Drivers of reform implementation in local government: a qualitative comparative analysis

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IMPACT

This article demonstrates that, in order to implement reform in local government, several conditions are required. The combination of a large municipal scale, constructive politico–administrative relations and a sufficient number of qualified employees will considerably increase the chances of success. The article explains why local policy-makers and public managers need to adopt a holistic approach. They are wasting their time if they improve only one factor related to reform implementation. Policy-makers at the central level need to be aware that they either need to tune their reform ambitions to the extent these factors are sufficiently present locally, or they also need to include a strategy to target these factors explicitly to increase the chances for successful reform.

ABSTRACT

By identifying a configuration of factors that impact the degree of reform implementation, this article offers a more accurate view of a local government's implementation capacity than earlier studies. Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis in 11 local governments was used to test how organizational factors jointly produced the right context for reform implementation. The results indicate that reform implementation capacity is largely dependent on the following organizational factors: municipal scale, politico–administrative relations and the presence of sufficient properly qualified employees.

Keywords: Belgium; Flanders; implementation; local government; municipality; reform; reform implementation capacity

Introduction

Since the 1980s, there has been a tendency towards decentralization in most European countries (Bikker, & Van der Linde, 2016). Central governments have been transferring authority, tasks, spending responsibilities and competences to lower levels of government (Nelissen, 2002). In addition, environmental and legislative pressures have been challenging many of the traditional management practices and norms (Meneguzzo, Sancino, Guenon, & Fiorani, 2013). Consequently, a wave of reforms aimed at coping with these challenges has changed local government in many countries (Schwab, Bouckaert, & Kuhlmann, 2017).

The ability to reform is an important element of good government (Lindvall, 2017). However, the implementation of reforms is often piecemeal and inconsistent (Rapanos, & Kaplanoglou, 2014) and only a few reforms actually reach completion (Kroll, & Pasha, 2019), especially when they are (partially) pursued by central governments (Steen, Teles, & Torsteinsen, 2017).

Given that local government reforms often fail, we need more insight into the drivers of reform implementation (Demircioglu, 2020; Ferlie, Hartley, & Martin, 2003; Rapanos, & Kaplanoglou, 2014). Most research on public sector reform has focused on the outcomes and effects of reforms (Allers, & Geertsema, 2016). Most studies have also tested the independent effects of a single factor on reform implementation. However, the relationships between the various determinants and the joint effects of these have yet to be addressed (De Vries, Bekkers, & Tummers, 2016; Walker, 2014). In addition, research has focused on specific policy fields (for example, Hermansson [2019] focuses on disaster management), which has made the identification of any general patterns difficult (Van de Walle, Hammerschmid, Andrews, & Bezes, 2016). De Vries et al. (2016) have called for comparative studies to show the extent to which the drivers of a high degree of implementation are generalizable.

In summary, research into reforms in local governments has focused too little on the implementation phase, usually starts from the independent effect of an isolated factor and often just looks at a single reform within a specific policy domain. The aim of this article is to respond to these criticisms by identifying a configuration of factors that makes it possible to implement different reforms.

In the next section, we review the literature and define a number of core concepts in order to develop our conceptual framework.

Theoretical background

Reform implementation capacity

As a start, we have to make a distinction between reform and change: two concepts that are often used interchangeably. Although all public sector reforms require change, not all changes are the result of a reform. Changes can be nonintentional, driven by external developments, while reform is a 'deliberate and intentional change, based on a plan or program' (Greve, Lægreid, & Rykkja, 2016, p. 4).

The managerial and organizational response to (centrally-initiated) reform strategies depends largely on the local government's reform capacity. Lindvall (2017, p. 144) defines this capacity as 'the ability of decision-makers to adopt and implement policy changes'. This definition has three limitations. First, it creates the illusion that reform capacity depends solely on decision-makers, whereas in fact the entire organization is involved. Second, Lindvall refers to 'policy changes', which relate to reforms concerning the organization's service delivery. However, the term 'reform capacity' should also encompass internally-oriented administrative reforms, in which the organization itself is the subject of reform. Third, Lindvall's definition covers both the adoption and implementation of a reform. While in a sense this is already a demarcation—Cinar, Trott, & Simms (2019) highlight three other phases in addition to the implementation phase—we argue it is appropriate to separate reform adoption and reform implementation more clearly. Doing so enables us to shed light on specificities of particular activities within the reform process. After all, the capacity required to adopt a given reform is not necessarily the same as that required to implement it. In this article, therefore, we narrow down Lindvall's initial concept of 'reform capacity' by introducing the term 'reform implementation capacity'.

Degree of reform implementation

The operationalization of the concept of 'degree of reform implementation' has evolved considerably over the past few decades (Chackerian, & Mavima, 2001; Farooqi, & Forbes, 2020; Matland, 1995). Early studies tended to be top-down, measuring the extent to which implementations remained faithful to the original, centrally-imposed policy design (Pressman, & Wildavsky, 1984). After the 1980s, more bottom-up approaches were adopted—looking at the way local policy implementers adjusted policies to suit their local context (McLaughlin, 1987). More recent studies, such as McDermott (2006), have tried to reconcile these perspectives by asking which organizational characteristics and contextual factors are best suited to implement (centrally-initiated) reforms. After years of debate between these top-down and bottom-up perspectives, both sides have now agreed that implementation is a continuum located between central guidance and local autonomy (Pülzl, & Treib, 2017). This article identifies a combination of organizational characteristics that contribute to the degree of implementation of centrally-initiated reforms, taking into account both local realities and the institutional context.

Determinants of a high degree of reform implementation

Understanding change and responses to administrative reforms is about understanding variations in response to the same coercive pressure (Windels, & Christiaens, 2006). From our reading of the literature on reform and its implementation, we distinguish five main determinants of a high degree of reform implementation: organizational size; municipal scale; financial condition; politico–administrative relations; and the quality of the employees. Many studies have examined the influence of one of these factors on the implementation of reforms, with varying results. We first discuss these five factors separately, before examining their influence in combination.

Organizational size: The size of an organization, typically understood as the number of its employees, is important. However, its influence on the capacity of an organization to implement reforms can go either way (Rhys Andrews, Beynon, & McDermott, 2015; Demircioglu, 2020). The first is the *complexity-administrative growth hypothesis* (Rushing, 1967), which states that a large scale has a negative influence on an organization’s capacity to reform, because it involves an increase in complexity. Several studies have shown that the size of the organization has a positive link with bureaucracy, and that co-ordination is more difficult in organizations with a large number of employees (Caplow, 1957; Mintzberg, 1989). More recently, this hypothesis was tested by Demircioglu (2020): using a self-assessment survey of Australian public sector employees, he found that organizational size is negatively associated with the implementation of reforms. However, there is a second hypothesis concerning the relationship between organizational size and capacity: the *internal economies of scale perspective* (Blau, 1972), which assumes that a large organization can better spread its administrative costs and, through these efficiency gains, can invest in improving the functioning of the organization. Building on this hypothesis, Brudney, Hebert, & Wright (1999) examined the influence of a number of organizational characteristics on the reform implementation capacity of government agencies in the USA. This led to the conclusion that large agencies were more successful in implementing reforms. Many recent studies have endorsed the second hypothesis, which states that a large organizational scale has a positive impact on the implementation of reforms (Anderson, Potočnik, & Zhou, 2014; R. Andrews, & Boyne, 2009; Bikker, & Van der Linde, 2016; Hansen, 2011; Lago-Penas, 2013).

Municipal scale: Most arguments in favour of a large municipal scale are related to economies of scale. First, most public services are subject to fixed costs, which means that marginal costs should decrease with output. Second, a larger municipal scale also allows for a larger civil service—allowing more room for specialization (Gomes, Alfinito, & Albuquerque, 2013). This is all the more important because the tasks of municipalities are becoming increasingly complex. In a sense, therefore, the factors ‘organizational size' and 'municipal scale' are related to each other.

On the other hand, several scholars have argued that local governments will be more actively followed by citizens in smaller municipalities, making them more driven by public opinion. As citizens are often reluctant to undertake reforms, a small municipal scale can have a negative impact on the implementation of reforms (Dahl, 1967; Denters, Goldsmith, Ladner, Mouritzen, & Rose, 2014).

Financial condition: Boyne (2003, p. 369) states that ‘the idea that more resources will lead to better results is perhaps the simplest theory for improving public services’. After all, the presence of sufficient financial resources would enable an organization to innovate, absorb failures and act proactively (Rosner, 1968). Although there is some consensus within the literature that the presence of financial resources has a positive effect on the capacity of the organization, there are different opinions about the actual magnitude of this effect. A strong version of this theory argues that higher government spending has a direct, positive impact on the quantity and/or quality of service provision. For example, Matland (1995) found that a high degree of reform implementation is influenced by the availability of financial resources, and Boyne (2003) found that the presence of financial resources is an important factor for bringing about change. A weaker version sees high government spending as a 'necessary but not sufficient condition', and recognizes the importance of efficient and effective financial management to deliver maximum potential benefits (Boyne, 2003; Gomes et al., 2013; Walker, Boyne, & Brewer, 2010). The opposite hypothesis is the *financial stress hypothesis*, which was designed and empirically tested for the first time by Hood (1995). The results showed that OECD countries in financial difficulties have an incentive to adopt and implement administrative reforms. These findings were partly confirmed by Van Helden (2000), who tested the hypothesis within Dutch local governments.

Politico–administrative relations: Although leadership as an individual, intrinsic quality can be seen as an important factor, several scholars argue that it is mainly politico–administrative relations that influence the degree of the reform implementation (Ferlie et al., 2003; Hennau, 2016). Pollitt, & Bouckaert (2017, p. 165) assert that reform ‘cannot be adequately comprehended without reference to the crucial relationships which exist between administration and politics, and between administrators and politicians’. Reforms usually involve politicians and civil servants, but the relationship between them varies considerably from one organization to another. Although models for analysing politico–administrative relations differ widely in design and approach (Pollitt, & Bouckaert, 2017), studies generally agree that a constructive relationship between the civil service and the political level is essential for a high degree of reform implementation (for example Brans, De Visscher, & Vancoppenolle (2006)). For example, in their study on the implementation of reforms at the Italian regional level, Ongaro, & Valotti (2008) found that a close and constructive relation between top civil servants and politicians had a positive impact on the implementation of reforms and reduced the risk of interruptions or reversals.

Sufficient qualified employees: A sufficient number of high-quality employees has been shown to have an important influence on the reform implementation capacity of an organization. This factor includes employee empowerment, job-related skills and competencies (Bartlett, & Dibben, 2002), training, human resource flexibility (Anderson et al., 2014), staff turnover (Cinar et al., 2019) and individual employees who can break through a conservative, risk-averse organizational culture (Borins, 2000). A study by Windels, & Christiaens (2006) on Flemish centres providing social services shows that the general level of education of the executives and the staff positively affects the implementation of reform.

Although the empirical evidence on the factors influencing reform implementation capacity in the public sector is long-standing and growing (Walker, 2014), the literature reviews by both De Vries et al. (2016) and Walker (2014) point out that most studies have tested the independent effects of a single factor. The relationships between the various determinants and their joint effects have not yet been addressed. These are the focus of this study.

Research design

This section justifies our case selection, explains our data collection process, introduces fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (Fs/QCA) as our methodological approach and discusses the operationalization and calibration of both outcomes and conditions.

Case selection

The data used in this study was from local governments in Flanders, Belgium. Eleven 'critical' cases were selected—meaning that the selected cases had strategic importance to the general problem (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Since the current political debate on government capacity in Flanders focuses primarily on smaller and medium-sized municipalities, we selected *a priori* on municipal scale: municipalities with a population of around 10,000 inhabitants (four cases) and with a population of around 40,000 inhabitants (seven) were chosen. We opted for municipalities with approximately 40,000 inhabitants because Flemish legislation seems to implicitly aim at this scale. Furthermore, we took care to ensure a sufficient geographical spread and variety in the socio-economic characteristics of the selected municipalities. To ensure that the selected critical cases were not extreme cases, a shortlist was presented to an expert on local governments. This way we were sure that our cases represented an appropriate cross-section of administrative practices in Flanders.

Different data collection methods were used for gathering the data. In total, 83 semi-structured in depth interviews were conducted (49 hours of recorded material). The respondents were local politicians (for example mayors, aldermen, opposition politicians) and civil servants (managers, heads of service and employees). We opted for a purposeful sampling strategy, in which mainly the administrative and political élite of the organization concerned were interviewed. The reason for this was that these people are likely to have the best view on the implementation of the chosen reforms. To avoid élite bias, operational employees were also interviewed when deemed necessary. All interviews were transcribed and coded with NVivo 11 software. They were supplemented with a thorough document analysis to corroborate the view of the respondents, and to add depth to the collected data. Before moving to the 11 selected cases, a pilot study was conducted in order to test our conceptual and analytical framework, and to see whether the questions were clear and produced useful results.

Methodological approach: Fs/QCA

Fuzzy-set QCA (Fs/QCA) was used to analyse the data. The QCA method, which is particularly helpful for exploring complex phenomena (van der Kolk, 2019), relies on Boolean algebra to detect various combinations of conditions (a combination of factors) related to a certain outcome of interest (in this case a high degree of reform implementation), drawing upon fundamental case study research components (Ragin, 1987).

We opted for a Fs/QCA method for analysing our data for two main reasons. First, Fs/QCA is highly suitable for analysing combinations of conditions in a systematic way, which is consistent with the aim of this research (Rihoux, & Ragin, 2004). Second, Fs/QCA is preferred over crisp-set QCA. A crisp set is dichotomous: a case is either 'in' or 'out' of a set. A fuzzy set, by contrast, permits membership in the interval between 0 and 1 while retaining the two qualitative states of full membership and full non-membership. The Fs/QCA-method thus allows a more nuanced view of the cases, resulting in higher content validity (Schneider, & Wagemann, 2012). The software packages used were setMethod (Oana, & Schneider, 2018) and QCA (Dusa, 2018) in R.

Calibrating the outcome: high degree of reform implementation

Coding the outcome depends on the degree to which the reform is implemented by the local government. As stated earlier, it is not sufficient to look at whether or not a single reform is adequately implemented to properly measure reform implementation capacity. To address this, this article examines the local implementation of two reforms. Both reforms were applicable to all Flemish municipalities.

The first reform studied was the integration of the municipalities and their respective public centres for social welfare (PCSW). Each municipality in Belgium has a PCSW providing social services. The three Belgian regions (Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia) each are responsible for most local government matters. The Flemish government chose to make the integration of these PCSWs and the municipalities compulsory by 1 January 2019 (Homans, 2016). It formulated a number of objectives and preconditions for this integration. In addition, a number of substantive guidelines concerning the organizational model and procedural guidelines for the drafting of (legal) texts were provided to local governments to facilitate the process.

The second reform studied was the implementation of an organizational control system. This refers to the complete set of instruments by which an organization tries to strengthen its control over its operation. The goal of organizational control is to map out the processes and procedures in order to achieve a more efficient and effective internal operation and service provision.

There was a clear difference in the level of involvement of the Flemish government between the two reforms. This is important for our study because recent research has shown that autonomy with respect to higher levels of government matters when it comes to local government reform (Keuffer, 2018; Santis, Grossi, & Bisogno, 2019). Although the municipality–PCSW integration had already been announced by the central government as mandatory by 1 January 2019, at the time of data collection municipalities were still free to proactively implement this reform or not. Our qualitative research design enabled us to take into account path dependence and the historical dimension of the co-operation between the two organizations and also to look at the broader context in which the integration was taking place. On the other hand, organizational control was already compulsory at the time of data collection. The Flemish government has been actively encouraging the implementation of an organizational control system for many years, but the actual implementation of organizational control is highly dependent on the reform implementation capacity of the local governments themselves. While the Flemish government has set out guidelines, local government is entirely responsible for implementation.

Although several studies indicate that political commitment and support can be important factors in the implementation of public sector reforms, there is no consensus on the extent of their role in administrative reforms with an internal focus (Lægreid, &

Rykkja, 2016; Lavertu, Lewis, & Moynihan, 2013). In order to avoid any ideological and/or political bias in our results, we explicitly questioned our respondents about their perceptions of both reforms. All our respondents (both politicians and civil servants) asserted that ideological motives had no influence on the implementation of the reforms.

In order to determine the extent to which these reforms had been implemented, a number of indicators was selected for each reform on the basis of the regulatory framework, preparatory expert interviews and previous research on the implementation of similar reforms (for example Farneti's [2009] study of the implementation of a comparable internal control system in local governments). The implementation of municipality–PCSW integration was evaluated through four indicators: the integration of management; the integrated functioning of two support services (IT and HRM); and the perception of the respondents regarding the speed of the integration processes. The implementation of organizational control was also evaluated on the basis of four indicators: the presence of risk management and proactive policy implementation; the presence of measurement and monitoring systems; the perception on the Flemish guideline organizational control; and the use of an integrated, organization-wide control system. These indicators were scored independently by two researchers, based on the empirical data. Because of restrictions concerning the length of this article, the details of the calibration process could not be included in this article—please contact the authors for more detailed information.

Conditions

In Fs/QCA, all conditions and outcomes are considered sets. We gave each case a score between 0 (fully out) and 1 (fully in), reflecting its membership in each of the conditions. The cross-over point of 0.5 is important because a lower score indicates that a case is ‘more out than in’, whereas a score higher than 0.5 indicates that a case is ‘more in than out’ of a set (Schneider, & Wagemann, 2012). This process of ‘scoring’ the cases on the basis of their set memberships is called ‘calibration’ (Basurto, & Speer, 2012; Berg-Schlosser, De Meur, Ragin, & Rihoux, 2009). In this study, the fuzzy-set scale differed according to the conditions: for example, municipal scale was a binary calibration because our case selection allows this, but we used a more nuanced scale for financial condition. In the following paragraphs, the five determinants are discussed separately. In order to limit subjectivity, the indicators were scored independently by two different researchers.

The first condition was the 'absence of one-person services'. One-person services are services where just one employee (part time or full time) is responsible for both the strategic and operational components of the service, making the service (and consequently the organization as a whole) vulnerable. If there were no one-person services present within the municipal organization, the case received a value of 1; if there was at least one one-person service in operation, the case got the value of 0.

The second condition was ‘large municipality’. The average municipality in Flanders has 21,000 inhabitants. Municipalities that were significantly bigger than the average (around 40,000 inhabitants) and municipalities that were significantly smaller than the average (around 10,000 inhabitants) were examined. Municipalities with a population around 40,000 were assigned the value 1, while municipalities with a population around 10,000 received the value 0.

A third condition was 'sufficient financial resources'. To assess this, the following indicators were taken into account: the ratio of the cumulative budgetary result to total assets; debt ratio relative to the average within the cluster of similar municipalities (‘Belfius Cluster’); tax revenues; share of the auto-financing margin (the difference between the revenue available to loan costs and the net periodic loan expenditure) in the total operating revenue; the evolution of the six-year auto-financing margin; budgetary flexibility (the share of fixed expenses in operating expenses); investment expenditure per capita; and respondents’ perception of the financial condition of the municipality. For this condition, a fuzzy-set scale was used with four scores ranging from full membership (1) via scores of 0.67 and 0.33 to full non-membership (0).

The fourth condition was ‘constructive politico–administrative relations'. The relationship between civil servants and the local politicians was evaluated on the basis of the respondents’ perceptions elicited in interview, the questions for which were based on recent research on politico–administrative relations in local governments (Hennau, 2016; Siegel, 2015). Politico–administrative relations concern, for example, the management of the civil service by local politicians; the (perceived) power of the management team; and the role of the general manager as a key figure in the interplay between politics and administration (Hennau, 2016; Mouritzen, & Svara, 2002). A positive, constructive perceived politico–administrative relationship was assigned a value of 1, while its absence had the value 0.

The fifth and final condition was 'sufficiently qualified employees'. This variable was assessed on the basis of the following indicators: the number of high-skilled FTEs; the training provision within the organization; the possibility of internal mobility; and the perception of the respondents with regard to the recruitment policy. For this condition, a fuzzy-set scale with four scores was used, ranging from full membership (1) via scores of 0.67 and 0.33 to full non-membership (0).

Table 1 shows that the results for the conditions 'Large municipalities' and 'Absence of one-person services' were identical: small-scale municipalities had one-person services in all cases examined, while no such services were active in large municipalities. Therefore, following the QCA-procedures, the two conditions could be merged. This way only four conditions remained: sufficient financial resources, constructive politico–administrative relations, large municipalities, and sufficient skilled & qualified employees.

Table 1. Operationalization conditions.

Case No.	Sufficient financial resources	Constructive politico–administrative relations	Absence of one-person services	Large municipalities	Sufficient skilled and qualified employees
1	1	1	1	1	1
2	0.33	0	1	1	0.33
3	0	1	1	1	0.67
4	0	1	0	0	0.67
5	0.33	1	1	1	0.33
6	0.33	1	1	1	1
7	1	1	1	1	0.33
8	1	1	0	0	0.33
9	0	1	0	0	0
10	0.67	1	1	1	0.67
11	0	1	0	0	0

Results

The first step in QCA-analysis is the construction of a truth table, which contains a row for every possible combination of conditions. Subsequently, the individual cases are allocated to a row by the specific combination of conditions they exhibit. Rows without empirical cases are called ‘logical remainders’ and are removed from the table. The truth table for the outcome ‘integration municipality–PCSW’ is presented in Table 2. We used a consistency threshold of 0.8, which is well above the suggested level of 0.75 (Ragin, 2009). Because of the limited number of cases, our frequency threshold was 1 (Ragin, 2009).

Table 2. Truth table 1.

Sufficient financial resources	Constructive politico–administrative relations	Large municipalities	Sufficient skilled and qualified employees	Outcome	*N*	Raw consistency	PRI
0	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**3**	**1**	**1**
1	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**2**	**0.85**	**0.65**
0	1	1	0	0	1	0.8	0
0	1	0	0	0	3	0.55	0.50
1	1	0	0	0	1	0.49	0
0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0

In the next step, Boolean algebra was used to minimize the truth table: see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Solution outcome 1.

CONSTRUCTIVE POLITICO–ADMINISTRATIVE RELATIONS *BIG MUNICIPALITY*SUFFICIENT SKILLED EMPLOYEES → INTEGRATION MUNICIPALITY – PCSW

Solution consistency: 0.92

Solution coverage: 0.67

The consistency scores for the configuration in Figure 1 were rather high. The solution consistency, the degree to which membership in the solution is a subset of membership in the outcome score, indicates that 92% of the empirical evidence is in line with this solution. The solution coverage measures the proportion of memberships in the outcome explained by the solution. This means that 67% of our outcome was covered by this configuration.

Our results therefore show that when the municipality is large (which also means that there are no one-person services present in the organization), politico–administrative relations are constructive and there are sufficient numbers of qualified staff, the financial condition has no effect on achieving the targeted outcome.

Following the same analytic steps for the outcome ‘organizational control’, the truth table (without logical remainders) is as in Table 3.

Table 3. Truth table 2.

Sufficient financial resources	Constructive politico–administrative relations	Large municipalities	Sufficient skilled and qualified employees	Outcome	*N*	Raw consistency	PRI
0	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**3**	**0.87**	**0.76**
1	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**2**	**0.83**	**0.70**
0	**1**	**1**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**0.72**	**0.23**
0	0	1	0	0	1	0.60	0
1	1	0	0	0	1	0.30	0
0	1	0	0	3	0	0.27	0.08

Again, our analysis provides only one configuration (see Figure 2) explaining the outcome.

Figure 2. Solution outcome 2

CONSTRUCTIVE POLITICO–ADMINISTRATIVE RELATIONS *BIG MUNICIPALITY*SUFFICIENT SKILLED EMPLOYEES → ORGANIZATIONAL CONTROL

Solution consistency: 0.85

Solution coverage: 0.70

The consistency scores for the configuration in Figure 2 were rather high, with a solution consistency of 85% and a coverage of 70%.

Interestingly, the results for both reforms were the same, despite the fact that the reforms differed in several ways. Five of the 11 cases studied (1, 3, 5, 7 and 10) featured the identified determinants for a high degree of reform implementation.

Discussion and conclusion

This article adds to the growing body of literature on local government reform by identifying a configuration of conditions contributing to a high degree of reform implementation, thus providing a more nuanced view on local government implementation capacity. Based on existing research, five conditions were selected, each of which has been associated with the development or strengthening of reform implementation capacity: financial condition; politico–administrative relations; the absence of one-person services; municipal scale; and the presence of sufficient qualified employees. Our main objective has been to investigate the extent to which these factors together have a joint effect on the degree of reform implementation by local governments. Fs/QCA analysis of two different reforms shows that the combination of a constructive politico–administrative relationship, the presence of sufficient qualified employees in the organization and a large scale leads to a high degree of implementation.

Further research

While this study identifies a relevant configuration of conditions, further research is required to gain more insight into the reform implementation capacity of local governments. First, we focused on determinants internal to the organization without taking into account the influence of organizations on each other. It may be interesting to apply the 'diffusion model', where reforms are seen as emulations of reforms in surrounding municipalities, to a similar research design (Berry, & Berry, 2018). Second, we focused on the implementation of reforms: it is possible that the success of other phases within the reform process may be influenced by a different configuration of factors. Third, only two reforms were studied and, in order to further investigate the legitimacy of the concept of ‘reform implementation capacity', it would be interesting to analyse other reforms using a similar research design. Fourth, only municipalities with approximately 10,000 and 40,000 inhabitants were examined: it would be interesting to see whether the same research design yields similar results over a broader set of municipalities, including much larger ones. Finally, the cases in this study were in a single region. Recent implementation research has pointed out that different regions or countries seem to have different 'implementation styles'(Pülzl, & Treib, 2017), depending on the content and scope of responsibilities and the extent of autonomy (Bouckaert, & Kuhlmann, 2016). Pierre (2011) observes that administrative traditions can be important for understanding reform processes. In their typology of local government systems, Bouckaert, & Kuhlmann (2016) place Flanders in the 'Continental European Napoleonic tradition' (powerful, centralized bureaucracy and functionally rather weak local governments), as opposed to, for example, the 'Nordic type' (highly decentralized and functionally strong local governments). It would be interesting to see if a similar research design, tested in a different region rooted in another administrative tradition, results in similar or different configurations. Hence, to learn more about potentially contrasting logics of implementation in different institutional settings, more research with a focus on cross-country comparison is needed.

Contributions

This article contributes to the literature in at least four ways. First, a thorough analysis and problematization of the various factors, as presented in the conceptual section of this article, illustrates that their concrete operationalization varies greatly across different studies. We tried to create added value by providing a multidimensional operationalization for each factor, combining qualitative data from in-depth interviews and quantitative data from the document analysis. This way, we ensured that the research was based on both perceptions and objective data, limiting subjectivity without losing sight of the specificity of the local context.

Second, as Walker (2014) and De Vries et al. (2016) point out, most research on the implementation of reforms has studied the isolated effect of a single factor. This seems to have implications for the results. For example, when it comes to organizational size, the *internal economies of scale perspective* of Blau (1972) is diametrically opposed to the *complexity-administrative growth hypothesis* of Rushing (1967), although both hypotheses have been empirically confirmed in recent studies. Our results, which found an equal configuration of factors for the implementation of two different reforms, show that the different factors could not be examined in isolation from each other. The degree of implementation did not depend on a single factor, but on the interplay of a number of factors. Our configurational approach pointed out that organizational size only influences the degree of reform implementation in interaction with a number of other factors. This applied equally to the other factors within our configuration.

Third, among others, De Vries et al. (2016) and Van de Walle et al. (2016) argue that there is a need for comparative research into the implementation of reforms. Several authors (for example Gray, 1973) have found that a high degree of implementation of one reform is not necessarily a guarantee of the presence of large reform implementation capacity more generally. They thus hypothesized that the configuration of factors leading to a high degree of reform implementation may vary depending on the nature of the reform. Our analyses showed that the same combination of factors led to a high degree of implementation of two different reforms. The organizations that managed to implement the municipality–PCSW integration also managed to implement organizational control and vice versa. Although only two reforms were studied, these results suggest that reform implementation capacity is largely dependent on organizational factors, regardless of the reform studied. Hence, some local governments which have a number of common organizational characteristics are consistently more successful in implementing reforms than a number of other local governments.

Fourth, the two reforms we studied also differed in terms of central government involvement. Although several scholars have found that central–local relations have an important impact on the implementation of reforms at the local level (Bouckaert, & Kuhlmann, 2016; Heinelt, Hlepas, Kuhlmann, & Swianiewicz, 2018), our results nuance this assumption by finding that an equal configuration of conditions for both reforms leads to a high degree of implementation, suggesting that the influence of central government involvement is quite limited when different reforms are examined within the same institutional setting. Although further research is required, we hypothesize that central–local relationships can be decisive at the macro level, for example when comparing the implementation of reforms in different regions or countries, but have a limited influence on different administrative reforms within a single institutional setting.

Lessons for practice

Our results indicate that, rather than a single factor, it is the interplay of a number of organizational characteristics which determines the successful implementation of reforms in local governments: municipal scale, constructive politico-administrative relations and the presence of sufficient qualified employees. This finding has important implications for policy-makers at both local and central levels. It is not enough for local government to focus on strengthening a single factor: reform implementation capacity can only be improved when a holistic approach which considers several organizational characteristics is taken. Central government policy-makers need to take this important condition into account when requiring reforms in local government.

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