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Managing Paradoxes in Public Partnerships

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To say that the trends to develop collaboration to deliver public services derive from global macro-trends inspired by the principles of New Public Management is a commonplace. This paper applies the lenses of institutional theory to the study of voluntary inter-municipal partnerships and counter-argues that collaboration initiatives are shaped by the interaction of political, functional and social pressures. Interestingly, this process of continuous shaping concerns both the creation and the disruption of collaborative arrangements. The capacity of Oliverø (1992) concept of deinstitutionalisation of complement operational explanations is exemplified by illustrating the experience of voluntary inter-municipal collaborations in the Italian region of Lombardy. As part of an ongoing research programme, the paper draws primarily on relevant organisation research and previous qualitative fieldwork carried out by the authors.

Keywords: Local government, incentive policies, implementation, inter-municipal collaboration, partnerships, paradoxes, deinstitutionalisation

Introduction

Developing collaboration to deliver services and to address complex problems more efficiently and effectively than through autonomous action is considered a key driver of public action throughout Western countries. Collaborative arrangements (common labels used to define these conglomerates of connections include networks, joined-up government, inter-municipal arrangements, and partnerships) aim to jointly implement policies at local level and provide services through an alternative model to that of traditional direct service delivery.

Up to now, the prevailing view of the broad literature, at both the academic and the professional level, is that collaboration is a global convergent trend, 'a means of improving municipal management systems' (Dollery, Garcea, & LeSage, 2008a, pp. 194-195). Much of the research assumes that collaboration in and of itself must be desirable (McGuire, 2006).

Collaborations are closely associated with the ideas and practices of 'managerialism' or 'new public management' (hereafter NPM) reform agenda (Barretta & Busco, 2011; Dollery, Garcea, & LeSage, 2008b). The 'joined-up government' movement in the UK (late 1990s), the 'whole of government'

approach in Australia (after 2000) and the 'franchise government' movement in the US (1990s) (Bovaird & Tizard, 2009, p. 235) are the most well-known international examples of initiatives aimed at reinventing local government. A recent report (Testa, 2010) attests to the growth in popularity of inter-municipal partnerships in Italy too (see also: Borgonovi, 2000a; Borgonovi, 2000b; Meneguzzo & Cepiku, 2008; Rebora & Meneguzzo, 1992), where NPM principles were adopted relatively late. The dominant discourse is generally related to an uncritical and optimistic view of collaborative management, seen as a way to achieve competitive advantage.

Nevertheless, a growing body of research, while recognising extensive commonalities of the reform paths between one country and another, underscores the large variety of structural features, scope and patterns of collaborations across and within countries. Unlike the mainstream discourse that addresses mainly the rational motives that induce collaboration, this second research stream attributes a determining weight to the factors that shape collaboration choices, including national institutional contexts, environmental factors and local preferences, and, more importantly, are interested in exploring the development of the collaborative arrangements over time.

This paper slots into the latter research stream and focuses on a research field with its own specific traits, the horizontal collaborations set up between municipalities: 'While vertical inter-organisational activity tends to combine complementary capabilities, resources or processes across organisations, horizontal exchange of activity between organisations frequently combines potentially competitive or substitutable capabilities, resources or processes. This can result in complex inter-organisational interdependencies and tensions between constituent and collaborative goals that are quite distinct from those observed in vertical contexts' (Grafton, Abernethy, & Lillis, 2011, p. 243). A clearer understanding of the collaboration practices in these settings is therefore essential to direct research and practice (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 396).

As a contribution to the ongoing public management debate, the paper seeks to broaden the understanding of inter-municipal collaborations by highlighting some of the paradoxes (i.e., apparent contradictions) and unintended consequences (i.e., opposite effects to those desired by

their architects) of these initiatives. For example: Why do local administrations prefer the contracting-out of public services to external suppliers or the signing of agreements with neighbouring municipalities as opposed to a form of permanent institutionalised (and subsidised) collaboration? What is the cause of the stagnation that characterises most of the established collaborations?

The paper adopts the logic used by Pollitt (2001) in his criticism of the deterministic idea of international convergence towards the NPM styles, and sets Pollitt's original analysis, inspired by institutionalist theory, alongside Oliver's (1992) concept of 'deinstitutionalisation'. Drawing on research carried out in the Italian region of Lombardy, this latter concept will be used to frame the empirical evidence of voluntary inter-municipal collaborations. What this article argues is that managing and developing joint work is 'using the words of Barringer and Harrison (2000, p. 369) - a 'fragile balance of competing forces' even in the 'ideal' situation in which the decision to collaborate is voluntary and supported by a constant flow of public funds. In an area of public action that is poorly structured, such as that defined by the policies that intend to spur stable forms of collaboration, paradoxically, the same policies can contribute to the 'dissipation or rejection' (Oliver, 1992, p. 566) of publicly-funded initiatives.

Before proceeding, a few points need clarification. Here, the terms 'collaboration' and 'cooperation' are used interchangeably to signify an action aimed at achieving a common goal. In the public sector, there is a wide variety of structural features, scope and patterns of arrangements, but the article focuses primarily on a specific form of collaborative ventures, i.e., the *Unioni di comuni* (Unions of municipalities, or UM), the associative forms set up between municipalities as separate entities to deliver services and joint policymaking.

The paper begins by recalling the basic assumptions and limitations of the dominant concept of collaboration. Next, the emergence and growth of public collaborations will be associated with institutional isomorphism, a theory that 'unlike the dominant discourse centred on economic efficiency' 'underscores the role played by the context in the creation and implementation of

collaboration arrangements. The paper then correlates the mixed picture of the voluntary inter-municipal partnerships in the Lombardy region to the practices of deinstitutionalisation that the local actors develop in response to the political, functional and social pressures exerted in the respective local areas. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of a legitimacy-based view of public collaborations, and indicates future avenues of research.

The mainstream view of collaboration

The popularity of network arrangements has grown considerably over the years. Less than 20 years ago, the public network arrangements of the British National Health Service (NHS) were considered a far from consolidated area of academic investigation, and were even defined as ‘emerging’ (Ferlie & Pettigrew, 1996, p. 582). A recent article published in *Organization Studies* (Bort & Kieser, 2011) that reviewed 1,784 research articles published in top organisation journals from 1960 until 2005 has shown that the popularity of the network theory now exceeds that of the widely known approaches, including, but not limited to, Resource Based View, New Institutional Economics, and Institutionalism.

The public management literature on public partnerships provides two main but opposing views. The dominant discourse assumes that the adoption of collaborative forms between public administrations is intrinsically ‘a good thing’, ‘a virtue’ (Hudson, Hardy, Henwood, & Wistow, 1999). ‘Joint provision of public services is a way to overcome production-related obstacles and simultaneously meet the rising expectations of citizens. Economies of scale (resulting from a higher production) and economies of scope (a consequence of a more varied production) can be realised. Further, joint planning and joint policy implementation make it possible to incorporate mutual interdependencies among neighbouring municipalities and thus enhance the quality and efficacy of local policies’ (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007, p. 211). In the literature, ‘there has been less emphasis on the costs than on the benefits of collaborative efforts’ (Agranoff, 2006, p. 66). Turrini et al. (2010, p. 210) say that: ‘The prevailing view among many service professionals, policymakers, and

researchers is that, by integrating services through a network of providing agencies, clients will gain the benefits of reduced fragmentation and greater coordination of services leading to a more effective system and, thus, more positive outcomes.

In contrast, other observers (the minority) criticise the presumed superiority of (and necessity for) collaborative arrangements versus hierarchical- and market-based types of public services production and delivery. A number of empirical studies (Huxham, 1993; Milward & Provan, 2003; Provan & Sebastian, 1998) point to the shadow areas, the contradictions and the implicit danger of certain over-optimistic readings. For example, the output from collaborative arrangements often appears to be negligible or the rate of output extremely slow. Even where successful outcomes are reported, stories of pain and hard grind are integral to the success achieved (Huxham, 1993). Indeed, Entwistle et al. (2007) found that public partnerships suffered predominately from a mix of hierarchical and market dysfunctions (p. 64). Despite its promise, the critics argue, 'collaboration' is not a panacea (May & Winter, 2007, p. 499).

But why does it make little sense to consider collaboration as a generalised and unavoidable trend for the public sector? Before responding to this question, two aspects need to be clarified. First, there are many proposals on how to define and conceptualise collaboration. 'Collaboration' (or cooperation) is one of the most used terms in inter-organisational research (Ferro & Sorrentino, 2010) and refers to an action of two or more subjects implemented to achieve a common goal. What makes an action cooperative is its *end* (Maggi, 2011, p. 80, original emphasis). The problem is that sometimes the term collaboration is used as a synonym of coordination. A choice that is hard to share because the notion of coordination refers instead to a concerted action aimed at managing interdependent elements (Thompson, 1967, pp. 54-55). In other words, cooperation is an expression of the action of one or more subjects, while coordination concerns the *order* of the process, meaning its *regulation*.

Second, the mainstream discourse considers the collaborative forms a contrast to traditional hierarchical forms: the first being strongly associated with decentralisation and the latter considered

the maximum expression of centralisation. Also in this case, a terminological clarification is required. The centralisation-decentralisation dimension refers to the distribution of decisional capacity: for example, the decisional capacity of a centralised organisational form is concentrated in the hands of a few decision makers; similarly, a distributed decisional capacity characterises a decentralised form. On the other hand, cooperation (or collaboration), as discussed above, refers to a method of carrying out the action: cooperation exists when the actors share the objectives and not necessarily the methods. So it is incorrect to place the cooperative nature of the collaborative arrangements in opposition to the centralised or decentralised nature of the decision-making processes. As a result, it is arguable that collaboration between local administrations can be considered a method that broadens the decisional space of the peripheral levels of government. In short, for reasons of conceptual clarity, the question of cooperation must be kept separate from the question of the distribution of decisional scope (Masino, 2005, p. 172).

To return to the main question, we need to first observe that no metric exists with which to measure the presumed 'global' convergence of the public organisations toward collaboration. According to Pollitt (2001, p. 493), the highest form of convergence is obtained when talks, decisions, action and results line up. To our knowledge, no comparative study of public partnerships has documented uniform and convergent results throughout countries to date.

Second, the mainstream thinking seems incapable of grasping the variable range of situations in which collaboration takes place. Collaboration strategies follow trajectories that can vary considerably over time, in terms of the scope of cooperation among partners, their composition and the degree of organisational integration (Hulst, van Montfort, Haveri, Airaksinen, & Kelly, 2009). Comparative research suggests that collaboration arrangements are influenced by a number of institutional factors, administrative traditions, and local preferences (Dollery et al., 2008b; Hulst et al., 2009; Wollmann, 2004), none of which have much to do with the purported 'global trends' invoked by the current debate.

To take a step forward in understanding public arrangements it is necessary to surpass the simplistic view that sees collaboration as inherently good or bad (Ansell & Gash, 2008, pp. 561-562). Collaboration is certainly context-specific (Luna-Reyes, Gil-Garcia, & Cruz, 2007) and this is the fixed point from which we need to start the analysis. Institutional theory, with its emphasis on the context and on the acquisition or enhancement processes of legitimacy, is a useful means to address the complexity of public collaborations.

The institutional perspective

Institutional theory and research focus the reflection on the common traits shared by the organisations and the analysis of the sources and types of pressure to conform (Hatch, 2006, pp. 86-87). The basic idea is that the institutions regulate and restrict the behaviour of political and social actors in that they define their values, roles and identity, and condition their actions and choices. The institutional perspective assigns a preeminent role to the environment as the main source of isomorphism and convergence processes of the organisational forms: by incorporating institutional rules within their own structures, organisations become more homogeneous, more similar in structure, over time (Scott, 1998, pp. 212-213). Moreover, institutional-level decisions precede and constrain interactions and decisions at the policymaking level, which in turn constrain the operational level (Imperial, 2005, p. 298).

The three general mechanisms conducive to isomorphism - coercive, mimetic, and normative - (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) guide and inform public partnerships formation. The coercive pressures arise when, for example, the supranational bodies (e.g., the European Union, EU) or higher levels of government use the top-down approach to impose the setting up of cooperative forms on local governments as a condition for receiving assistance (Pollitt, 2001), e.g., financial subsidies or technical support. The integration process has led the EU countries to enact directives related to the management of institutional relations between municipalities, provinces, regions and state. In Italy, these Europe-wide changes are teamed with important internal reforms,

including the new political party system, the direct election of the mayor, the lengthy and uncertain transition to federalism, and the stability pact that imposes strict limitations on the municipalities.

Mimetic pressures arise when the actors seek to replicate whatever they see as successful, desirable or appropriate for their specific environment. The object of imitation could be the proposed or actual reforms of other jurisdictions (Dollery et al., 2008a, p. 195). Imitative processes can achieve tangible effects. For example, a greater external legitimacy of the organisation can enhance reputation, image, prestige or congruence with the prevailing norms. In turn, this may make the public organisation more competitive for public funds (Graddy & Chen, 2009, p. 56).

In terms of normative pressures, the business schools and consultancy firms play a decisive role in inspiring the values and the choices of action of the public managers (Sorge & Van Witteloostuijn, 2004). The most important influence of NPM was the rationale it gave for adopting private-sector management principles and practices, along with market and quasi-market mechanisms for service provision as a means to improve municipal management systems (Dent & Barry, 2004; Dollery et al., 2008a, p. 194). This process of norm-formation (Pollitt, 2001, p. 938) affects the nature and scope of reforms (Dollery et al., 2008a). Getting together to 'create a system' means counting more on whatever the new powers, competences and resources of the local administrations are attributed. In that frame, public collaborations can aspire to play a key role as intermediaries between municipality and province, but also between municipality and region.

The institutional isomorphism recognises thus the variety of the public's strategic responses to environmental pressures. In fact, the academic work that theoretically and empirically addresses the theme of public collaborations (e.g., (Barretta & Busco, 2011; Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Grafton et al., 2011; Krishna, 2003) makes it clear that any or all of the above pressures are often inter-related and concurrent. But how can we read those situations in which an institutionalised collaborative practice is openly discarded or 'left to its fate' by its own promoters?

Recent institutionalist research (Lawrence, Hardy, & Phillips, 2002; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009; Oliver, 1992) started to address the study of the effects of actors and agency *on*

institutions using Oliverø (1992, p. 564) concept of deinstitutionalisation, i.e., 'the de-legitimation of an established organisational practice or procedure as a result of organisational challenges or the failure of organisations to reproduce previously legitimated or taken-for granted organisational actions'. Deinstitutionalisation is used herein to interpret the empirical evidence on the voluntary inter-municipal partnerships in the Lombardy region.

Background

Italy has exploited the potential of inter-municipal cooperation by harnessing a wide range of instruments with widely different levels of institutionalisation, such as consortia, conventions, agreements, and unions; a situation fairly unparalleled in other European countries.

The *Unioni di comuni* (Unions of Municipalities or UM) - defined as a separate multi-purpose governing entity set up specifically by two or more municipalities to which these latter can transfer a broad range of actions, from joint policymaking to joint implementation and delivery of services - were originally established as a temporary instrument of association for very small municipalities (less than 5,000 inhabitants) prior to their envisaged successive merger. The UM have been the object of significant legislative reforms in recent years. Initially, the UM were scarce because the law forced the municipalities in question to merge (Fiorillo & Robotti, 2006). That hurdle was removed in 1999 and by 2010 the total number of UM in Italy had grown to 313. A total of 1,561 Italian municipalities are members of a UM, while approximately 5.8 million citizens live in a municipality that belongs to a UM (Testa, 2010). As second-order organisations they have become the main form of inter-municipal cooperation in many regions.

The UM is structured into boards that represent all or a subset of participant municipalities. The bylaws should stipulate that the UM chairperson be elected from the mayors of the partner municipalities and that the other bodies be composed of local council members and the boards of the associated municipalities to guarantee the representation of minority interests. The UM has full powers to establish its own organisation, carry out the functions transferred to it, and manage

financial relations with the member municipalities. The UM is the beneficiary of the income generated by the services it is called on to provide and the public contributions of which it is recipient.

It is the responsibility of each region to regulate and support the inter-municipal collaborations. The rules establish the requirements to obtain the funding, the incentive criteria, and the amount of the additional resources to reward compliance (Formez-Anci, 2005). Generally, the regional rules seek to create beneficial conditions for the potential implementers, i.e., the higher the number of partners and the higher the number and significance of the services transferred to the UM, the higher the contribution awarded. For example, the Lombard UM are required to jointly manage at least three of the following functions and/or services: information systems; technical office; economic-financial management; tax management; urban planning and environmental management; staff payroll; local police; and social care services.

Further, the regional systems distinguish between extraordinary and ordinary contributions, whereby the former are issued at the official setting up of the UM, or in the case of municipal mergers (as in Lombardy), while the ordinary contributions are allocated to support ordinary activities for a maximum period of 7-10 years. The rules assume that regular funding can help the UM to achieve economic self-sufficiency in the medium term (Formez-Anci, 2005, p. 22). Some regional administrations provide the UM with additional support through contributions for the development of feasibility studies.

Currently, the UM is the only type of collaborative form supported by government funds. National norms (e.g., Decree 318/2000 of the Ministry of the Interior) call for additional resources to be issued to those municipalities that form or join a UM. The criteria to obtain that funding are similar to those of the regionally administered policies. The regional systems are based on a more structured funding application procedure and, in addition, ensure the UM a constant flow of resources over time. That predictability lets participants plan and budget with confidence (Imperial, 2005, p. 309). On the other hand, the allocation of national funding to a UM is prone to

fluctuation because it depends on the government's budget policies. The Italian UM are monitored both by the Ministry of the Interior and by the relevant regional administrations through a periodic reporting system.

Methods and research setting

This research adopts a qualitative approach. The empirical evidence gathered between 2009 and 2010 in the Italian region of Lombardy during earlier fieldwork (Sorrentino & Simonetta, 2011, 2012) has enabled the authors to explore: i) the different forms of inter-municipal collaboration; ii) the reasons for and the limits to cooperation; and iii) the perceived impacts of these initiatives. To qualitatively assess the capacity of incentive-based policies to push the councils in the direction desired by the legislator – i.e., service sharing and joint policymaking to promote the local communities – the data collected in the semi-structured interviews held with public administrators and UM managers were used along with documentary research. Lombardy offers a heterogeneous and fragmented picture of associative forms that are extremely sensitive to local area specificities and poorly guided by the regional administration. Surprisingly, a mere 147 of Lombardy's more than 1,000 small municipalities in 2010 were members of permanent collaborative forms such as UM. Research has shed strong light on the counter-intuitive and, in some cases, paradoxical effects of incentive-based policies aimed at spurring collaboration, including:

- *Higher fragmentation of concrete associative practices.* Lombardy has the highest number (60) of *Unioni di comuni*, the only associative forms that now qualify for state and regional contributions. In tandem, the Lombard councils (1,546) are involved in a mix of different collaboration initiatives (over 500) governed by different contractual forms depending on the theme/service. Generally, the simplest and most common form of cooperation are single-purpose agreements between two neighbouring municipalities;
- *Limited power and capacity for joint action.* 71% of Lombard UM has no more than three small municipalities, most of which, once established, make no progress and so stagnate;

- *Low networking capacity between UM members.* Only rarely does a UM bring new municipalities into its fold; in fact, it is far more frequent to find a reduction in the number of functions and services transferred to the UM by the participant members. The re-internalisation of the services previously mandated to associated management can often be observed.

Prior fieldwork has highlighted also the crucial role played by the mayors and the local councillors involved in the creation of collaborative arrangements, to such an extent that in some cases the fate of the UM is tied by a double thread to the political fortunes of their promoters. The task here is to verify whether the fragility observed in most of the Lombard UM cases can be traced to what Oliver (1992, p. 564) defines as 'deinstitutionalising pressures', using the empirical evidence gathered in the two earlier studies. Why does an established UM become an empty box or fall out of favour? To respond to this question, the next section will review the political, functional and social pressures for deinstitutionalisation that prior fieldwork on Lombard UM has pinpointed.

Findings

A number of issues emerged from the interviews with the public administrators, including the wide variety of service delivery strategies from which the respondents select actions and decisions based on their knowledge of the contingent situation. The empirical evidence of the pressures on deinstitutionalisation produced by the interviews and presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3, below, was generated in response to the questions concerning the operational roll-out of the collaboration initiatives implemented at local level. The illustrative quotes presented in the tables refer to the entire panel analysed, including the UM that have spurred progress and development. The data collected have been reclassified using the categories identified by Oliver (1992), i.e., political, functional and social pressures.

Political pressures

In the small municipalities, the direct (i.e., non-mediated) relationship between the citizen and the public administrator is crucial and cannot be avoided. According to all the respondents, the UM suffer from what is called a 'democratic deficit'. The smaller the municipality, the more direct the relationship between mayor and voter. This means a constant work of 're-stitching' is needed (the burden of which is mostly carried by the mayors of the partner municipalities) aimed at preventing the decisions of the UM from being perceived as far from satisfying the interests and directions expressed by the partner councils. When the interest in maintaining a UM fades, the UM is reconsidered. In this circumstance it is probable that additional resources are spent for inappropriate purposes (i.e., to fund the current management rather than investments).

Table 1. Political pressures

<i>POLITICAL PRESSURES</i>	<i>ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES</i>
Legitimation of the administrators does not go through the UM	<i>The citizens vote for me not the UM (councillor)</i> <i>Transferring services to the UM reduces the ability of the elected official to personally resolve the problems of the citizens who appeal to him/her directly (UM general manager)</i>
The UM can become the victim of instrumental political attacks	<i>During the election campaign, one of the board members attacked the UM, accusing it of inertia. When he became a councillor, he continued to sabotage the initiatives until the municipality left the UM definitively (local official).</i>
Significant dispute between councils (due to political dissensus or conflicting interests)	<i>Two mayors started with the ambition of providing extra services and implementing a shared path of organisational innovation, but a third municipality was less convinced and, in fact, at the first sign of difficulty, decided to opt out (UM Secretary).</i> <i>In two cases councillors resigned after the services under their management were transferred (UM general manager)</i>
Exposure to political risks in situations where the UM has a high level of organisational integration	<i>We already do a lot of transferring other services to the UM would be a significant effort and I am not sure it's worth it (mayor of a lead municipality).</i>

	<i>The mayors who made huge efforts in the setting-up phase did not feel up to facing the political risk inherent in accelerating the merger of their municipalities (UM secretary)</i>
UM seen as an <i>end</i> to obtain and distribute additional resources	<i>It was easier to convince the opposition parties [to approve the incorporation of the UM] than my own majority, but when I showed them the funding contributions, everyone agreed (mayor).</i>

Functional pressures

Often, the partner municipalities themselves cast doubt on the real potential of the UM to enable economic savings and regain efficiency. Then, paradoxically, the freeing-up of resources (technical, financial, but especially staff) risks creating another problem for those municipalities with less organisational capacity, which then have to decide what to do with the extra staff: do they relocate them or redistribute tasks? The immediate costs of the reorganisation of services can eclipse the potential longer-term benefits.

Table 2. Functional pressures

<i>FUNCTIONAL PRESSURES</i>	<i>ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES</i>
The return of investment may be unclear or intangible when a new UM becomes operational	<i>After the initial enthusiasm, we had to face a thousand obstacles ... Today the UM is mainly an economic, financial and administrative operations management centre, while the municipalities continue to provide the services with their old tools, based on their regulations and resources. (UM secretary)</i>
The convenience of remaining in the UM is evaluated in terms of the low or practically non-existent exit cost	<i>í the municipalities that left our UM created another on their own (mayor)</i>
The freeing-up of resources deriving from the operating synergies can become a 'hot potato'	<i>í I wouldn't know how to relocate them (mayor)</i> <i>I would like to avoid internal conflicts with the staff of my municipality (councillor)</i> <i>Transferring a service that was previously managed in-house by the municipality is a delicate decision:</i>

	<i>í the manager and the employees who run the service no longer deal with the political and technical bodies of the individual municipalities but with those of the UM (UM secretary).</i>
The amount of the funding received is deemed inadequate compared to the costs incurred	<i>Certainly Iðl receive a modest financial contribution... It will be the job of the next mayor to do betterö (mayor)</i>
The possibility of mutual gain (or collaborative advantage) is questioned	<i>Not all our members have been able to realise the benefits produced by the shared management of the services (UM Secretary)</i> <i>The operating standards present in the lead municipality are not sustainable by small partners like us (mayor)</i>

Social pressures

Interviewees suggested that in periods of economic crisis the critical focus of the citizens shifts to the so-called öcosts of politicsö. On the other hand, the search for solutions that respond to situations of unease can lead the councillors to look for extempore points of exit, dictated by particular local conditions: the UM enables access to additional resources. In the citizenø eyes, the UM is an öopaqueö agency and can thus become an easy target for those who do not know it and thus distrust it. The value of collaboration via a UM is questioned by a low social consensus.

Table 3. Social pressures

SOCIAL PRESSURES	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
Public criticism against the UM, considered a source of waste, a kind of öuseless agencyö	<i>The citizens tend to lump everything together, mainly because the associative forms that preceded the UM have not been disbanded (UM secretary)</i>
The economic crisis exacerbates the difficulties of the small municipalities to respond to social unease	<i>Before establishing a new UM, the mayors should look at what is already going on in associative form. These activities should be the first to flow into the UM. Instead, each municipality invents the öwheelö, also using the occasional services of the staff of other municipalities í itø madness (UM Secretary)</i>
The citizens have little faith in the capacity of the UM to resolve real problems	<i>The UM is invisibleí Many of my fellow citizens ignore its existence or fail to grasp its usefulness</i>

(UM councillor)	
Low rate of associative culture in the local community	<i>[after 4 partner municipalities left]...the UM actually gave up playing a bigger role in local politics, and especially supralocal politics (UM general manager)</i>

Discussion

This paper suggests the usefulness of applying the theory of Oliver to the analysis of voluntary inter-municipal partnerships. The argument is that managing and developing joint work implies a fragile balance of competing forces and pressures. The setting up of permanent forms of local collaborations such as the UM is an opportunity for change that the diverse actors decide to take or not, based on personal opinions and preferences but also opportunities and constraints that can change along the way. The paper highlights the tension between a common objective (that of the UM), and the personal independent objectives pursued by the local actors. The strategies developed by each of these in response to the political, functional, and social pressures that exist in the different local areas shape the fate of the UM. The upshot is that, in a highly formalised body such as a UM, development and continuation over time cannot be taken for granted.

The paper corroborates the view that the æconomic rationalistøpreoccupation (Hood, 2000) does not seem decisive either for inducing the actors to work together at the outset or for ensuring the development of the joint initiatives over time.

The broader picture of inter-municipal collaboration in Lombardy reveals that when it comes to the production and delivery of public services the municipalities have a specific preference for loose inter-organisational relationships rather than the more formal type. Not only do the former (bilateral agreements with other municipalities or outsourcing contracts with external providers) predominate in absolute terms, they are also the ones that continue to grow after joining a UM. In Scandinavia, the complete opposite is true: -It seems that the more formalised the collaboration is, the easier it is for local governments to use the tools of meta-governance and get the collaborating actors committedø(Haveri, Nyholm, Roiseland, & Vabo, 2009). That indicates

further reasons for analysing the collaboration practice -in contextø(Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2000, p. 24).

Oliverø's concept of deinstitutionalisation enables the dissipation of many established UM to be traced to the following predictive antecedents:

- Low number of staff transferred from the member municipalities to the UM;
- Low rate of services devolution (particularly those that imply the sharing of back-office operations: e.g., construction, technical office, bookkeeping, financial statements);
- Transfer to the UM of solely basic/less critical services;
- Lack of unified structures (so-called Single Offices or *Uffici Unici*) under the UM;
- Few significant developments in terms of number of services and number of partners after the UM is set up;
- Use of regional funds to pay for the current services managed;
- Set up of new less binding bilateral arrangements even after the UM is established;
- Re-internalisation of services previously transferred to the UM;
- Withdrawal of member municipalities from the UM;
- Political discontinuity of one administration versus its predecessor;
- Unaligned electoral calendars.

All the abovementioned antecedents (except for the last two) stem from the precise choices of the UM leaders, which corroborates the -management matters argumentø(Boyne, Meier, O'Toole Jr, & Walker, 2006, p. 9; Ospina & Saz-Carranza, 2010), i.e., the crucial role of the collaborative public managers in favouring or blocking the collaboration effort (O'Leary & Bingham, 2009).

We have yet to understand the heuristic value of Oliverø's conceptualisation in relation to the role of the incentive policies designed to respond to the problem of the marginality of the small municipalities, which offer extra resources to induce the desired behaviour (i.e., collaboration between local agencies through a UM to jointly provide efficient and efficacious services), but also

leave the councils significant room for discretion in terms of the collaboration environment and the degree of organisational integration of the shared activities and reporting requirements. In short, policies that are poorly selective in both inputs and outputs and that are only loosely guided by the regional administration translate into a weakly structured organised field of action. The Regione Lombardia has preferred to 'keep its head down' by:

- setting low selective eligibility requisites and not setting an exit cost in the case of municipalities that leave the UM. In both cases the UM's value is reduced;
- calling for limited actions to accompany the setting up of the UM. The municipalities potentially interested in entering collaboration projects but lacking the necessary organisational capacity do not even get off the ground; and
- establishing an ex post monitoring/control system aimed at verifying procedural compliance but not the outcomes of the UM. The lack of careful oversight by a regional administration reduces the reporting activities to a mere bureaucratic requirement and leads the councils to adopt opportunistic behaviour.

The good news is that, whichever way you look at it, the use among small councils of inter-municipal associative forms has grown in recent years, therefore the modest results achieved so far can be seen as a 'cup half full'. Paradoxically, however, the Regione Lombardia risks fuelling the delegitimation of the UM that it itself is funding. Each of the critical factors recalled above, in fact, can help, severally or jointly, to erode the UM practice.

Conclusions and future research

Having problematised popular understandings of public partnerships from the empirical viewpoint, this paper has underscored the need to use concepts other than NPM to analyse collaboration trends. The central argument is the usefulness of the institutional lens to read the creation and implementation processes of the voluntary inter-municipal arrangements, but also to help to clarify

the development or disruption of collaboration over time. Specifically, the paper sheds lights on the practices of deinstitutionalisation that the UM leaders adopt to respond to the political, functional and social pressures that characterise their respective local areas. According to Oliver (1992, p. 567), the effect of these practices leads to the 'dissipation or rejection' of an institution.

Developing a better understanding of the range of contrasting effects of collaboration contributes to the extant literature on publicly-funded partnerships. Adding to the knowledge may be particularly important for the managers of small and marginal municipalities. It is crucial for these actors to understand both the advantages and the disadvantages of inter-organisational relationships before they make a commitment to participate (Barringer & Harrison, 2000). In the case of the managers, it is equally important that these are able to promptly recognise the predictive factors that can trigger disfavour or disuse of institutionalised organisational practices.

A major limitation is the fact that this exploratory study is hard to use as a generalised example because it addresses only a small number of UM, photographed at a certain point in time, and uses empirical data collected from one specific category of key informants, i.e., the UM leaders. In addition, the research approach adopted here does not enable the identification of which factor (or combination of factors) is decisive for the future of the UM analysed. Finally, the considerations made do not take account of the outcomes and the impacts of the collaborative efforts.

These limitations suggest future avenues of research. Further effort is needed to update the picture of the Lombard UM as shaped by the legislation enacted by the Italian government at the end of 2011 (Law n. 214/2011), which tightens up the norms on associative forms. For example, the law now restricts the association of municipalities with less than 5000 inhabitants to exclusively two organisational forms: bilateral agreements (or conventions) and UM. Moreover, it defines the basic functions that must be implemented by inter-municipal collaboration. A longitudinal research approach applied to the entire panorama of the Lombard UM (which have meantime shrunk in number) could shed light the effects of the new institutional framework on the discretionary space of local actors. In addition, further enquiry using data gathered expressly to explore

deinstitutionalisation is needed to closely examine the antecedents of UM disruption, to find out why and in what circumstances they jointly operate and interact, and with what results. In fact, we cannot rule out that the political fallout of deinstitutionalisation (Oliver, 1992, p. 583) will necessarily lead to disruption. The disbanding of a UM could, for instance, be a precondition to pursuing a new institutional initiative, such as the merger of the municipalities in question. Finally, future research will need to address the conditions that facilitate the municipalities' adoption of virtuous behaviours in order to develop a system of indicators that can help the regional policy setters to assess the efficacy of the collaborative efforts. To sum up then, a far broader and deeper effort is required on the empirical research front to capture the trends and critical factors of use to the national and regional policymakers working on the reconfiguration of local services through collaboration.

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