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**Small but beautifully far away –**  
Institutional Decentralization Policies as Multi-Level Governance Strategies

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**Abstract:**

The rearrangement of public functions in multi-level-systems is a central topic of inter-governmental relations. Thereby the decentralization of public functions has become a global trend in national public administration reform (Pollitt/Bouckaert 2004; Denters/Rose 2005; Deffigier 2007). National decentralization policies are often expected to impact upon both the efficiency and effectiveness of the fulfilment of public functions as well as on the democratic accountability of policymakers on the local level of government (Wollmann/Bouckaert 2006). Yet, no linear changes on all dimensions are to be expected. Using first empirical findings from an ongoing research project of the two German universities of Potsdam and Bochum which scrutinizes decentralizations to the local level of government in Germany, France and England, we try to give an answer to the following question: Which impact do national policies of the decentralization of public functions have on public policy implementation and what effects can be observed (Does decentralization make a difference?)?

The paper is divided into two parts: First, basic assumptions and the theoretical framework of our research are outlined. This includes a ‘mapping’ of the national decentralization strategies in the three cases under scrutiny and the sketch of a set of five dimensions of performance used to measure the impact of national decentralization policies. Second, leadoff results regarding motives, strategies and impacts of decentralization of state functions in the German case are presented. These first empirical results back the hypothesis that the impact of decentralization policies depends on the transferred tasks’ characteristics and the strategies applied.

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## 1. Introduction

The rearrangement of public functions in multi-level-systems is a central topic of inter-governmental relations. Thereby the decentralization of public functions is a global trend in national public administration reform (Pollitt/Bouckaert 2004; Denters/Rose 2005; Deffigier 2007). One frequent effect of this development is the split of policy formulation and policy implementation between levels of government. It is unclear yet which impact these decentralization policies have on public policy implementation and the performance of service delivery (*Does decentralization make a difference?*). To answer this question, an ongoing research project located at the two German universities of Potsdam and Bochum scrutinizes decentralization effects to the local level in Germany, France and England.<sup>1</sup>

In this contribution, we use first empirical findings from the mentioned project in order to deliver a preliminary answer to the exposed research question with specific regard to the German case in two policy domains. The paper is subdivided into two parts: First, basic assumptions and the theoretical framework of our research are outlined. This includes a ‘mapping’ of the national decentralization strategies in the three cases under scrutiny and a sketch of a set of five dimensions of performance used to measure the impact of national decentralization policies. Second, leadoff results regarding motives, strategies and effects of the decentralization of state functions (in the policy fields of *Pollution and Trade Control* including *Occupational Health and Safety*; and *Integration Services for the Disabled*) in the German case are presented.

## 2. Does decentralization make a difference?

### 2.1 A framework for analysis

Since the beginning of the 1990s, scholars in the fields of both comparative administrative science and comparative local government have been observing a global trend towards a decentralization of public functions and services from the state to the local levels of government (Pollitt/Bouckaert 2004; Denters/Rose 2005). In spite of the widespread research activities aiming at the comparative analysis of decentralization reforms in different Western European countries, the question of how decentralization and the restructuring of intergovernmental relations impact upon the performance of local governments still remains an underexposed topic.

In general, it is reasonable to assume that recent decentralization reforms in different Western nation states have been designed with the aim to arrive at an optimization of the states’ performance in multi-level governance and the fulfilment of public functions (Deffigier 2007: 79). In this context, decentralization policies are often expected to impact upon both the efficiency and effectiveness of the fulfilment of public functions as well as on the democratic accountability of policymakers on the local level (Wollmann/Bouckaert 2006). Yet, given the fact of normally diverting interests of policymakers on the different layers of government we don’t need to expect linear changes on all of the mentioned dimensions of administrative performance.

To develop an understanding of the actor-related consequences of decentralization measures to the local level of government demands for a definitional clarification of the concept of decentralization. We start from a rather wide, but not uncommon understanding of this concept. Following the literature on state and local government reform, we distinguish between three ideal-typical forms of decentralization, namely *political decentralization*, *administrative decentralization* and *administrative deconcentration* (Benz 2002: 209-214; Wollmann 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> The project „European Local Systems under Change: Institutional Decentralization and its Effects“ is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for the period 2007 – 2009. The research is jointly headed by Jörg Bogumil and Sabine Kuhlmann and conducted by the authors at the University of Potsdam (Renate Reiter) and the Ruhr-University Bochum (Falk Ebinger, Stephan Grohs). For an outline of the research project cf. Ebinger et al. 2007. Further information is available under <http://homepage.rub.de/Joerg.Bogumil/Lokalsysteme.htm>.

The first form of decentralization, *political decentralization*, can be defined as the transfer of state functions that have either been located on the central level of government (i.e. functions realised by a central government office) or on a sub-central level of state administration (i.e. functions realised by one of the states' deconcentrated authorities on the sub-national level) into the sphere of local government. Following the conventional understanding, political decentralization means that locally legitimised bodies become competent to decide autonomously on the planning, financing and administration of their newly acquired executive functions.

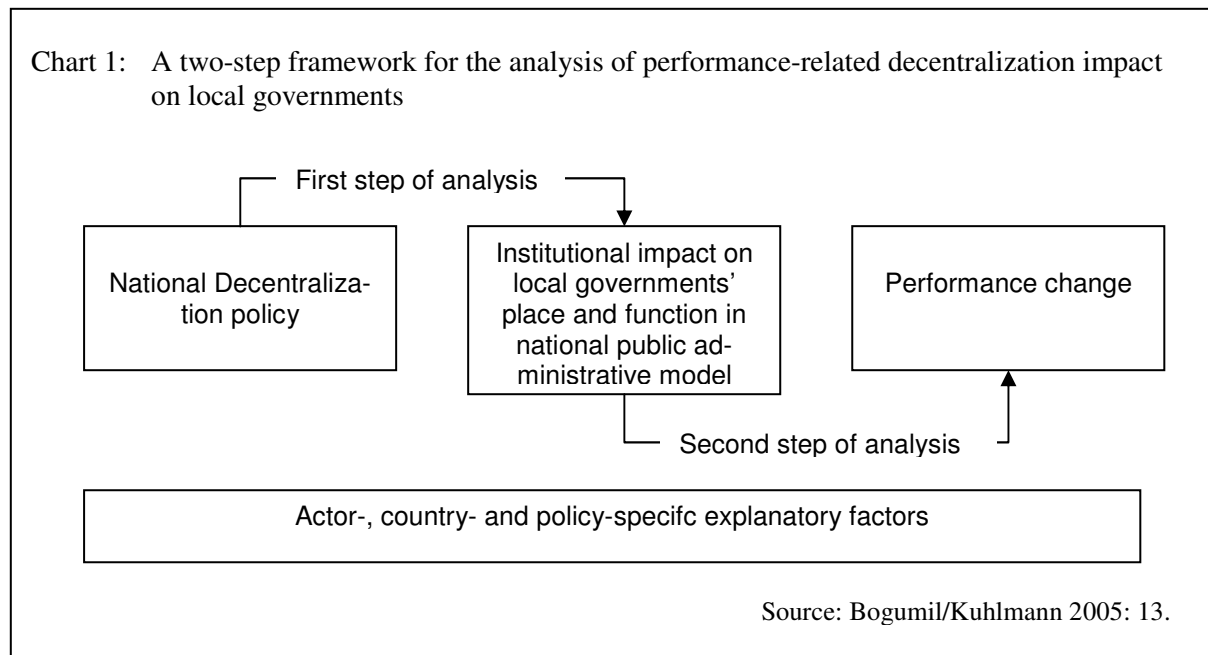
Compared to the rather far-reaching form of political decentralization, *administrative decentralization* marks a more moderate form of reordering intergovernmental relations. This form of state restructuring is defined as the concession of executive functions from the state to local administrative authorities without the assignment of locally elected bodies to decide autonomously on the local conditions of action. Local administration may decide on its own how to organize the fulfilment of the new functions. Yet, acting as agents of national governments or governmental offices local authorities remain at least formally under the states' full control not only of the legality but also of the functionality and the professional quality of the respective action (Wollmann 1997: 106).

Finally, *administrative deconcentration* is defined as the delegation of central state functions to administrative bodies which are located on the sub-central levels of government but which are part of the states' own administration. Again following the conventional understanding, we first subsume the 'classic' phenomenon of a delegation of central state functions to governmental bodies and services traditionally located on the sub-national level (examples are the French *services extérieurs* or the German *Untere Sonderbehörden*) to our definition of administrative deconcentration. We also add the phenomenon of an assignment of functions from national governments to so called Quangos (Quasi-non-governmental-Organizations, Skelcher 1998) – a kind of decentralization typical for state restructuring in the Anglo-Saxon countries – to our understanding of the term of administrative deconcentration, given the fact that the state in this case keeps its rights to a direct control of the decentral fulfilment of functions.

Our further argumentation is based on the premise that the performance of local government is a function of the specific organisational model underlying public administration and the intergovernmental setting in the respective state (Pollitt/Bouckaert 2004; Wollmann/Bouckaert 2006). We therefore presume that a shift in the organisation of public administration and the intergovernmental setting as instigated by national decentralization reforms should accordingly lead to a change in local governments' performance in different public policy fields. For a classification of public administrative and intergovernmental organisation in our three cases at the outset of the respective national decentralization reforms, we utilize Wollmanns' (2006) distinction between two ideal typical models of the inter-organisational and intergovernmental setting, the *multi purpose model* and the *single purpose model*.

According to Wollmann the primary criteria for the organisation of public administration and intergovernmental relations based on the multi purpose model is territoriality whereas it is functionality when based on the single purpose model. The '*multi purpose model* of local public administration' thus refers to the (ideal) organisational case whereby local governments are charged with several inter-related or unrelated purposes. Territorial government in this case is based on a multi-purposive or even universalistic functionality within a given, territorially defined jurisdiction. The '*single purpose model*' accordingly refers to the (ideal) organisational case whereby different types of administrative bodies are respectively charged with one main purpose (Wollmann/Bouckaert 2006: 12-14; Wollmann 2006).

In the light of these basic reflections, we adopt the following two-step framework for our analysis (chart 1):



In what follows, before presenting empirical data from the German case, we first assess the institutional impact of national decentralization reforms on the national model of public administrative organization in the three cases under scrutiny by ‘mapping’ the respective national decentralization strategies. In this context, we put the emphasis on the change of local governments’ place and function within each national model since the beginning of the 1980s.

## 2.2 Institutional decentralization reforms in France, England and Germany: major developments and basic hypothesis

### 2.2.1 France

Due to its unitary character and *Napoleonic* state tradition (Rouban 2008; Peters 2008), the French state has traditionally been depicted as an example for a highly centralised model of public administrative organisation with local authorities on the different levels of sub-national government (until 1982: municipalities/communes; departments) being in a rather ‘weak’ position (Hoffmann-Martinot 2006: 231f.; Wollmann 2006: 15f.). This situation resulted from the presence of the states’ own administrative bodies on the ground. The states’ dominance was only “tamed” (Mabileau 1996: 25) by the traditionally established practice of an accumulation of offices (*cumul de mandats*) which enabled locally elected office holders (*notables*), especially the mayors, to gain political influence on the national level of government through adding a national mandate to their local one.

Since the launch of decentralization reforms in 1982, this state-controlled, basically single purposive setting of territorial government underwent a two-step change (*acte I* of decentralization since 1982; *acte II* since 2003) towards a more locally-controlled, more multi-purposive form of territorial government (Le Lidec 2007; Kuhlmann 2007). Decentralization started in 1982 with the abolishment of the prefects’ right to *tutelle* and the admission of the regions as new territorial authorities in their own right. Local authorities were assigned singular ‘blocs’ of different, mostly compatible functions<sup>2</sup> and the states’ deconcentrated administrative bodies as well as the prefecture not only saw a reform of their functional profiles but also the strengthening of their coordinative functions and capacities.

During the second round of decentralization (*acte II*) the original idea of both upholding the single purposive nature of French territorial government and at the same time creating a decentralized state

<sup>2</sup> Roughly the distribution of functions between the different types of local authorities looks as follows. Municipalities: local planning, local infrastructure; departements: social policy functions; regions: regional planning, economic policy functions.

could not longer prevail. Since central government had systematically used the accordance of a multi-purposive spectre of functions to the different inter-communal authorities (*établissements publics de coopération intercommunale, EPCI*)<sup>3</sup>, the basically single purposive administrative and intergovernmental setting of the French state is complemented more and more by multi purposive forms of territorial government (Thoenig 2005). As has been the case already in 1982/83, it is again the department which, in 2003, takes most profit from the decentralization of functions, namely in the field of social policy. At the actual stage and namely contrasting the effects of state reform in the English case, the administrative and intergovernmental settings of the French state are thus characterized by the coexistence of the mostly locally-run single purposive form of territorial government and an intercommunally-run, multi-purposive form of territorial government that gains in prominence (Borraz/Le Galès: 2005). All in all, the organization of multi-level governance in the French case has, since 1982, become more complex and blurred. It is as well marked by a strengthened autonomy of local governments as well as by a high degree of vertical integration between levels of government in different functional fields, taking on a specific form of policy interweavement *à la française*.

### 2.2.2 England

England's reform record differs substantially from the Continental European countries regarding the central-local-nexus. Against the decentralisation trend the ongoing weakening of local governments' functional profile as well as a tightening of supervision, regulation and intervention by the central government can be observed since the early 1980s. The formerly strong and multifunctional localities in England were object of an obviously anti-localist policy of the conservative governments of Thatcher and Major imposing financial constraints on local governments through the capping of local rates and finally replacing them first by the poll tax and subsequently by the so called Council tax. Local governments were considerably weakened in their functional profile by compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) which exposed traditional local tasks to market forces. Equally menacing to local government was the option granted to certain institutions to opt out of local control into quasi-autonomous bodies (or "Quangos") financially dependent on the central government (e.g. grant maintained schools, Housing Associations etc). Additionally in certain fields "agencies" as deconcentrated parts of central government's administrative apparatus were installed at the local level displacing the traditional local government. Finally the conservative government imposed a tight control regime on the local governments by audits and performance targets (cf. Stoker 2004; Wilson/Game 2006). The change in government to New Labour did not change these policies in their substance, but added certain new features which can be subsumed under the headers of *democratic renewal*, *joint up governance* and *performance management* (cf. Stoker 2004; Wilson/Game 2006).

Recapitulating the English case, we can – in contrast to the development in Continental European countries – observe a general centralising trend since the 1980s. We can identify a trajectory from a strong multi-purpose-model to a more and more single-purpose model. Similar to the Thatcher era, New Labour treats local governments as one "partner" amongst others in local service delivery which may create the impression of a retrenchment from centralization. Yet, regarding the German case, the persistence of 'English exception' becomes clear.

### 2.2.3 Germany

Going back in to history, far reaching rights regarding local self-government were already formally granted within certain German territories, following the Prussian example of 1808. Before being cut back in the aftermath of the 1848/1849 revolt, the concept had been introduced throughout many other German territories. This multi-functional profile was re-established and constitutionally guaranteed after the Second World War when territorial and administrative structures were prepared for an endur-

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<sup>3</sup> Three types of EPCI have been created or confirmed by the law and can voluntarily be established by cooperating communes and municipalities, depending on the bigness of the newly erected territorial unit: *communautés urbaines* (already existent before 1999) counting 500.000 inhabitants and more, *communautés d'agglomération* (new) counting between 50.000 and 500.000 inhabitants and *communautés de communes* (already existent before 1999) with up to 50.000 inhabitants.

ing democratic future. The politically and functionally strong local level is since then formally designed as the residual administrative level delivering all necessities to local citizens otherwise not catered for. A “continental” feature also present in the German local administration is the entanglement of state and local level in a so called “integration model” (Wollmann 1999). Local functions and tasks must be split in those which can be derived from the autonomous rights granted to the local level and those duties delegated to them merely for execution by the federation and the state (*Länder*).

Germany is currently divided into 429 counties (*Kreise*) constituting the higher level of a two-stage local system. Some 313 are rural counties (*Landkreise*) and 116 independent cities (*Stadtkreise*). The lower level of local administration is made up by the cities and communities (*Städte* and *Gemeinden*) belonging to a rural county whose administration is handling most of the more complex responsibilities. Despite the occasional delegation of single tasks to the local level the overall territorial and functional pattern remained constant since the 1970s. Only the consolidation of the partly inadequate structures established in the East-German states after the German unification in 1990 brought some new approaches and hence expanded responsibilities to the local level. This situation changed fundamentally with the beginning of the new millennium. Faced with immense financial pressures the states of Baden-Württemberg and Lower Saxony implemented far reaching administrative reforms. In both states hundreds of state agencies were reorganised or dissolved entirely. One trait of these reforms was the delegation of considerable packages of administrative responsibilities on the local level while maintaining political decision-making and control in the hands of the state. The intention behind this step was to empower the municipalities and reduce costs by cutting red tape – simply by pulling tasks out of the highly specialised sectoral state administration onto the less differentiated and politically more responsive local level. A wave of reforms imitating this approach actually roles over Germany as it proved to be at least politically successful.

In sum it can be diagnosed that the role and character of the local government level in nearly all German states is changing currently at breathtaking speed. However, that next to all tasks transferred were assigned to the county level for compulsory execution. In contrast the dependent cities and municipalities did not benefit from any upvaluation and local or county councils are still excluded from decision-making. As a consequence, this reassessment of the local administration’s role materializes as administrative decentralization without formal political empowerment.

On the basis of our general observations concerning the institutional effects of decentralization reforms in France, England and Germany, we can now come back to our central research interest, i.e. the performance effects of decentralization.

#### 2.2.4 Hypotheses

As has been outlined above, it is assumed that the structure of government and the assignment of tasks influence administrative performance. Hence changes in structures and responsibilities are supposed to have an immediate impact on the exercise of functions. The mechanisms which supposedly lie behind this causal relation have to be explicated yet. Referring to the already introduced two ideal types of public service organization a rough sketch of the content of this black box can be drawn: If a strong *multi-purpose local government* is seen as one pole on the continuum of possible institutional solutions, the *single purpose state administration* would be the other. Scholars in the field share rather consistent assumption concerning the attributes of these two ideal types. Thus a set of basic hypotheses about the effects of organisational arrangements can be derived: It is presumed that multi-purpose local responsibility increases performance in the dimensions of democratic control, accountability and the possibilities for cross-sectoral coordination (Wagener 1979; Wollmann 1997, 2004, 2008; Bogumil/Kuhlmann 2005; Banner 2005). Simultaneously efficiency and effectiveness records might be reduced as economies of scale and scope decrease and political interference in administrative decision making rises. Vice versa single purpose state administration is seen as highly efficient and effec-

tive however associated with weak records on the dimensions of democratic control and horizontal coordination (Bogumil/Reichard/Siebart 2004; Bauer et al. 2007; Ebinger/Bogumil 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Drawing on the empirical knowledge, these basic hypotheses for the three countries under comparison can be read in the following way: In France, political decentralization in conjunction with inter-communalisation should make cross-policy coordination more viable and should presumably strengthen accountability for policy outcomes. Yet, as decentralization, inter-communalisation, and administrative deconcentration are set in place simultaneously, these effects could to some extent be limited. Since actor relations in the local arena get increasingly more complex and coordination processes are complicated, transaction costs and the costs of coordination and negotiation become high and the effectiveness and efficiency of the overall system could be levelled out by these aspects (Kuhlmann 2007).

In England, the sectoralisation and fragmentation of administration is growing with the advance of local, monofunctional agencies and quangos. If the hypotheses' assumptions are correct this is likely to do considerable damage to inter-sectoral coordination. While functional performance might improve in individual sectors, transparency of decision-making processes, accountability and control should diminish.

In Germany, the modification of administrative structures and functional reforms in the German *Länder* supposedly strengthen the territorial organisation model and lead to even more comprehensive responsibilities on the local level. Consequently, mutually disruptive functions of state and local entities could be harmonised and cross-sectoral services become better integrated. However it is to be expected that local democratic accountability will stay limited for two reasons. First, many of the new responsibilities are complex administrative tasks outside the daily necessities of citizens – as e.g. complex long-term planning routines related to infrastructure maintenance or environment protection and land use. Thus scrutiny by citizens and resulting democratic control can not be exerted in a meaningful way. Secondly competencies of local councils are limited as functions are mostly transferred in the form of an administrative decentralisation. According to the hypotheses it is to be expected that the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of individual functions is inadequate and will diminish further. This is due to the effect of the reduced leverage of sectoral interests in multi-functional entities, as well as the obvious priority given to consolidating local government budgets.

Keeping our performance interest in mind, we intend to test these hypotheses in the course of our project. In what follows, we will first explain our dimensions and indicators for the measurement of local government performance in the three cases under scrutiny and then present first empirical evidence from the German.

### 2.3 Decentralization-related performance effects on local government: Dimensions and indicators for the measurement of local government performance

How can the theoretically deduced assumptions on the effects of institutional policies on the performance of local governments be approached in empirical research? In a first step we assess the different dimensions regarding the performance of local systems. The evaluation of public-sector-reforms faces numerous methodological and conceptual difficulties. One problem is that the performance of public institutions is influenced by numerous intervening factors. Consequently, it is often not possible to clearly isolate the impact of institutional changes (cf. Pollitt/Bouckaert 2004: 103ff, Boyne et al. 2003: 13ff.). Secondly, we cannot draw on an elaborated set of indicators for surveying performance improvements, which is partly because the target dimensions of modernisation are only very generally formulated, often inconsistent and even contradictory (cf. Bogumil/Kuhlmann 2006) as well as changing over time. Following Pollitt/Bouckaert (2004: 6) administrative reforms usually serve multiple ends such as savings, improvement of quality, efficiency and effectiveness of the service or product

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<sup>4</sup> Benz (2002) outlines differences between regulative, reallocative and productive administrative tasks. Picking up that argument these differences have to be considered in the further research which might contribute to differentiate the presented hypotheses.

delivery. Moreover intermediate ends as improvement of political steering capacity or administrative independence as well as pure symbolic benefits might be furthered. Additionally, the evaluation and the weighting of individual dimensions vary depending on the perspective and institutional affiliation of various stakeholder groups (cf. Boyne et al. 2003: 14, Enticott 2004).<sup>5</sup>

This makes it necessary to develop a multidimensional framework which tries to cover the constitutive dimensions of performance and is oriented on the scientific discussion as well as is apt to reflect the multiple perspectives on the issues dealt with. For the deduction of these performance dimensions we are geared to the distinction of the single- and multipurpose distinction outlined out above (cf. Wollmann 2004; Benz 2002) as well as to the discussion on performance-indicators for public sector-reforms (cf. Pollitt/Bouckaert 2004: 103-142; Bogumil/Kuhlmann 2006).

The five distinct performance dimensions underlying our measurement of performance cover as well procedural (coordination; democratic control/accountability) as well as output-oriented (efficiency; effectiveness) aspects of local government performance and, last but not least a more general interest in the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the fulfilment of public functions. As far as the procedural aspects are concerned, we are interested both in decision-making procedures and in the coordination-capabilities on the vertical dimension between local administrative bodies and the central state as on the horizontal dimension between different administrative bodies on the local level. For the analyses of these two dimensions we can draw on research strategies developed in implementation research. It comprises case studies in which real processes of interaction and communication will be scrutinized. For the analyses of the output-oriented dimensions we draw on the approaches used in evaluation research and mostly applied to the evaluation of public management reforms (cf. Pollitt/Bouckaert 2004; Bogumil et al. 2007; Kuhlmann et al. 2008). We distinguish between an input-dimension which comprises changes in the charges of resources (personnel, finance, and time) and an output-dimension (number of treated cases; duration of case-treatment, effectiveness and quality of the services). Finally, we focus on the changes of the heterogeneity in service delivery between different local entities. Chart 2 as well contains several indicators for the measurement of changes on these dimensions. Besides available quantitative data we also draw on case studies and on the assessments of the interviewed actors.

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<sup>5</sup> For example *effectiveness* is on a first stage described as “the achievement of predefined goals”, the underlying problem becomes obvious. Which goals a public administration – and especially a local public administration – should pursue and should hence be measured against? Local governments are confronted regularly with the discrepancy of rather abstract formal laws or standards defined on a higher national level and with local interests finally articulated by local politicians. Especially the overarching goals stated in national laws would regularly require the administration to follow the advancing professional standards in the different fields such as health-care, social services or environmental protection. As detailed professional standards enforce costly measures and limit the discretion of politicians in decision-making they pose a potential thread for the interests of these local actors. It becomes obvious that two definitions of effectiveness – an often implicit political and a rather abstract professional – have to be considered. Both perspectives tend to negate external effects related to their point of view: professional administration in one policy field often ignores the financial effects of its decisions while politicians at times deny the sense behind professionally set standards. Objective effectiveness should be found somewhere in between this two extremes.

Chart 2: Dimensions and indicators for the measurement of local government performance consecutive to national decentralization reforms

| Dimensions of Performance                              | Performance indicators in different dimensions  |
|--|---|
| Horizontal and vertical coordination                   | Institutional integration in the forms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>; Issue- and problem-oriented coordination within local administration (informal)?</li> <li>; Regular, formalised meetings/rounds for internal coordination?</li> <li>; Creation of new administrative services/bodies in charge of the coordination task?</li> </ul> Inter-communal coordination: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>; Change in intensity in issue-/problem-oriented inter-comm. coordination?</li> </ul> Vertical coordination |
| Democratic control of decision making / accountability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>; Local council in charge of decision making and political control of implementation of the new competence?</li> <li>; Integration of user groups/organised interests into local decision making?</li> <li>; Partizipation of citizens?</li> <li>; Transparency of Decisionmaking</li> <li>; Responsiveness</li> </ul>   |
| Efficiency   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>; Changes in 'resource-input' (financial costs and personal)?</li> <li>; Changes in administrative output ('rate of public service production': number of treated cases; duration of case-treatment)</li> <li>; Ratio input-output</li> </ul>  |
| Effectiveness  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>; Legal quality, formal correctness of public service production</li> <li>; Professional quality of public service production</li> <li>; Proximity to citizens: spatial closeness of administration, electronic accessibility of administration</li> <li>; Cutback of vertical policy-merge?</li> <li>; Improvement of local capacity to decide and act autonomously</li> </ul>  |
| Heterogeneity in local service delivery                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>; Amplification of 'unequal' service fulfilment in an inter-communal perspective?</li> </ul>   |

For "testing" the applicability of these heuristics, we started with secondary analyses of decentralization-effects in different policy-fields in the three countries. Rationale for the selection of different policy-fields was their relevance regarding changes in central-local relations: Each field in each country stands for "paradigmatic" shifts between the central and local levels of government. In the course of our project we intend to expand our analysis to further and also to corresponding fields in the different countries.

### 3. First results

Due to the federalist structure and the described "wave" of administrative reforms including administrative decentralizations, Germany could be described as the coming Eldorado for comparative research. As most of the reform ventures are still rather recent or not even fully implemented yet, only a few states currently qualify for evaluative studies. In this showcase the effects of administrative decentralization in Baden-Württemberg shall be outlined briefly. As noted above, the state of Baden-Württemberg was one of the forerunners and "inventors" of the latest reform model pressing ahead a comprehensive reshuffling of its public service in 2005 (cf. Bogumil/Ebinger 2005; Bogumil/Ebinger 2008). While no political decentralization was undertaken, one of the main characteristics of the reform was a massive increase of the counties' administrative responsibilities. The number of employees rose on average about 40 to 50%. Two of the many administrative spheres affected by this measure were the environmental policy regime, in particular the field of *pollution and trade control* including *occupational health and safety* for the majority of enterprises and a social policy subsection dealing with *integration services* for the disabled.

The selection of these policy fields as case studies has several virtues: Analyzing the effects of decentralization of two policy fields in one state effectively facilitates the control of intervening variables. Furthermore, both sets of tasks can be described as comparable concerning their political importance, e.g. related costs and (regulative) impact. In addition, potential differences between regulative and distributive policies can be scrutinized. Finally, the chosen policy fields differ in the decentralizations' quality. *Pollution and trade control* is a typical case of administrative decentralization with ongoing state supervision while *integration services* are politically decentralized responsibilities only transferred from a centralized *communal* administrative body to the counties. This difference appears important at a first glance. However due to dense federal regulation in both policies no significant differences in the freedom of choice of local authorities should be observed.

The two policy fields hold the following attributes: *Pollution and trade control policy* can be described as a highly conflictual field. It affects thousands of companies both in daily production and labour security as well as in the course of any expansion of operations. Unlike to any "normal" state activity no consistent group of stakeholders reaps specific profit from tough environmental regulation and monitoring. On the contrary, by allegedly limiting discretion and increasing costs of entrepreneurs, most environmental protection policies are highly unpopular with addressees and, especially in the light of economic crisis, pose a target for political populism. *Integration services* for the disabled are an equally heavy weight on the political agenda as it burdens the local bill in Baden-Württemberg with about 1.1 billion euros p.a. whilst calling strong interest groups on alert as activists for the opportunities of disabled citizens and manifold business interest act in concert.

A first set of interviews on the immediate effects of decentralization in these two policy fields was recently conducted in one of the biggest and most densely populated counties (> 500.000 inhabitants) of the Land Baden-Württemberg. As the county under scrutiny is heavily industrialized and blessed with a thriving economy, fiscal pressures are far less burdensome here than in most other counties of the Land. This situation brings about a strong institutionalization on the county level whose office disposes of more than 1.500 employees and significant resources. The cases presented here are hence based in one of the most capable administrative counties, a fact one has to keep in mind when generalizing any of the findings. The inquiry was carried out along the five distinct performance dimensions described above – coordination; democratic control/accountability; efficiency; effectiveness and homogeneity of the fulfilment of public functions. In the following, encountered results are presented. To facilitate comparison the effects in the two policy fields are set aside in each of the five dimensions:

### 3.1 Horizontal and vertical coordination

As described above this first dimension is supposed to capture changes coming along with decentralization in in-house as well as for horizontal and vertical coordination in both policy fields. In both cases analysed here, the need for coordination has changed fundamentally in all respects. In both cases, administrative actors judge in-house coordination to have become much faster and better as an effect of decentralization, as most functions are now united under one umbrella in the County Office.

Concerning *Integration Services* the functional move from the former two state-wide operating centralized offices into the counties allowed for the first time close contact to all other social services and thus furthered the comprehensive implementation of a case-management approach. Interfaces with school authority, public health department or youth welfare office are reported to have become smoother as face to face contact effectively helps to reduce and solve conflicts. Likewise the case managers' knowledge and contact to the local service providers have improved. This is considered an indispensable feature for successful case management. The need for horizontal coordination increased dramatically with decentralization. As reactions to legal changes or newly arising questions have to be taken in the counties without ex-ante coordination, counties try to harmonize their decisions as fast as possible via meeting rounds on all administrative levels concerned. Furthermore, non-binding standard guidelines are developed in a joint working-group. The central facility maintained by the local level, the *Kommunalverband Jugend und Soziales (KVJS)*, provides professional assessment of the needs of disabled persons. Contacts between the counties and the KVJS are reported to be very intensive and

fruitful as employees on both levels still share a common background. In sum, decentralization can be described as a positive sum game concerning coordination.

For the county's department for *pollution and trade control* decentralization facilitated everyday coordination in much the same way. The department cooperates closely with the adjoining departments for *traffic and infrastructures, nature conservation, agriculture, spatial planning and water pollution control*. Despite substantial improvements in in-house coordination, employees perceive potential for the further improvement of processes and routines. Thus, the full advantages of decentralization and bundling of functions were not reaped so far. With decentralization an increased necessity for horizontal coordination and communication between the 44 counties' pollution and trade control administrations arouse. One effect of this development has been an increase in the need for permanent formal and informal contacts, whereby case managers get expertise beyond day to day routines. As the important informal networks are build on personal contacts, changes in personnel are a major thread for executive quality. Due to the simple lack of capacities counties with weak personal resources run even the risk of dropping out of formal networks. As opposed to horizontal coordination, vertical relations between the counties and the state's regional supervisory authority, the *Regierungspräsidium*, are reported to be generally good. Yet, the demarcation of responsibilities between the two levels seems to bear potential conflicts. As the decision about local or state responsibility solely depends on production levels or factory size, interferences and redundancies are frequent.

### 3.2 Democratic control of decision making / accountability

As described above this second dimension is supposed to capture effects of decentralizations on the possibility of local councils, interest groups and citizens to participate, steer and control the public administration.

For the first two case studies in Baden-Württemberg this dimension proved to be an elusive subject with little tangible moulding. The chief administrative officer of a county is only indirectly elected by the county council. Therefore, popular pressure mostly reflects (opposed) local interests of particular municipalities rather than party politics. Additionally, the functions under scrutiny in both policy fields can be described as specialized routine tasks which normally generate only little advertency amongst the general public. Against this background, deviating effects could be observed:

In the field of *integration services for the disabled*, municipalities' main concern as well before as after the relocation of functions is to control the financial burden apportioned within the local level.<sup>6</sup> Individual cases do not become subject to any kind of political intervention. Concerning financial questions, the county administration seems to perform well; no political debates on organizational questions are reported. Only in the seldom event of discussions about care facility relocations local interest become alive and exert pressure on the county administration. Representation of disabled citizens in local advisory bodies is reported to be more effective as immediate contacts to the responsible administration are now possible. In total it can be concluded that due to the nature of the policy – the strong legal binding and the high professionalism within *Integration Services* – no significant change in democratic control has taken place.

As far as the field of *pollution and trade control* is concerned, starting conditions are different: A regulative policy is observed, networks between businesses, investors or citizens on the one hand and local politicians on the other hand are dense and (some) individual cases become an issue for political debate. No matter if the licensing of facilities, occupational health and safety questions or individual complaints are concerned, district employees report about an immanent conflict between regulative duties and the facilitation of business development. This tension is becoming pronounced when facilities operated by municipalities or the county itself are concerned. Even if the specialists' decisions are respected, requirements in pollution and trade control issues are eyed with suspicion from county chief executives. In this respect the notion "democratic control" is becoming rephrased in a rather questionable way and decentralization entailed a perceptible change in the execution of pollution and trade

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<sup>6</sup> The counties' budget is primarily financed by a push across allocation shared by the counties' municipalities.

control. It has to be noted that this rather critical vision from within the administration is based on individual cases which “went wrong” and conflicts or interventions are still a rare exceptions.

### 3.3 Efficiency

On this dimension changes in costs, production quantities and the input-output ration related to the decentralization of responsibilities are captured.

As *integration services for the disabled* were always a communal responsibility, decentralization from the central to the county level did not entail any immediate change in funding. However the fraction of expanses shared Land-wide will decrease in a medium-range perspective, posing incentives for the counties to keep an eye on costs. The counties had to face rather different starting conditions as far as their resource capacities in the policy field were concerned. Qualified personnel devolved from the state level of government were distributed unevenly between counties. Furthermore it is reported that only a fraction of counties was able or willing to keep the IT-systems which had been used on the central level. Many departments had to restart from scratch. As described above, better coordination amongst the services involved on the local level have facilitated processes and hence helped to increased efficiency in the case observed. Simultaneously to the decentralization of tasks the complexity of individual cases has risen substantially as a case management policy has been implemented more widely. To master this challenge, the county decided to hire additional personnel. This step was facilitated by the expectation that effective case-management would reduce costs by increasing the share of ambulant services. As a general result, service quality as such increased while overall processing time did not change noticeable. A rather negative effect of decentralization results from the suppression of formerly centrally provided back-office services. All interviewees miss the legwork formerly done by the legal and policy departments, helping them to reach fundamental decisions on issues for which they rate themselves as unqualified.<sup>7</sup> In sum decentralization in the field of *integration services* has proved to be supportive to a reduction of costs and an increase in service quality while further improvements seem possible.

The field of *pollution and trade control* offers a typical example for a politically motivated administrative decentralization. In this field, municipalities in Baden-Württemberg pay their eagerness for additional competences with a 20 percent cut in states compensations. As the number of available personnel for reallocation to the county level was insufficient at the outset, in the case observed the necessary savings were made in one fell swoop right with the transfer of functions. Hence the newly acquired responsibilities had to be handled from one day to another with roughly 75 percent off the staff required before. While this ‘shock therapy’ was reportedly handled surprisingly well in the still sizable department observed here, many smaller counties had obviously a worse start and are plagued by persistent structural problems. Employees hint to the rapid decline in competences and resources which were observable from right after the reform up to today. To go by the general estimation of interviewees, competence deficits and resulting follow-up costs for public authorities, businesses and citizens can easily exceed the immediate savings accompanying decentralization. Despite short-term savings decentralization is seen below the line as a negative sum game, as savings on the county level would have been bought dearly with functional losses.

### 3.4 Effectiveness

This dimension covers all aspects of civil service quality including legal quality, professionalism and citizen-orientation. As the first round of interviews shows, decentralization of responsibilities has produced significant but not uniform changes.

In both policy fields the more attractive counties in urban areas or closer to former offices were able to skim most of the best qualified personnel at the beginning of the reform. The periphery was often left with no or overtly inadequate manning. This reportedly led to quality problems which can be resolved only little by little. As counties are free to organize internal structures and processes, rather different

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<sup>7</sup> As e.g. the assessments of legal claims against beneficiaries.

solutions were chosen. Consequently starting conditions concerning the creation of synergies and the provision of internal and external assertiveness of the organization vary significantly.

In the county under scrutiny here, *integration services* were positioned in an unusually strong position and granted significant institutional autonomy. This setting allowed the committed management to establish the case-management approach on a broader basis and to tighten in-house and external relations with all actors involved in the support of disabled citizens. This close multilateral cooperation has reportedly improved controlling and helped to refine the range of services offered by third party providers. To compliment local competencies the *Medical and Pedagogical Service* of the central KVJS is now called in on a case by case basis for specialized knowledge. This functional division of labour increased the use of ambulant and low-threshold services and raised the overall service quality substantially.

A more ambiguous conclusion has to be drawn for the decentralization of functions in the field of *pollution and trade control*. Here, several negative developments outweigh positive aspects like an improvement in horizontal coordination and better back-office services. The most important deficit resulting from decentralization is the decrease in specialized knowledge. Instead of around 50-70 experts in the former state-run *pollution and trade control agencies* the communal entities on county level hold only between 5 to 15 employees each. A general tendency towards a “de-specialization” has thus become apparent which, though, depends heavily on county size. The rather top-notch case observed here holds 14 case-managers and claims nothing more than being reasonably qualified for “day-to-day” routines. In smaller counties case-managers are responsible for around 10 industrial branches, which is considered an assignment not reasonably manageable. Interviewees report risen handling times, decreased service quality and a loss of reputation in the eyes of many customers. Furthermore professionally weak departments could hardly resist political claims. To cope with rising pressure all staff recurs on similar strategies: avoiding the inquiry into technically or politically problematic arrangements, reducing or quitting pre-emptive inspections and reducing the training intensity of newcomers. In total employees dismiss decentralization on professional grounds.

### 3.5 Heterogeneity of service production between local units

This last dimension covers the question of “égalité” and reliability of public services: Do citizens and businesses have to face extreme differences from one county to another or is a certain degree of homogeneity assured?

In *integration services* the very different starting conditions between counties have led to very different approaches, especially concerning the restrictiveness in the dealing with claims. This heterogeneity between counties was still reinforced by the lack of a central legal and policy department. Nowadays the multitude of coordinative meetings and commonly edited guidelines guarantees harmonization in “90 percent of issues” within several months. Meanwhile, some differences remain, mainly by deviations of counties in favour of their disabled citizens.

In the field of *pollution and trade control* substantial heterogeneity is caused by the unequal deployment of specialists between counties. Voluntary trainings and informal meetings reduce discrepancies particularly among the stronger counties. Employees hope that a further development of an intranet can fill the growing gap in know-how.

All in all, heterogeneity between counties can not be captured in detail at the moment due to a lack of valid comparative data.

## 4. Conclusion

The empirical analysis of decentralization reforms in policy fields of *integration services for the disabled* and of *pollution and trade control* in the South-German state of Baden-Württemberg has allowed for a first test of the analytical framework developed here for the measurement of local government performance. As work is in progress no final results can be presented. However some conclu-

sions can already be drawn. Four aspects are especially noteworthy both from a methodological and an analytical point of view:

First our still rather crude set of dimensions seems to cover rather well the actual changes, as in both policy fields correspondent changes were observed and few residual dimension stayed unconsidered. Second, not surprisingly, our basic assumption that decentralization actually makes a difference can be confirmed. Yet, there is no consistent trend referring the performance effects of transfers to be observed. Consequences of changes seem there to be influenced by a whole host of factors - starting conditions, institutionalization, stakeholders and promoters involved, controlling and most important the characteristics of tasks and county size. Concerning these last two points, it can be stated that problems of scale arise frequently due to the transfer of competencies to inadequate administrative levels. This seems to be the main reason of inefficient and ineffective administration. While in *integration services* the advantages of local service delivery could be combined with high specialization on the central level, a positive effect has been achieved. In *pollution and trade control* a system immanent lack auf know-how due to the fragmentation of formerly highly specialised single purpose state agencies has to be reported. Misallocation of capacities (specialists to generalists), long set-up times, low quality of decisions and pure size effects paralyse the new structures.

Third, it could be shown that it is not so much the form of decentralization as such which actually makes a difference. Rather comparable forms of administrative decentralization seem to unfold differing performance effects when applied on tasks differing in characteristics and requirements. Political saliency of policies, possible synergies on the local level and finally the expertise required locally seem to be decisive factors.

Forth, the described observations confirm the triangulation of methods approach chosen for our project. As the changes can neither be described satisfactory by quantitative approaches nor by mere case studies, a combination of methods seems most promising.

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