

# Council Decisions on Inter-local Collaboration: A Typological Theory

Eric S. Zeemering, Indiana University

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## Inter-local Collaboration as a Legislative Decision

Local governments have available to them multiple organizational strategies for the production of local public services. While many local governments opt to produce public services within their jurisdiction, officials have the opportunity to contract with private-sector producers or other units of government (Joassart-Marcelli and Musso 2005; Oakerson 1999; Stein 1990). Inter-local agreements are a special category of service contracting that deserve additional attention (Friesman 1970; Marando 1968; Morgan and Hirlinger 1991). Decisions to organize local public services, from the public-choice perspective, are informed by the underlying preferences of citizens within a community (Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren 1961). City councils and the legislative bodies of local units of government, then, should play an important role in aligning the organization of public services with citizen preferences. However, representation in intergovernmental relations (IGR) has gone largely unexamined. Local officials' decisions to engage in inter-local collaboration versus jurisdiction-specific production are analyzed in this project. This research uses a typological theory constructed with reference to the theoretical insights of existing research. I argue officials' decisions to engage in inter-local collaboration are shaped by a) the policy stimulus that places collaborative options on the public agenda, b) perceptions of potential intergovernmental partners, and c) perceptions of the terms of collaboration.

## A Typological Theory

The formation of inter-local agreements has been conceptualized largely as an administrative activity (Frederickson 1999; Thurmaier and Wood 2002; Visser 2002). The social networks formed by professional administrators are posited to foster norms of cooperation among local governments in a metropolitan community. Prior research suggests involvement in local intergovernmental networks is not limited to administrative officials (Wright 1973). Because elected officials' involvement in the mission, policy, administration and management of a local government may vary across communities (Svara 1985), and because legislative bodies must often vote to approve collaborative ventures among local governments, greater attention must be given to elected officials' perspectives on intergovernmental relations. I posit their decisions to support inter-local collaboration are shaped by three dimensions:

- 1) Policy Stimuli - Before a collaborative solution to an intergovernmental problem is considered, a stimulus must define the local public service problem in an intergovernmental context. A collaborative stimulus may come about through the work of a policy entrepreneur, influence from another level of government, natural disaster, or other sources (Cigler 1999; Cobb and Elder 1972; Schneider, Teske, and Mintrom 1995; Sheingate 2003).
- 2) Perceptions of Intergovernmental Partners - Local officials may develop social networks that facilitate intergovernmental collaboration (Frederickson 1999; Thurmaier and Wood 2002); however, officials may also hold long-term animosities or different conceptions of the public good that inhibit positive intergovernmental relations (Anderson 1960). While trust is not a necessary precondition for cooperation (Cook, Hardin, and Levi 2005), face to face interaction and reciprocity may facilitate cooperation (Axelrod 1984; Ostrom, Gardner, and Walker 1994).

- 3) Perceptions of the Terms of Collaboration – Officials evaluate how the terms of collaboration will cost or benefit their jurisdiction. Officials may be concerned with terms such as decision-making power, finance, and service quality (Hirst 2000; Kickert and Koppenjan 1997; Miller 1981).

These three causal factors may combine in different conjunctions to result in decisions to collaborate or decisions to provide a service alone within a single jurisdiction. I organize these conjunctions as a typological theory of local intergovernmental decisions and use data from in-depth interviews to evaluate the necessary and sufficient causal conditions for collaboration (Braumoeller and Goertz 2003; George and Bennett 2005; Ragin 2000).

## Inter-Local Collaboration Decision Typology

		Weak Stimulus		Strong Stimulus	
		Negative Terms	Positive Terms	Negative Terms	Positive Terms
Perceptions of Partners	Positive	Collaboration Unlikely (A)	Collaboration Unlikely (C)	Collaboration Possible (E)	Collaboration Very Likely (G)
	Negative	Collaboration Very Unlikely (B)	Collaboration Unlikely (D)	Collaboration Unlikely (F)	Collaboration Possible (H)

## Data & Methods

Between June and December, 2005, fifty interviews were conducted with a random sample of local elected officials in the state of Michigan. I began with a list of officials from the Michigan Municipal League's (MML) January 2005 *Directory of Michigan Municipal Officials*. The list is stratified into three categories: small jurisdictions (2,500 through 9,999), medium jurisdictions (10,000 through 99,999), and large jurisdictions (100,000 through 500,000). A random sample was taken from each population category and officials were contacted through a letter and follow-up phone call to their city office. With fifty final respondents, a response rate of 33.78 percent was obtained. The final sample includes 24 interviews with elected officials from small communities, 21 from medium communities, and 5 from large cities. The interview data has been coded and is used to evaluate the typology using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) (Ragin 1987; Ragin 2003) and through the evaluation of descriptive evidence from the in-depth interviews. This poster presents descriptive examples of conjunctive causation for each cell of the typology. The handout accompanying this poster provides the QCA results for collaboration in police patrol services.

## Evidence

**PROPOSITION A:** *Collaborative IGR will not occur with a weak collaborative stimulus, low perceived value, and positive perceptions of potential partners.*

In a community with several collaborative intergovernmental ventures, police service is not an area in which the city collaborates. Perceptions of neighbors are positive, but a council member explains that there is little value in collaboration. When asked if he is satisfied with the city's police service, the council member explains: "I would have to say yes but that is a very expensive endeavor as you well know... I am satisfied but it is expensive... At this point we think that the cost is worth the benefit

## Evidence (cont'd)

we get out of it and the major reason I guess, I don't know for fact that people contract out, is they get, they cut expenses quite a bit. But I've heard that and heard that works for them, but I think we have police service that I don't want to compromise in any way and my suspicion is that they're contracting out with compromise." In the presence of a positively evaluated police department and a perception that high quality is best maintained through internal production, police service is internally produced. The lack of a collaborative stimulus and the perception of negative terms keep collaboration from consideration.

**PROPOSITION B:** *Collaborative IGR will not occur if elected officials perceive the value of collaboration to be low, lack a strong collaborative stimulus and hold negative perceptions of potential intergovernmental partners.*

"Do we partner with [the county]? Do we partner with the [neighboring city]? A bunch of those have their own problems. Do we partner with suburban partners? You know, I can't support regionalizing those sorts of services-police services-unless I can go and tell people that they are going to get a better level of service. And I think the trend is to partner and then reduce because the accountability is less." This council member perceives potential partners negatively, and he is skeptical about the terms of collaboration.

**PROPOSITION C:** *Collaborative IGR will not occur with a weak collaborative stimulus, even if the value of collaboration is perceived to be high and potential intergovernmental partners are viewed positively.*

Cell "C" in the typology might be a spring board for collaboration if a stimulus takes root. A city official makes this possibility clear when she explains that neighboring townships have been unhappy with the cost structure that the county sheriff's department has used to charge the city's neighboring townships for additional services. She suggests that in the future the townships might turn to the city for police services because the city is geographically proximal, and the city police force might provide a higher level of service at a better cost than the county sheriff's department. The council member notes this might benefit the city as well: "I think that if we found that through contracting with the townships we could have more money to hire more police and all of us could get more service that would be better." A stimulus would make possible a more complete assessment of potential terms for collaboration.

**PROPOSITION D:** *Collaborative IGR will not occur if elected officials perceive value in collaboration but lack a strong collaborative stimulus and hold negative perceptions of potential intergovernmental partners.*

A council member expresses concerns about the expenses associated with policing in his city, particularly the cost of overtime for patrol officers. Theoretically, the city might gain additional resources by contracting out patrol services to smaller neighboring cities, but such an idea appears never to have been considered. Further, the council member expressed a common concern articulated by Michigan city council members-taxes paid to the county government support police patrol through the County Sheriff's Department for non-incorporated territories, but not existing incorporated cities. "...a lot of the northern cities do not have their own police departments so they are using county officers which we pay for but we don't get our fair share in response to that. Sometimes I gripe about and I don't think it's fair. Other times I realize they have growing problems and they need that little boost to get them over the hump so I don't gripe too loud. I'd like to see more involvement by the county here." The city might, in theory, experience cost savings by eliminating their police department and contracting with the county Sheriff's Department as well. While potential cost savings are possible through contracting out the city's services or contracting with the county for service, the council-member's perceptions of the importance of police services in the community may cause him to reduce the perceived value of collaborative service provision. He explains, "We are very proud of the service we offer because if a community is safe in its surroundings, the safety has to be satisfied first before any functions can go on in the community. I'm a strong advocate of a strong police and fire department."

**PROPOSITION E:** *Collaborative IGR is possible when the value of collaboration is perceived to be low if a strong collaborative stimulus is present and perceptions of potential intergovernmental partners are positive.*

Even when clear financial benefits are not evident from an inter-local contract, council members still find clear rationale for continuing collaborative agreements. A city council member who recently supported the renewal of a fire service contract to a neighboring township at first said "there are none," when asked about the benefits that flow to the city from the agreement. But why would a collaborative agreement sustain itself if no benefit came to the city? When I asked "why does the city continue the relationship?" the council member offered an explanation that more clearly reveals her perceptions of the benefits: "Our firefighters like it. It gives them more experience. Because we're limited, we only have six miles here in the city and so this gives them additional coverage that will give them experience and run time. And it's nice to cover them because they don't have that service at all out there. See they run on one mill and every time that they've tried to bring something in, I think that the residents fight it." The council member justifies the arrangement by pointing to the township's need, but admits to some level of experiential benefit for the city as well.

**PROPOSITION F:** *Collaborative IGR will not occur in the presence of a strong collaborative stimulus if the value of collaboration is perceived as low and if perceptions of intergovernmental partners are negative.*

A collaborative agreement that has ended may result in an inability of communities to work together again in that policy area. In a city that works with a neighboring township on library and water services, a shared police department was abandoned. The city council member had positive things to say about township officials when discussing most policy areas, but hinted at challenges in policing. He explains: "Probably about six or seven years ago the city...abandoned it's police department and purchased services from the township and the township provided them for several years, five or six years... I think when the city went to them they saw it as a way of providing services cheaper, and then as time went by, I think they felt they could provide them cheaper again by themselves, or they weren't perfectly satisfied with the services. Not that the services were deficient but they weren't as personal as they are when you have your own department. So the city restarted up it's own police department again. The experience embittered so many people. It would be difficult getting the two groups back together again." Reflecting on the costs of operating the police department now, the council member explains, "yes, it's an expensive function... But police service is one of the municipality's most expensive services it provides; yet, I've always felt that a town without a police department isn't really a town. It's the idea that you've got those people going up and down and looking after them. Patrolling is important where people live together in high density... You need police services."

**PROPOSITION G:** *Collaborative IGR will be very likely to occur if a strong collaborative stimulus exists, and if elected officials perceive value in collaboration and hold positive perceptions of potential intergovernmental partners.*

When a collaborative stimulus, positive perceptions of partners, and positive terms of collaboration are found together, collaboration is very likely. One city's decision to contract-out police dispatch services exemplifies this conjunctive pattern. In this community, positive perceptions of intergovernmental partners are facilitated by a long-established partnership in public safety services. While the city had its own police force and dispatch center, a neighboring city was the contracting partner for fire and emergency medical response for almost thirty years. This relationship was evaluated positively by the council member. How did a police dispatch partnership come onto the agenda at this point in time, when the cities had not shared this service in their existing public safety relationship? The mayor explains the stimulus: "We had our own dispatch service and it was a practical matter for us as we began to

examine the continuing cost or rising cost of providing police services. The dispatch service was a tough one to maintain. It was a tough one to keep people in, to be able to fill in terms of positions, it was expensive. We had to duplicate a tremendous amount of equipment... and so as a consequence we began to look at alternatives for that. And [the neighboring city] was in the process of putting in a very sophisticated brand new dispatch center over there and advanced 911, all the bells and whistles that went with it and we had been on the same radio frequency with our police and their police for a long time anyway so it made some sense from our standpoint to look at that." We see interaction between the stimulus and the terms of collaboration. The city sought cost savings through contracting, stimulating interest in collaboration.

**PROPOSITION H:** *Collaborative IGR will be possible if elected officials hold negative perceptions of potential intergovernmental partners if a strong collaborative stimulus exists and if the value of collaboration is perceived to be high.*

The combination of positive terms and a stimulus for collaboration may be sufficient to overcome negative perceptions of intergovernmental partners. In other words, in local intergovernmental relations, there is some evidence for cooperative decisions similar to what Cook, Hardin and Levi (2005) call cooperation without trust. A city council member explains that as the city was developing a fire authority with neighboring townships, some townships were hesitant to join the collaborative effort. "Yes, history of animosity between them and the city and issues around annexation and I think just some petty political arguments that got in the way of looking at the long-term interest of their constituents. The other three townships didn't have those problems and they saw that yes, the city has 10,000 residents, a \$360 million tax base. [One] township has 25,000 residents, a \$3 billion tax base and they're buying services from us for \$75, \$80,000 a year...and we told them we can't continue it, so you need to be part of it. We need to be able to use your tax base to support it and they stepped forward and said yes, we understand we need to do that. We're beyond the infant stage. We're big boys now, we can pay our way but you have to give us the ability to tax." Even with the financial necessity, some townships were reluctant to participate. But, the councilor explains that constituent pressure (a collaborative stimuli) resulted in their participation: "No, they ended up participating because their constituents kicked their butts and said you get in there and you participate.... Their own citizens persuaded their board that they'd better be part of this."

## Implications

By thinking about decisions to engage in inter-local collaboration with a typological theory, we have the opportunity to examine cases on both ends of the dependent variable-communities engaged in collaboration and communities that have opted for within-jurisdiction production of the public service. This research demonstrates that the legislative decisions of city councils to engage in inter-local collaboration must be understood in the context of at least three bodies of research in public policy: policy agendas/stimuli, social networks, and the terms of service contracting. This poster presents descriptive evidence from research interviews with local elected officials. The accompanying hand-out provides further data and analysis using QCA. While the social network perspective on inter-local relations provides valuable insights on how local governments can engage in productive dialogue, this research suggests the agenda status of collaboration and assessment of the terms of collaboration (including the economics, authority distribution, and service quality) are important causal mechanisms for collaboration decisions.