mechanisms) can be effectively combined in such situations. Clearly, the logic of the realist evaluation differs vastly to that advocating the use of ‘best practices’, which latter, conversely, seek to extend the same way of addressing and solving the problems everywhere.

Any attempt to process the “models” of universal use loses significance when the realist evaluation is adopted. Nevertheless, the work done in the field leads us to reasonably expect common “underlying patterns to success and failure” (Pawson, 2002b) from which to gain valuable insights for policymakers and public managers planning to develop local forms of cooperation.

6 CONCLUSION, REFLECTIVE REMARKS AND FUTURE STEPS

This paper suggests the use of a realist approach to evaluate policies that incentivise inter-municipal collaboration initiatives. This approach emphasises the need to assess policies within their “context”, and to ask what “mechanisms” are acting to produce which “outcomes” (Gill & Turbin, 1999).

Our aim has been to illustrate, through a limited example and drawing from the extant literature, the application of this approach in the elicitation and formulation phase of the policy theory. Obviously the CMO configurations outlined in Table 1 do not cover all the aspects that come into play in reality, nor do they offer recipes for policymaking or managerial action. When the project commissioned by the Regione Sardegna comes on stream and the grid is completed with the empirical data gathered in the field, we will be able to formulate evidence-based hypotheses and rival explanations for partnership outcomes. Those hypotheses will be refined and tested using the tools normally found in the researcher’s toolkit.

Cooperation and collaboration between public agencies are critical issues to improve service delivery capability and increase efficiency, therefore, we need to be able to measure and evaluate the results achieved by these kinds of partnerships. Evaluating public policies that promote local government partnerships need to take into account the different contexts in which these policies act. The realist approach provides the theoretical support to build an evaluation model of practical use to the policymakers. As far as we are aware, this is the first attempt to use such an approach to evaluate the public policies that promote UM.

The realist approach is holistic and evidence-based and can contribute significantly to demystifying the ‘black box’ problem. The black box is the space between the actual input and the expected output of a programme (Stame, 2004). By exploring the mechanisms through which the measure works and the context in which they are triggered, it is possible to identify specific situations that are inappropriate (Gill & Turbin, 1999), e.g., it could emerge that the setting up of formal partnerships makes no sense given certain environmental conditions and, therefore, that it is far better to implement less binding forms of partnership. Nevertheless, the reader should not be misled by the relative ease with which it is possible to highlight plausible CMO configurations; the real problem inherent the application of the realist approach is to successfully validate the CMO configurations through consistent data, keeping to the research timetable.

Clearly, further work is needed. In addition, we are not in a position to establish whether and to what extent the policies we propose to evaluate can be captured within one overarching evaluation theory.

But that, perhaps, is not the biggest problem given the all-inclusive nature of the realist evaluation, i.e. it allows for any kind of strategy and method useful to verifying the research hypotheses.

At this stage, what seems doubtful is how to reconcile the hegemonic administrative paradigm (everything is focused on the aspects of accounting management and procedural correctness) with the evidence-based and contingent view of the middle-range evaluation theory.

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