

Chapter 18

Evaluating Local Partnership Incentive Policies: A Realist Approach

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ABSTRACT

Current research tells little about how to assess the public incentive policies designed to persuade local governments to set up partnerships. This first paper of ongoing research illustrates an evaluation method based on the ‘realist approach’, the tenets of which assign a key role to the context in which the mechanisms of a public programme work (or not). The evaluation framework is intended to be a tool to assist and inform future policymaking and practice. The paper provides a picture of the current scientific debate by exploring the relevant literature; outlines a research path aimed at building an empirically-based model for assessing public policies to promote and support local partnerships in the Italian Region of Sardinia; and indicates a possible context of use for the theory through an illustrative example.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence (indeed dominance) of joint initiatives to address multifaceted social problems is a widespread phenomenon (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007a, 2007b; Isett et al., 2011; O’Toole, 1993) that has received considerable attention in the

debate on Transformational government or T-Government (Irani et al., 2007; King & Cotterill, 2007; Klievink & Janssen, 2009; Brown & Parker, 2011; Weerakkody, Dwivedi, Dhillon, & Williams, 2007). At the local level, collaboration initiatives bring together two or more distinct public authorities to cooperate in achieving a common

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goal (e.g., to provide services) and as an alternative to traditional hierarchical governance (Kenis & Provan, 2009). When the area of collaboration is not only operational (e.g., limited to the delivery of services) but also encompasses policy formulation and planning, the joint action has more ambitious aims and objectives (i.e., “co-design”, in the words of Ranade & Hudson, 2003).

Most European countries have at some point put considerable political support behind the development of inter-municipal cooperation through the use of statutory obligations and financial incentives (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007b). The key advantages commonly attributed to collaboration initiatives include enhanced efficiency, the fostering of innovation and flexibility, and better service outcomes (Dawes & Préfontaine, 2003; May & Winter, 2007; Provan & Kenis, 2008). Finally, as part of a wider T-Government strategy, collaborative arrangements can more effectively meet the future challenges of reducing waste and inefficiency by reorganising or reusing back-end information systems, processes, facilities, maintenance contracts, and sharing investments (Becker, Niehaves, & Krause, 2009; Cabinet Office, 2009; Janssen, Joha, & Weerakkody, 2007; Kamal, Weerakkody, & Jones, 2009; Luna-Reyes, Gil-Garcia, & Cruz, 2007; Oliver, 1990; Weerakkody, Dhillon, Dwivedi, & Currie, 2008).

The presumed performance benefits of collaborative arrangements have attracted increased attention from policymakers and practitioners alike (Kenis & Provan, 2009). In tandem, the growing demand for public spending accountability raises questions as to whether and under what conditions these arrangements ‘are actually performing at a level that justifies the costs of collaboration’ (Kenis & Provan, 2009). Although many studies have assessed joint working in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, there has been far less interest in how incentive policies actually affect partnership performance, which is fairly surprising, given that the new managerial strategies tout performance evaluation as a guiding principle and that

in countries (like the UK) ‘partnership working has a long history in the public sector’ (Lamie & Ball, 2010, p. 109; ODPM, 2006). Moreover, the research has tended ‘to focus primarily on the outcome of an evaluation to the detriment of the mechanism and context aspects’ (Gill & Turbin, 1999, p. 180) and, thus, provides the rationale and motivations for this study.

This paper argues that the success of an evaluation effort largely depends on the evaluation design and, in particular, on the assumptions that underpin the design itself. In order to better understand why some collaborative arrangements perform well and others do not, or in what specific circumstances some publicly-funded partnerships develop or stagnate, it is necessary to find an approach that recognises the crucial role of the context. ‘Collaboration takes place in a specific context’ (Luna-Reyes et al., 2007, p. 810) and is shaped and reshaped in the course of everyday life according to the personal preferences or motivations of the public officials, the politicians and the local authority managers. In turn, personal preference ‘is mediated by organisational conditions’ (Brodin, 2011, p. i260). The paper suggests that the so-called ‘realist approach’ (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) with its emphasis on the context is useful to address the policy evaluation puzzle in multi-organisational settings.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the potential of the realist approach in the evaluation of incentive-based policies. To accomplish that, the paper illustrates a concrete experience of what is still a fledgling evaluation research project, in which the authors are directly involved. Specifically, the research team has been asked to develop an evidence-based framework for assessing public policies to promote and support inter-municipal partnerships in the Italian Region of Sardinia.

Thus, the main contribution of this paper is to extend our understanding of policy evaluation by applying the realist approach to the assessment of local government partnerships. As far as we are aware, this is the first attempt to apply such an

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