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The relevance of coordination in local government reforms

Since the 1970s concepts of a New Public Management (NPM) have had an impact on reforms in the public sector in every economically developed country (cf. OECD 1995). Many specific paths of reform can be identified (cf. Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). In a first stage, beginning in 1993, German municipalities adopted NPM voluntarily under a regime of learning in networks influenced by only low-level competition. The Kommunale Gemeinschaftsstelle für Verwaltungsmodernisierung (KGSt) in Cologne, an association of local governments, was a key player in this period. The KGSt adopted a model from the city of Tilburg in the Netherlands for German municipalities. This so-called Neue Steuerungsmodell (NSM) focused on a new form of political “Steuerung” (controlling) supplemented by new instruments for an enforcement of “customer satisfaction” and cultural change. Privatization, PPP and outsourcing weren't a part of NSM and were of less importance than in Anglo-Saxon countries. In 1999 and 2003 the state-level laws on local budgeting were changed and some aspects of the NSM became obligatory (cf. Weiß 2013a).

In the last 10 years, the NPM/NSM ideas have lost ground in local government reforms. In German Public Management Science, we can find the argument that the NSM reforms were largely useless (cf. Holtkamp 2008, Bogumil et al. 2011). A more differentiated point of view claims that the different forms of coordination – hierarchy, competition and networks (cf. Thompson 1991, Williamson 1991) – had diverse effects on the various instruments that were suggested in the reform concepts (cf. Weiß 2013a). It can be hypothesized that it is not the complexity of the instruments suggested by the reform but the governance structure used for implementation that is decisive for success.

The main objective of this project is to analyse the relation between a reform instrument and the mode of coordination that leads to a possible success of implementation. A classification of reform instruments will be worked out as a basis for qualitative comparative analysis.

Some evaluations of the German reform processes can be used for this analysis (for example Bogumil 2007, KGSt 2010, Deutscher Städtetag and PwC 2011, Weiß 2013b, Weiß 2014). In addition, some instruments which have been implemented in the last few years could be evaluated.

The results from Germany will be compared with experiences of reforms in Canadian municipalities. Canada is a federal state with a similar per capita GDP. Provinces and territories – which are similar to the German Bundesländer – are responsible for laws

applied on local levels. The responsibilities of local governments for public service seem to be similar to Germany (cf. Commonwealth Local Government Forum). In the last years a shift in the policy of the provinces from “directive interventions” to “facilitative interventions” has taken place (Martin et al. 2011). Further research will be carried out in Canada if possible. This research should be based on scientific journals and publications for local practitioners and on interviews with social scientists and practitioners. Relevant instruments can be identified based on current publications. Instruments will be clustered by their complexity by using a methodology that has just been developed by the author.

For local governments in Germany the first steps in identifying relevant forms of coordination for instruments to be implemented have been made (cf. Weiß 2013a). Further work can be done by appraising recent publications. For the analysis of reforms in Canada relevant publications have to be reviewed. Furthermore, interviews with public management experts and local government practitioners will be conducted during a sabbatical at the University of Victoria, B.C., from August until November 2015. The research will be supported by Prof. Dr. Evert Lindquist, Director of the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria.

Expected findings will contribute to principle topics of public management, for example questions on (institutional) change in Weberian and post-Weberian organizations and the efficiency of different forms of coordination for triggering change. Maybe comparative analysis can point out the impact of different forms of coordination during the policy cycle.

The deliverables will also have practical implications for concepts and implementation of future reforms on local government and the supervision of local authorities by the state, especially with regard to local budget policies and budget consolidation (cf. Weiß and Leeske 2014).

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