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Keywords:  
Inter-municipal cooperation  
Child welfare  
Norway  
Governance structure  
Allocative efficiency

### Abstract

Inter-municipal cooperation is gaining in popularity in many Western countries, making it a matter of pressing importance to better understand what factors might contribute to the success of such arrangements. This article focuses on three Norwegian inter-municipal cooperative arrangements in the field of child welfare that are deemed to be successful, and the aim is to identify common features across the three cases with a focus on the governance structures of the collaborations. The study combines document studies and qualitative interviews, and reveals three main factors that can explain success: a sense of urgency, political and administrative support combined with incremental processes. The study also indicates that these factors interact, and can thus not be viewed as explanations taken individually. Furthermore, the potential negative effects on allocative efficiency are highlighted. Since the success of inter-municipal cooperation seems at least partly to depend on whether the task in focus is “moved out” of the ordinary activity and embedded in a higher political and administrative level, it is argued that this may further fragment the municipalities’ ability to make priorities between sectors and services.

### Introduction

Inter-municipal cooperation is not a new phenomenon, neither in the Scandinavian countries (Baldersheim, Fimreite, & Strand, 1992; Haug, Baldersheim, & Øgård, 2011) nor in other European countries (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010; Rudie Hulst, Montfort, Haveri, Airaksinen, & Kelly, 2009; R. Hulst & Montfort, 2007). Although historical data are scarce, there are indications that inter-municipal cooperation in different forms is becoming more popular both in Europe and in the US (Anell & Mattison, 2009; Bel, Brown, & Warner, 2014; Bel & Warner, 2015; Blåka, Tjerbo, & Zeiner, 2012; ECON, 2006; D. I. Jacobsen, 2014a). The exception is Denmark, where inter-municipal cooperation has decreased since the amalgamation of municipalities in 2007. However, the Danish case highlights another important point: not even the radical amalgamation in Denmark has eradicated the need for cooperation across municipal borders, although studies indicate that inter-municipal cooperation was cut in half (Kjær, 2011).

Given the scale and scope of inter-municipal cooperation, the research on what constitutes and leads to success and failure is strangely sparse. Most recent studies concentrate on the basic characteristics of the organization of inter-municipal cooperation, such as general types of structure (for instance contract versus joint organization), measuring success by economic gains (Bel, Fageda, & Mur, 2014; Bel & Warner, 2015, 2016; Warner, 2011), or on reasons to engage

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in inter-municipal cooperation instead of trying to achieve results on one's own or through other organizational arrangements like outsourcing and privatization (Bel & Warner, 2016). Very few studies focus on the role of the governance structure of the inter-municipal cooperation in explaining success, i.e. how inter-municipal cooperative arrangements are organized vertically and how they are linked to the levels of administrative and political leadership in the respective municipalities.

Furthermore, most studies concentrate on municipal services that can be defined as "hard" and "technical", such as solid waste management (Dijkgraaf & Gradus, 2013; Zafra-GÓMEZ, Prior, DÍAZ, & LÓPEZ-HernÁNDEZ, 2013), refuse collection (Gradus, Dijkgraaf, & Wassenaar, 2014), water supply (Mattisson & Ramberg, 2015), fire protection, management of parks and recreational areas, and parking (Jung & Jeong, 2013). Most of these services could be characterized as rather easy to monitor, insofar as both outcomes and processes are measurable, and thus outsourceable to contract management (Brown & Potoski, 2003; Hefetz & Warner, 2012).

This study aims to fill this research gap by pursuing the following research question: How do governance structures affect the success of inter-municipal cooperation?

Empirically, this study focuses on an area of municipal service provision that could be defined as *complex*, in the sense that both processes and outcomes are hard to measure objectively: child welfare or child protection (Hamilton & Bundy-Fazioli, 2013). Moreover, child welfare is a highly specialized service – a small municipality might not deal with more than 2–3 cases a year. Although each case may be time-consuming, they do not usually represent a workload considered sufficient to engage a full-time employee specializing in these types of tasks alone. The consequence is that municipalities in Norway must either allocate this service to persons with other tasks in their portfolio, with an attendant loss of focus and quality, try to hire a person in a part-time position, or engage in cooperation with other municipalities (Ekspertutvalget, 2014).

The article is structured as follows. First, we discuss the notion of *success* in cooperative arrangements, since this is essential to the choice of cases for the empirical study. Second, we investigate possible causes of success, focusing on the governance structure of the cooperation. In addition, we discuss other important factors that contribute to success in inter-municipal cooperation. As there is limited research on this area when it comes to inter-municipal cooperation, we rely on insights from similar research on network governance (E.-H. Klijn, 2008; Turrini, Cristofoli, Frosini, & Nasi, 2010; Verweij, Klijn, Edelenbos, & Van Buuren, 2013) and inter-organizational relationships (IOR) (Cropper, Ebers, Huxham, & Ring, 2008). Third, we discuss the empirical design (what characterizes child welfare services in Norway, selection of three cases) and method, focusing on the use of qualitative data with a combination of secondary data (reports, evaluations, etc.) and interviews. The fourth section contains the empirical analysis: first analyses of each case, then a cross-case analysis. Finally, we

discuss the findings in relation to the expectations defined in the theoretical section.

### Defining success in inter-municipal cooperation

Success, as in efficiency, is clearly a multi-dimensional phenomenon (see Babiak 2009; Human & Provan 2000; Kaplan & Norton 2010; Provan & Milward 2001). At least three different dimensions should be taken into consideration when judging the success or failure of service provision: economic efficiency, quality and governance (Jacobsen 2014). The most commonly discussed dimension seems to be *economic efficiency* or productivity. It is commonly assumed that inter-municipal cooperation might create economies of scale, in the sense that the mean cost per unit produced decreases. Economies of scale occur because it becomes possible to exploit resources like machines, buildings and employees to the full, thus avoiding slack. Empirical research indicates that inter-municipal cooperation does indeed realize some benefits from economies of scale (Bel, Fageda, et al., 2014; Bel & Warner, 2015; Hefetz & Warner, 2012). However, as noted in the introduction, the relevant studies mainly investigate municipal tasks that could be termed “technical”. It is hard to find studies of service areas for which the economic benefits of cooperation are harder to define, such as education, social welfare and health care.

The second dimension is *quality of services*. Although it is difficult to measure the quality of services, especially complex services (Schreyer, 2012), three types of quality are often distinguished: output/outcome, process and structure (Donabedian, 2005). “Output/outcome” refers to the services provided, and is often measured by asking users or clients for their opinion on the services they have received, or by more objective measures related to outcomes (getting a job, getting well, finishing school, etc.) (Kelly & Swindell, 2002). “Process” refers to the degree to which the work itself is conducted according to some standard – usually professional guidelines for what constitutes good professional work. “Structural quality” refers to the input factors in the production of services, i.e. the quality of staff, the size of the collegium, physical space and available equipment, and so on (Bigras et al., 2010). The three types of quality are of course closely linked, given the assumption that input factors (structure) affect processes that in turn affects outputs/outcomes.

Much of the debate on inter-municipal cooperation in Norway has focused on structural quality, and linked structural quality to a minimum size of a service (number of people employed) that would ensure a sufficient professional collegium and sufficient “robustness” (Ekspertutvalget 2014). A larger collegium is assumed to have many positive effects: increased robustness in cases of sickness or absences among staff, more professionalism in virtue of having more colleagues with whom to discuss different issues, a broader professional knowledge base, and a more attractive workplace that can offer both colleagues and full-time positions (Fox & Gurley 2006). All these factors are assumed to increase the quality of both processes and outputs/outcomes. The same considerations are

brought up in debates about the optimal size of municipalities all over the world (Dollery, Byrnes, & Crase, 2008; Dollery & Grant, 2013; Drew, Kortt, & Dollery, 2015).

A third dimension of success is *democratic governance*. Much of the current discussion concerning inter-municipal cooperation has raised the question whether such arrangements lead to a loss of political control (Fimreite & Medalen, 2005; D. I. Jacobsen, 2014a; Pierre, 2011; Røiseland & Vabo, 2016). Some studies indicate that politicians lose insight into complex inter-municipal cooperative arrangements, that they feel removed from the day-to-day management, and that power is transferred to the cooperation (E. Zeemering, 2016; E. S. Zeemering, 2012). If so, inter-municipal cooperation may be regarded as a threat to democracy (Gjertsen, 2014; Dag Ingvar Jacobsen, 2015; E.-H. Klijn & Skelcher, 2007).

Economic efficiency and quality may be regarded as tradeoffs: a decrease in the cost of production may be a consequence of a decrease in the quality of services provided (Io Storto 2016). There may also be a tradeoff between political control and governance, on the one hand, and quality and efficiency, on the other. Intrusion into professional production of services may sometimes affect the efficiency of professional work (Provan & Milward, 2001). Measuring the success of inter-municipal cooperation has to take these different tradeoffs into account.

## Governance structure and success

Given that *success* is a multidimensional concept, one should also assume that there are multiple causal factors relevant to achieving success. These causal factors are usually grouped into three categories: contextual, structural and functional/processual (Turrini et al., 2010). In this study, we focus on the structural characteristics or, more specifically, on the governance structure – or, using a basic concept from organization theory, the vertical specialization – of inter-municipal cooperation.

In general, vertical specialization addresses the governance structure of the cooperative arrangement (M. Egeberg, Gornitzka, & Trondal, 2016). The first dimension of *vertical specialization* is the autonomy of the inter-municipal cooperation of its members. Although strangely missing from the research on inter-municipal cooperation, operational autonomy is central to research on agencification (Pollitt, Talbot, Caulfield, & Smullen, 2004). There are several similarities between a (semi-)autonomous agency and an inter-municipal cooperation insofar as many – if not most – inter-municipal cooperative arrangements are organized into separate, formal entities (Anell & Mattison, 2009; R. Hulst & Montfort, 2007; D. I. Jacobsen, 2014a; Røiseland & Vabo, 2016). The reason to focus on autonomy is increased efficiency through letting “the managers manage” (Van Dooren, Bouckaert, & Halligan, 2015). The flip-side of autonomy, however, is a possible lack of democratic accountability and control (Bjørnholt & Salomonsen, 2015; E.-H. Klijn & Skelcher, 2007). Elected politicians and

traditional hierarchical leaders lose some of their steering power when they are unable to give direct orders or instruct the semi-autonomous entities. Thus, inter-municipal cooperation may lead to some kind of “democratic deficiency”.

However, inter-municipal cooperative arrangements are not completely autonomous, insofar as they are still connected to both the political and the administrative levels in the participating municipalities. This coupling usually takes on the form of some kind of board of directors, general assembly, or both. These bodies become the instruments for governing the cooperations, on the one hand, and the cooperations’ coupling to their “mother-organizations”, on the other. Thus, how these bodies are designed becomes essential, and this factor constitutes the second dimension in vertical specialization. The arguably most important design dimension is who the representatives in these steering bodies are and who they represent. The more a steering body of a cooperation consists of centrally located politicians and administrative leaders (for instance mayors and CEOs), the more vertically integrated the cooperation will be (Keast & Mandell, 2014; Mandell & Keast, 2008; Turrini et al., 2010). Although this might increase the possibilities for hierarchical control of the cooperation, it will also represent a link for the cooperation to the important resources controlled by these actors. It may accordingly seem reasonable to assume that tight integration will increase an inter-municipal cooperation’s propensity for success.

As much of the governance of inter-municipal cooperative arrangements will take the form of indirect steering, the format of the financing also becomes a critical factor (Turrini et al., 2010; Van Dooren et al., 2015). If the financial support is dependent on constant negotiations between municipalities, much of the energy of the administrative personnel in the cooperation must be used to secure sufficient funding. The more stable and predictable funding becomes, the more attention can be devoted to performing the central task.

As noted at the outset, both contextual and functional/processual factors may also be important in explaining success. Contextual factors are related to the fact that any type of cooperative arrangement is embedded in a larger physical and institutional environment (Granovetter, 1973; Knox, Savage, & Harvey, 2006). In the present study, however, we focus on inter-municipal cooperation within the same national (Norway) and functional (child welfare) context, so the general contextual factors will be similar for any cooperation. Accordingly, we restrict our focus to some factors of importance that also vary within these larger contexts. First, the physical characteristics of the environment become important (D. I. Jacobsen, 2009). Physical distances between members in the cooperation may increase costs, and may thus impair interaction and in turn make it more difficult to establish good working relations. Second, as emphasized by Provan and Milward (2001), resource munificence in the area covered by a cooperation seems to make cooperation work more smoothly. This includes (financial) support to the cooperation from external institutions, which in our case would mean support of inter-municipal cooperation from other public institutions at the county or state level. Although the effect of resource munificence has been questioned in more complex networks (Weijie, 2016), it still seems to be of great

importance in more formalized cooperative arrangements related to public service provision (Cristofoli & Markovic, 2016; Raab, Mannak, & Cambré, 2015). Finally, one has to take into account the similarity between the cooperating municipalities (Bel & Warner, 2015). Similarity is closely associated with trust, as one will usually have higher levels of trust in someone similar to oneself than in someone very different (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). As pointed out by many, high levels of trust among members seem to lower the costs of cooperation (Hornbeek, Beechey, & Pascarella, 2016; Jung & Jeong, 2013; E. H. Klijn et al., 2016). Thus, we would expect cooperation to function more smoothly between municipalities that are similar with regard to important characteristics such as size, economy and politics, than between dissimilar municipalities.

Functional or process-related factors are connected to work-related experiences in the cooperation, and are based on the assumption that previous experiences influence present relations (Hall, Taylor, & Taylor, 1996; Sydow, Schreyogg, & Koch, 2009). First of all, it is important for success that there is an acknowledged need for formalized cooperation. Establishing inter-municipal cooperation implies extensive use of resources in organizing, staffing and developing models for financing. In addition, creating a co-operation of this type will also involve extensive change in the existing organization, and change is in many instances perceived as stressful and thus often met with resistance (D. I. Jacobsen, 2014b). Thus, it is important that all participants accept the need for a cooperative arrangement, and acceptance seems to come easier if there is a common perception of “necessity” (Benson, 1975) or “urgency” (Kotter, 2008). Such common perceptions usually derive from a recognized crisis or shock (Gersick, 1991; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Others emphasize that positive experiences early in a co-operation may function as “small wins” (Weick & Quinn, 1999) that create a sense of early success, and in turn increase the probability of later success (Quinn, 1980) – a positive, self-reinforcing circle (Masuch, 1985). Finally, it is important to understand the effect of being a “first mover” (Short & Payne, 2008). Usually associated with business organizations operating in a market, the effect of being a “first mover” is also clearly relevant to public organizations. Being a first mover may suggest “modernity” and “pro-activity”, increase legitimacy, and in turn increase support, both symbolically and financially (Scott, 2008). As more cooperative arrangements arise, the competition for attention and resources becomes stronger, and it may be more difficult to get the same type of support as first movers may experience.

## **Method and data**

This study focuses on one aspect of municipal activities: child welfare or child protective services. One may argue that this is a rather narrow focus, thus limiting the transferability of the findings (Heen, 2009). On the other hand, the field represents an extension of the areas usually covered in studies on inter-municipal success. As noted initially, most previous studies focus on rather “hard” services,

like water supply or waste handling, where either the processes or the results are tangible and relatively easy to measure. Child welfare is very different from these services when it comes to the complexity of measuring results. The role of child welfare services in Norway is to detect child abuse (usually based on information given by or retrieved from school personnel, police, health personnel or others), to intervene, and to provide measures either in the home of the child or outside the home, including assigning foster parents or moving the child to an institution. In addition to being extremely complex, child welfare services sometimes involve use of public authority, when taking children out of the home despite protests from parents or other family representatives. Finally, child welfare services are highly specialized and professionalized, and even medium-sized municipalities may have to join resources to be able to provide services of sufficient quality. It is thus representative of this type of municipal task, where inter-municipal cooperation may be necessary or beneficial even if large scale amalgamations will be completed (Ekspertutvalget, 2014).

*Success* is clearly a relative concept, i.e. a matter of something being better than something else. To say anything about success one has to compare, either in static terms (comparing successful co-operations with unsuccessful ones) or in dynamic terms (comparing a situation being more successful than it was on an earlier point in time). In this study, we focus on comparison over time; that is, we compare the situation before and after inter-municipal cooperative arrangements were made. The main research strategy was thus to study child welfare provisions that achieved success after the establishment of inter-municipal co-operations. In doing so, we also tracked down critical events in the processes of establishing the inter-municipal cooperative arrangements.

One challenge when studying public services in general, and even more when studying highly complex service provisions like child welfare, is that it is difficult to establish a clear standard for what constitutes success or failure (Provan & Milward, 2001). Measuring the economic efficiency of such services is extremely difficult, if not impossible. To meet this challenge, we used several indicators in a stepwise selection procedure. First, we mapped all inter-municipal co-operations established between 1990 and 2010. Second, we used national statistics (mean time processing in each case, arrears) to find co-operations that had improved the situation along given parameters after the start of the cooperation. Since such quantitative data are very sensitive to random influences, we also searched for other evaluations of inter-municipal child welfare services (Brandtzæg & Sanda, 2003; Brandzæg, 2006; Flermoen & Sanda, 2004; Kvello & Wendelberg, 2003; Langset & Vinsand, 2010; Nilsen & Vinsand, 2007; Sand, Aasetre, & Lysø, 2007; Sletnes, 2003; Tjerbo, 2009; Vinsand & Nilsen, 2008; Wendelborg, Sand, & Aasetre, 2008). Fourth, we consulted one of the leading scientific institutions in the field of child welfare or child protective services (the University of Agder), and asked what co-operations they would define as “flagships” within the field. Finally, based on the previous information, we consulted leaders in the so-called regional councils in Norway, a voluntary association of municipalities around the totality of inter-municipal arrangements in the region.

These leaders are documented to have good oversight over cooperation in the region (Brandtzæg & Sanda, 2003).

This process resulted in three cases with a high level of agreement between many factors that indicate success:

- A significant decrease in the backlog of cases.
- A significant reduction of time used in the proceedings.
- A reduction in the number of complaints on decisions.
- Increased stability of qualified personnel.
- High professional quality (as evaluated by university and regional council experts).

In the following we will denote these co-operations “Mid”, “West” and “North”. The availability of three cases makes a comparative case analysis possible. We will describe these co-operations in more detail in the analysis of each case. The research strategy was to try to find common factors that explain success across these three cases. These cases are both structurally (number of participants, formal type of cooperation) and contextually (geography, economy of participant, physical distances) different, which indicates that these factors may be of lesser importance in understanding success (Yin, 2014). On the other hand, finding common success factors across different cases increases the probability that these are more general explanatory factors, and not just coincidentally correlated with success in a unique case (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

First, we went through several documents (yearly reports, cooperation agreements, minutes from meeting, web pages, audit reports) to map out the more objective structural characteristics of each cooperative arrangement. These data sources were used for mapping information on characteristics like formal governance structure (organization chart), number of participants, mode of financing, physical location, etc. In addition, during the autumn of 2010, we conducted 29 telephone interviews with leaders of regional councils (3), mayors (10) and chief administrative officers (12) in the participating municipalities, as well as leaders (and one assistant leader) of the three co-operations (4). In total, 13 respondents represented “West”, 10 respondents represented “Mid”, while 6 represented “North”. The somewhat unequal number of respondents per cooperation is a consequence of the difference in the number of participants in each. Respondents were chosen according to the criterion of breadth in views on the cooperation, so as to avoid single source bias (Patton, 1999). As the focus was the importance of the governance structure, we selected respondents representing this structure. Interviews were conducted to retrieve information on aspects that were not possible to get from written documents, like previous experiences with cooperation, sense of urgency, how important a certain governance arrangement was deemed to be, etc. An interview guide was developed so that the interviews could be regarded as semi-structured data.



## Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, each case was analyzed separately to establish the unique success factors in each. Second, we looked for commonalities in explanatory factors across the cases.

### “Mid”-cooperation

This cooperation consists of five municipalities, with one being much larger in terms of inhabitants (12795)<sup>1</sup> than the other four (ranging from 670 to 3577 inhabitants). The smaller municipalities did not have their own units devoted to child welfare. Child welfare in these municipalities was organized as an integrated part (ranging between 20 and 50 %) of the job of the leader of the health and social services in the municipality. Only the largest municipality had a separate group counting 4.6 full-time equivalent employees (FTEs) with responsibility for child welfare. An audit remarked that these four municipalities were not dimensioned according to national laws.

The inter-municipal cooperation started as a national experiment with exception from the then-operating law in 2004. In this experiment, the four smaller municipalities were allowed to delegate the responsibility for child welfare to the largest municipality, and transfer resources accordingly. The main office was located in the largest municipality, but local offices – under the jurisdiction of the individual municipalities – were maintained in the four smaller ones. Resources were thus spread out across all participating municipalities. Minutes from meetings in the municipal councils indicate worries about lack of political and administrative coordination of the services.

In 2009 the services were reorganized, placing the responsibility for child welfare in all five municipalities in one unit with one leader. In addition, a common political board was set up consisting of elected politicians from all participating municipalities. Within this board, a political committee with child welfare as its sole responsibility was created. From 2008 to 2010, FTEs in the child welfare services increased from 6.7 to 11. The new leader of the reorganized cooperation emphasized how the fusion of services into one formal unit increased the political focus on child welfare in general, leading to the significant increase in resources. She pointed out that:

Reorganizing child welfare into one common unit increased both the administrative and the political attention given to the service. In particular, there is a previously unseen political awareness. Now I am able to work actively directly toward the political level, and I can see and feel that they have acquired an increased insight and understanding of the field. Never before have mayors in the region talked so much about child welfare (...) This service has become a central part of the political debate in the common council.

Strong anchoring at the political level is corroborated by the interviews with the mayors in the participating municipalities. One of the mayors put it the following way:

We receive much more information. Previously we only got information about the cooperation once a year, and through the yearly reports. Today we have a constant dialogue. The political anchoring is much stronger than it was before in the regional council. Especially the creation of a committee for child welfare in the common council has been important for political anchoring.

In short, it seems as though organized attention around the child welfare services also resulted in child welfare becoming a prioritized area in all participating municipalities, resulting in more political attention, and, in turn, more resources. One of the mayors voiced some second thoughts on the development:

There is a danger that ... it is important for us to see the whole picture ... that municipal services are treated equally. In spite of the big challenges we face in child welfare we need to maintain focus on other services as well.

Still, this was a single voice among the politicians. All the other mayors underlined the need to strengthen child welfare. Some administrative leaders, although they also emphasized the need for more resources to child welfare, were worried that other municipal areas may not receive the same level of attention as child welfare.

#### **“West”-cooperation**

“West” consists of six municipalities, ranging in size (inhabitants) from 1404 to 3641. Thus, there is, unlike in the “Mid”-cooperation case, no municipality that is significantly larger than the others. However, the economic differences between the municipalities are large, and they cover large physical areas with rudimentary infrastructure, resulting in extensive traveling time between municipal centers. The small size of the municipalities has forced them to cooperate on a large range of municipal services, although all five are not necessarily cooperating in all areas. Cooperation within the field of child welfare goes back to the early 1980s, but the cooperation was not formalized until 1993. At that time, the cooperation was classified as a “host-cooperation”, indicating that all resources were delegated to one of the municipalities. Host responsibilities were to rotate among the participating municipalities. This cooperation had its own administrative board, consisting of the health and social chief executive officers in all the municipalities.

Two reports done by the internal audit officers in two of the municipalities indicated a high level of conflict between the municipalities, primarily as an

upshot of different economic situations in the municipalities, resulting in problems of coordination. In 1996 the cooperation was reorganized. A new board, with representation only from the host municipality, was put together. Even though the board was still administrative, it was now anchored at the top administrative level in the host municipality. This board consisted of three persons: the chief executive officer (CEO), the chief financial officer (CFO) – both representing the host municipality – and the leader of the child welfare unit. The reorganization of the board was characterized by all those involved as an important crossroads, as child welfare was lifted out of the health and social sector in the participating municipalities and anchored at a higher administrative level. One of the CEOs expressed the reorganization thusly:

The reorganization of the board in 1996 was crucial for the continuing cooperation on child welfare in the region. The economic situations in the participating municipalities are enormously different, and the reorganization punctuated each municipality's possibility to pursue special interests.

In 2004 the cooperation entered a new phase. As a national experiment, based on evaluations indicating a lack of political steering of the cooperation, the six municipalities were allowed to organize child welfare as an "inter-municipal company". The number of FTEs increased from 10.2 in 2003 to 11.5 in 2005, a significantly higher increase than the national level in the same period. In practice, this led to the creation of a supervisory board ("representantskap") consisting of the mayors of the participating municipalities. At the same time the regional council, where the same mayors were represented, decided to define the cooperation as a prioritized area and a "flagship" for the region. In this period, the regional council took on a rather active role vis-à-vis the cooperation, including ensuring some external financing. All respondents characterized this support as very important for the success of the cooperation. One of the mayors put it like this:

The regional council is very strong and central to the region, and child welfare became an area that received a lot of attention ...

With the strong political representation in the regional council (all mayors represented, as well as representatives of the political "opposition"), the political anchoring of the cooperation became very strong.

The "company model" was discarded in 2009, and replaced with a host municipality model. The changes from the previous model were rather marginal, as the administrative responsibilities were still placed at the top administrative level in the host municipality, and the regional council took over the role as supervisory board. The political anchoring was, however, somewhat weakened as responsibility for child welfare was moved from a unit with sole responsibility for the

field (supervisory board), to a more multifunctional arena (regional council) where child welfare had to “compete” with other municipal areas for political attention. The CEO of the host municipality described it thusly:

The information about child welfare in the regional council is very ad-hoc. I try to keep them informed, but there are so many other fields demanding attention.

This statement indicates that the 2009 organizational model weakened the political attention toward the specific area of child welfare.

Several respondents underlined the problems of each municipality being too small to meet national standards within the field of child welfare. This led them to maintain cooperation in spite of a rather conflict-filled situation in the period between 1993 and 1996. In addition, the importance of the long history of the cooperation between the six municipalities was emphasized as an explanation for why cooperation was continued even after this period. The success of the model established in 1996 spurred an increased interest in cooperation in the municipalities, which was further reinforced by the attention given by the regional council, research institutions and the national government. In addition, all respondents emphasized the importance of the leader’s competence and stability in explaining the success of the cooperation.

#### “North”-cooperation

This cooperation consists of only two, equally-sized (just above 1000 inhabitants) municipalities situated in the northernmost region of Norway. Distances are large, and the population is scattered. Infrastructural difficulties, combined with long winters and heavy weather, complicate physical transportation between centers. The initiative to establish a cooperative arrangement came from one of the municipalities in 2005, as a result of a serious crisis. The municipality was part of a trial involving 10 children, a trial that went through the whole legal system to the Supreme Court. The municipality lost, and had to pay a large compensation.

In the initial period, six municipalities were involved in a project focusing on the feasibility of a cooperative arrangement. This project was led by a board consisting of all CEOs in the six municipalities, with tight connections to the political level. In 2008, the two municipalities signed an agreement on “neighbor support”, according to which the two municipalities should discuss all cases together to obtain the necessary quality of decision. This rather informal agreement was replaced by a formal cooperation in 2009, taking the form of a “host municipality”. An important premise for the creation of the cooperation was that both municipalities should guarantee a minimum of 1.5 FTEs earmarked for child welfare in each municipality. This increased the number of FTEs within the field from 1.7 in 2008 to 3.0 in 2009 – almost a doubling of resources. The re-

sources were split evenly between the two municipalities, and it was decided that services, due to long distances, should be located in both municipality centers.

The main reason for the success of the cooperation is assigned to the shared perception of crisis in both municipalities, with the Supreme Court decision being the “objective” evidence of total failure – or, as the mayor of the municipality in question put it: *“The service was so crisis-ridden that the need for cooperation was self-evident.”* All respondents underlined the feeling of crisis. One of the CEOs elaborated further:

The arrangement with a host municipality has been much more effective than the previous “neighbor support” agreement, since the cooperation became much more formalized, and we got a clarification of the principles of financing between the two municipalities.

The cooperation was thus not only based on a fixed agreement on how to finance the services, but also an agreement concerning on what level the services should be. Since the political councils in both municipalities decided on earmarking 1.5 FTEs each, they also committed themselves to maintaining this level even when facing financial cuts. In the period following the creation of the cooperation, both municipalities have made several cuts in other municipal areas, but child welfare has been spared. The political level in both municipalities decided, through the creation of the cooperation, to move child welfare out of the ordinary prioritizations between fields and sectors.

The administrative and political anchoring of the cooperation is rather weak. The leader of the child welfare office meets with the CEOs twice a year, and none of the CEOs calls for more information. They feel adequately informed about what goes on in the field. Meetings between the leader of the child welfare services and the municipal councils are limited to once a year. None of the interviewed politicians called for more information. As one of the mayors expressed it:

It seems natural that the political attention decreases when something functions well. (...) the administrative leader of the cooperation and administrative leadership in the municipality are now the responsible (...)

In addition, several respondents underlined the importance of an iterative, almost incremental process. As one of the CEOs said:

The project period was a prerequisite for us to succeed. During that period, we met frequently in meetings and seminars, we discussed on a permanent basis how to increase competence in the field (...) Slow-

ly, we built a common competence on, and understanding of, the field of child welfare.

Both CEOs also emphasized how the process resulted in the two becoming better known to each other, and thus to the establishment of trust between them. Finally, all respondents highlighted the importance of a new ICT-system making it easier to communicate over physical distances, given that the cooperation covers a very large geographical and sparsely populated area.

### **Across-case analysis**

The most obvious common feature in all three cases is a significant increase in resources devoted to child welfare in the areas covered by the cooperations. This increase is significantly larger in the three cases (ranging from 13 % to a doubling from before to after the formalized cooperation was established) than the national average in the corresponding periods. This increase coincides with the formalization and establishment of a more elaborate formal structure, both administratively and politically. In two of the cases, a three-layered organization was constructed with an operative, an administrative and a political level. In the third case (“North”), a two-layered structure was constructed, but based on a political decision guaranteeing a stable financial basis that ensured a doubling of the resources assigned to the field.

However, it is difficult to conclude that formalization is the most important cause for success; other research on organization of inter-municipal child welfare shows that two- and three-layered formal organizations are the rule, not the exception (ECON, 2006; D. I. Jacobsen, 2014a; Leknes et al., 2013). A feature common to all three cases, however, is what has been termed “anchoring” – the cases are all characterized by a tight connection to the administrative top level, or a specialized political organ. In the case of “Mid”, child welfare was connected to a specialized political committee. Regarding “West”, the 2004 reorganization resulted in political supervisory board manned by top politicians in the participating municipalities, later coupled to the regional council where the same top politicians were in office. “North” is to some degree the exception, since it does not exhibit a clear political anchoring of the cooperation.

On the other hand, “North” starts out with something that compensates for political anchoring, namely a political “guarantee” shielding the field of child welfare from prioritization decisions between municipal sectors and tasks. What all three cases have in common is that child welfare is “moved out” of the ordinary municipality activity and given special attention, both politically and administratively. Child welfare is thus “moved upward” in the prioritization hierarchy. It is moved out of the prioritization discussions involving areas within the health and social sector as a whole, and up to a level where child welfare becomes a separate area and is thus prioritized as a sector in itself. This is particularly noticeable in “Mid”, where a separate political committee is devoted solely to child welfare.

All three cases also show a similarity in that there is sense of “crisis” among central actors in the municipality, both at the administrative and at the political level. This is most obvious in “North”, where a municipality was sued and lost in court. But also in the other two cases there was a sense of crisis, as shown by audits remarking that most of the municipalities (except for the largest in the “West” case) did not fulfill the legal minimum staff requirement. It is doubtful that the creation of inter-municipal cooperation would have activated the same energy if there were no perception of crisis. On a timeline, it seems that this sense of crisis is the basic building block for the construction of a well-functioning inter-municipal cooperation.

Finally, in all three cases the process exhibits incremental traits, where both previous problems and successes create new momentum for further integration and cooperation. The process is clearly characterized by a trial-and-error procedure, something emerging most clearly in “West”, where cooperative arrangements hark back to the early 1980s. But also in the other two cases we see processes in which different alternatives are tested out, evaluated, and adjusted. Again, the common perception of crisis is probably a prerequisite for these more or less unbroken incremental processes. The incremental process could also be described as a continuous process of formalization. Cooperation in all three cases follows a path of rather informal contracts and cooperative arrangements in the beginning toward more elaborated formal structures and agreements later on.

In addition, we find several unique explanations, like the role of “regional flagship” in “West”, the importance of a new ICT system in “North”, and the competence and stability of leadership in “Mid”.

## Discussion

In theoretical terms, we find both structural and functional explanations for the success achieved in these three cases (Turrini et al., 2010). Initially, we focused on the role of governance structure of inter-municipal cooperation, i.e. the role of *vertical structure* in explaining cooperative success. One common characteristic of all three cases is that structural arrangements are completed to obtain and maintain a high level of resources. Common to all three cases is a structure that organizes a specific “focus of attention” to the field of child welfare (M. Egeberg, 2003; March & Simon, 1993). This is closely associated with what some authors call the “anchoring” of cooperation (Sanda, 2001) and others “involvement of key stakeholders” (Evertsson & Rosengren, 2015). In all three cases, the inter-municipal cooperative arrangement is structurally “moved out” as a separate organization from the sector where it belongs in most municipalities, together with other tasks in the health- and social area. In a “normal” municipality, politicians and top management concentrate on prioritization between sectors, not individual services (Blåka et al., 2012). Resources devoted to a specific area like child welfare is thus a question of prioritizing between that area and other areas within the same sector. Prioritizations are made at the sector level, not the municipal level. Thus, the construction of the inter-municipal co-

operative arrangements represents a decoupling of child welfare from the rest of the sector, shielding it from prioritizations between similar services.

This structural decoupling is clearest in “Mid” and “West”, where child welfare was organized in a separate organizational unit coupled directly to top administrative levels as well as to specialized political organs. As Egeberg (2003) points out, this is a structural design that necessarily gives more attention to one area than to others. Actors within the field get easier access to important decision makers in the municipality – and increased attention and access leads in turn, as these three cases indicate, to more resources. The case of “North” is somewhat different, but here a decision shielding the field of child welfare from prioritization considerations involving other areas was made by establishing a fixed level of resources devoted to the area.

However, the structural arrangements would probably not have been instigated were it not for a shared perception of crisis based on an understanding that what had been done before was unsatisfactory. This is probably the main functional explanation for success, and should be regarded as the “building block” for the measures taken later during the cooperation. This factor does not necessarily explain success directly, but rather explains the energy put into the establishment and maintenance of the cooperation. Behind the inter-municipal cooperation there is a constant “sense of urgency” (Kotter, 2008), making it difficult for any one partner in the collaboration to obstruct or – ultimately – leave it. In all three cases, we see strong – in the sense of clear and not too open to different interpretations (Jacobsen, 2014b) – cues from the environment in the forms of external audits, evaluations and legal processes pointing to legal deficiencies in the municipalities in question. This common sense of urgency in turn creates a strong commitment to doing something, and a willingness to find a unified solution.

Theoretically, only three solutions exist. The first is to solve the problem alone. In the actual cases this seems mostly impossible, as it would require too much resources devoted to a small municipal area. The second is to amalgamate with other municipalities, while the third is to cooperate. For most municipalities cooperation is far more attractive than amalgamation, insofar as it can be regarded as a much less radical change in the existing order (Steiner, 2003). A perception that only one solution is possible, combined with a very clear perception that something must be done, creates a strong pressure both on politicians and administrative leaders to succeed. This may explain why all municipalities in the three cases were willing to devote significantly more resources to the field of child welfare.

In addition, all three cases indicate the importance of stepwise, incremental processes in establishing a well-functioning cooperation. This observation supports the idea that successful cooperation is something that is primarily achieved over time, through a series of successes and failures (Quinn, 1980). Again, this would have been easy if all three cases exhibited only successes from the start, as one could then show to the importance of “small wins” (Weick, 1984). On the contrary, in one of the cases there was a long period characterized by more prob-



lems than successes. The key to understanding why a period like this does not lead to the dissolution of the collaboration is probably to be found in the main point mentioned earlier: a common perception of urgency, and that withdrawal or failure was not an option.

As a conclusion, these three cases indicate that inter-municipal success cannot be explained by a single factor, no single factor is more important than any other. Rather, it is a question of complex interaction between factors, where one or several factors only work favorably in the presence of other factors (Ragin 1987). This study indicates that organizational structures and incremental processes are important, but that these elements would probably not have had the same effect if the sense of urgency was missing. If this is correct, it will be much more difficult to establish and maintain a well-functioning collaboration in a situation where one or several participants do not share this perception.

Finally, the findings in this study foster two further reflections. The first is on the democratic consequences of inter-municipal cooperation. In Norway (Ekspertutvalget, 2014; Røiseland & Vabo, 2016), Sweden (Anell & Mattison, 2009), Denmark (Kjær, 2011), as well as in other European countries (R. Hulst & Montfort, 2007), inter-municipal cooperation has been criticized on the grounds that it reduces the opportunities for political governance. In short, it is argued that creation of single-purpose cooperative arrangements, governed by their own boards, diminishes the role of elected politicians by putting important activities (like child welfare) at “an arm’s length”. Inter-municipal cooperation is thus assumed to result in a decoupling of elected politicians and the services provided by the municipality. This study shows a different mechanism at work. In fact, the creation of inter-municipal cooperative arrangements in our three cases mainly led to a *stronger vertical coupling* between the political level and the child welfare services by conducting a *horizontal decoupling* of these services from similar services within the same sector. In the situation before the inter-municipal arrangements, child welfare was “tucked away” in the administrative sector of health- and social matters. Only in very special instances was there a direct coupling between this specific area and the political level. Political governance focused on the sector as a whole, not on any specific service within that sector, leaving governance of the child welfare area mostly to administrators and professionals. Organizing the service as an inter-municipal arrangement brought central politicians and top managements directly in contact with the specific service in all cases. One can thus argue that political governance over that specific area was strengthened, not weakened. This stands in some contrast to the idea that inter-municipal arrangements in general will result in weakened opportunities for political governance.

Still, the findings in this study come with a bitter aftertaste. One of the main findings is that success largely depends on the actual service being “moved out” of the ordinary municipal activity and given extra attention, both by the top management and the political leadership. The activity or task organized as an inter-municipal arrangement is coupled directly to political and/or administrative leaders, and thus becomes “shielded” from the process of prioritization between

areas and sectors that has to take place in all municipalities with responsibilities for several different tasks and services. If one looks only at the inter-municipal services, this factor is clearly a factor explaining “success”. But this success is limited to one service, one area or one task among many. One can rightly ask: Where are the resources given to the area of child welfare in all three cases taken from? Which other areas had to “suffer”?

These questions bring us to another level, one where we can raise the question of the “success” of a municipality as a whole, not only the “success” of a single area. One of the main theoretical arguments for delegating responsibilities within a state to lower levels of government is an assumption that decision makers “close to the people” are those in the best position to have a total oversight over needs in the population (Oates, 1972). Local authorities are assumed to be better than the state level at a) registering local wants and needs, and b) balancing between those needs and wants, since the state level is further removed from the people in the local constituency. The ability of local authorities to balance different areas regards efficiency on a higher level, by some called “allocative efficiency” (Brueckner, 1982; Shah, 1992) or “efficiency of prioritizing” (D. I. Jacobsen, 2014a).

The study of the three cases reported in this article indicates that activities organized as inter-municipal arrangements are given extra attention as they are “taken out” of the ordinary municipal activities. As we know, attention is one of the really scarce resources in any political system (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 2012; March & Olsen, 1989), and those winning the competition for political and administrative attention in a municipality will also win the competition for resources. Organizing municipal services as inter-municipal arrangements may lead to a fragmentation of the municipality, making it more difficult to obtain allocative efficiency. It is a puzzling thought that what causes success at one level (one service area) may be detrimental to success at a higher level (the total responsibility of a municipality), and that inter-municipal arrangements in general and not only limited to the child welfare sector, may undermine higher-level efficiency.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All numbers from 2010.