Inter-municipal Cooperation: Present Limitations and Future Developments

Abstract: This chapter looks back over the argument of previous chapters and returns to the set of questions outlined. Research hasn’t yet provided the answers to some of the most pertinent problems faced by inter-municipal cooperation. One of those challenges relates to the governance capacity of inter-municipal cooperation. Efficiency, democracy and stability are, thus, three key domains towards which research focus should turn. This chapter reviews the main gaps identified in research, and offers a summary of the main questions, particularly of the central topics research should address in the future. Finally, it tries to explain what is so special about inter-municipal cooperation.

This chapter looks back over the argument of previous chapters and returns to the set of questions outlined in Chapter 1. Why do local governments choose to cooperate, and under what conditions can it work? Do we know enough about how cooperation between local governments works to design better governance? Is it desirable to encourage cooperation? When facing democratic challenges, namely, regarding accountability, are there any innovative solutions? What lessons can we learn from the different European experiences?

The challenges of contemporary governance at the local level are emphasised when ‘scale problems’ are considered. Inter-municipal cooperation comprises a complex set of arrangements of services and responses to local life, from public delivery organisations to the private sector institutions, which might go beyond local boundaries. These governance arrangements face several challenges: the control over a complex network; democracy, representation and accountability; organisational fragmentation; and multi-territorialisation (for clarification, see Chapter 2).

If there is a trend to identify in the European way of dealing with these challenges, one word would summarise it in a simple way: reforms. Continuous, frequent, diverse and often divergent reforms.

Unstable territories and polities in Europe: new challenges

The setting is quiet clear in European countries: governments continue to reshape political institutions and to make relevant territorial choices (Baldersheim and Rose, 2010). This occurs mainly in response to the major pressures and impacts of shifting global economies, of European demography and of cultural and behavioural shifts. Global competition has put pressure on local authorities to find new ways of organising, with public discourses emphasising the importance of competitive territories at the regional level.

This permanent re-arrangement of territorial and functional scales of governance followed two parallel paths in most European countries in the past 50 years. First, there was a shift of responsibilities to local government, through decentralisation, devolution and delegation of competencies from central government to municipalities. Secondly, and at the same time, several mechanisms of pursuing economies of scale