

Change Management in the Context of Decision-Making Behaviour of Local Politicians Regarding Inter-Municipal Cooperation: A Look at the Example of Destination Management

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Abstract

Change processes always go through various stages. Regarding political change projects, there are specific continuative aspects that influence the decision-making behaviour of local politicians. This also applies to specific decisions relating to issues of inter-municipal cooperation. The intended gain in knowledge of this article is to determine how council representatives decide towards inter-municipal destination management organizations as a form of inter-municipal cooperation, to what extent experiences already exist in this field, how open they are towards them, and which possible influencing factors have an impact on this decision behaviour. Mixed-methods research is the chosen research strategy for this study. Semi-structured focus group interviews are followed by constructing the initial research model, and a written survey of council representatives was conducted. Based on this the present study finds that the openness of local politicians on inter-municipal cooperation, using the example of destination management organisations, is significantly dependent on location issues, legal form, and information about weighing up the advantages and disadvantages. Finally, also the origin of a specific destination management initiative, meaning internal or external to the respective local parliamentary group, was found as significant independent variable for political decisions about inter-municipal destination management organizations. As last step of this study and building on these findings and relevant theoretical framework models, a six-phase change management model was constructed as support for the decision-making behaviour of local politicians regarding inter-municipal projects. This model includes the phases of initiation (1), persuasion (2), political decision-making (3), implementation (4), evaluation (5), and resolution amendment (6).

Keywords

Change Management, Local Political Decision-Making Behaviour, Inter-Municipal Co-Operation, Destination Management

JEL Classification

G38, M14, M16, Z32

Introduction

All organizations and markets are also subject to dynamic changes (Laloux, 2016; Raworth, 2017; Henderson, 2020). The central challenge is to identify the need for these changes as early as possible and, after selecting suitable alternative courses of action, to implement and successfully master the change. The beginning of such a process starts with recognizing contradictions that are trying to block these change processes, which ultimately forms the initial condition of organizational change (Baitsch & Alioth, 1990). Change management plays a key role in this process, as it provides strategies that enable organizations to plan, control and implement the necessary change processes (Wehrlin, 2019). This means that responsible decision-makers in business and politics must deal with performing important tasks. Concerning the political sphere, there is the additional specificity that

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decisions usually need to be made based on more complex structures and backgrounds than, for example, in other areas (Behrens, 1980). This is particularly true when it comes to inter-municipal projects such as inter-municipally organized destination management organisations (DMOs), which require close networking with other decision-makers and actors. Suitable solutions must be found that are also enforceable and supported within the inter-municipal framework.

Before the above summarized background, the first aim of the research presented in this paper is to identify crucial factors influencing decision making in inter-municipal DMOs based on an empirical mixed-methods approach. The second aim of this study is the development of a generic change management model for the management of (inter-) municipal organizations. In this paper we use inter-municipal DMOs as illustrative empirical example as starting point for such a model. However, the suggested change management model could in the practice of local political decision-making also applied to different further policy fields (see Figure 2).

The overall challenge of change management lies in the fact that influencing factors, especially resulting from rapidly advancing technologies, increasing globalization and digitization, are steadily growing not only in dynamism but also in complexity (Demir, Yilmaz, & Imre, 2023). At the same time, the tourism industry, for example, is facing several new challenges. Competition is increasing, as are the demands of relevant target groups. To meet this challenge in the long term, development, and expansion of (inter-) municipal development and investment strategies, sharpening of the individual tourism profile, focus on specific target groups and advancement of contemporary marketing in the sense of so called "Destination Management 2.0" are becoming increasingly important (Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2014). In practice, however, some problems must be confronted, many of which result from the aversion of local political actors to giving up local structures and a generally observable resistance to change (Steinecke & Herntrei, 2017).

This makes the importance of change management even more central, as it provides approaches to solving the problem of how organizational strategies can be continuously adapted even in more complex settings and against the background of changing general frameworks (Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2018). To be able to transfer this claim specifically to the application of (inter-municipal) municipal policy, knowledge of its special features is required. In this context, the change management approach, and the basic assumptions of the public choice (PC) theory according to Downs (1957) will be used as an example to examine the criteria according to which local politicians make decisions concerning inter-municipal cooperation. The objective is to use the results to develop a change management model that explicitly refers to the decision-making behaviour of politicians in the context of inter-municipal cooperation. Although this model is developed using the example of inter-municipal cooperation in tourism and the related implementation of an intermunicipal DMO, it can also be used for other areas of inter-municipal cooperation.

The authors chose the German federal state North Rhine-Westphalian (NRW) as empirical field for their mixed-methods study. The reasons behind this decision are the following ones: (i) NRW is the most populous German state (with approximately 20% or almost 18 million inhabitants of 82 million German inhabitants in total (Fitch Ratings, 2022)); (ii) in NRW many German cities of all size classes are located, often geographically close to each other, and (iii) compared to other federal German states, NRW shows an 'average' important of touristic activities (Kozina & Bogdanova, 2021).

Starting from the introductory remarks in this section, the overall contribution of this study is twofold. First, based on a thorough literature review and an empirical mixed-methods research, crucial factors influencing decision making in inter-municipal DMOs were identified. In short, our study found as first main findings that openness of local politicians on inter-municipal cooperation – as dependent variable – is significantly dependent on location issues, i.e., in what involved municipality the respective DMO is (mostly) geographically located, legal form and local politicians' degree of information about weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the respective DMO project. Second, also the origin of a specific DMO initiative, meaning if it was initiated and developed internal or external to the respective local city council, was identified as significant independent variable for political decisions about inter-municipal DMOs. Finally, the authors constructed a six-phase change management model as support for the decision-making of local politicians regarding inter-municipal projects, also beyond decisions about tourism DMOs. This generic change management model comprises the phases initiation (1), persuasion (2), political decision-making (3), implementation (4), evaluation (5), and resolution amendment (6).

State of Research

With respect to the exemplary application of the change management model to the decision-making behaviour of local political actors in inter-municipal DMOs, the study breaks new exploratory ground. Nevertheless, argumentations are based on existing empirical findings, especially relating to the handling of change processes in the context of change management, but also involving the political decision-making processes in general.

Change Processes and Decision-Making Behaviour in Local Politics

Administrative Science Perspective

Budäus (2010) as well as Bogumil *et al.* (2007), Bogumil and Jann (2005) and Bogumil and Holtkamp (2007) provide extensive explanations from an administrative science perspective on how change processes in public institutions take shape regarding modernization processes. According to Gerstlberger *et al.* (1999), the need for modernization that exists in public institutions can be traced back to the aversion to change on the part of those employed and responsible in public institutions, as well as the lack of systematic use of managerial control mechanisms (such as those provided by change management). Fürst (1975) and Fernandez and Rainey (2006) similarly found that inter-municipal organizational forms fail so often in particular because the local politicians responsible for necessary political decisions tend to prevent inter-municipal cooperation for fear of possible non-re-election due to voters' aversion to change. This is because citizens have a negative attitude toward the closure of decentralized units.

Based on this, Schneider (2012), as well Frick and Hokkeler (2008) provide various aids in their practical practice-oriented publications on how inter-municipal processes can be initiated and implied. Nevertheless, with respect to our own research project, various research gaps emerge. According to this, the literature on business and administrative management as well as the publications on destination management do not provide any knowledge and, consequently, no change management model, which explicitly focuses on municipal political decision-making processes about inter-municipal cooperation, which, however, are the basic pre-requisite for inter-municipalization. Consequently, current research does not provide any insight into the effects of decision-making behaviour of local politicians on these forms of organization.

Change-Management Perspective

Studies such as those by Kotter (2012; 2014), as well as Doppler and Lauterburg (2014), which deal with the topic of change management from a business perspective, generally draw on a variety of change management models. However, these mostly focus on overcoming strategies of affected employees, which are rooted in fear and reservation. The research desideratum is that the change management models listed have no explicit reference to municipal policy decision-making processes. To cope with global crises, organizations go through various internal changes and adopt different survival strategies, several researchers and practitioners have highlighted that employees are the key factors in implementing such complex and ambiguity changes (Islam, 2023).

Tourism Science Perspective

Bieger and Beritelli (2013) and Beritelli *et al.* (2015) explicitly refer to the need for reform of DMOs. According to Kreilkamp (2015), tourism organizational units are particularly efficient if they are inter-municipal and have a large-scale structure, and accordingly also have increased competencies and higher budgets. Steinecke and Hertrei (2017) adds that local politicians tend to focus on the advantages of their own municipality rather than thinking or acting in an inter-municipal and networked way. Schuler (2016) argues that existing approaches from management theory for organizational change cannot be readily applied to regional destinations because they have specific structural characteristics. Consequently, the development of a change management model that explicitly refers to local political decisions is probably still missing. Kotter (2014) advocates a more agile, network-like structure that operates in concert with the hierarchy to capitalize on rapid fire strategic challenges.

Political Science Perspective

Kirsch (2004), Dehling and Schubert (2011), Donges and Freytag (2009) examined the decision-making behaviour of political actors from a political science perspective, ostensibly drawing on decision-making theories such as rational choice (RC) theory (Becker, 1974; Paternoster & Simpson, 1996) or public choice (PC) theory (Mueller, 1976). Among other things, they found that in most cases political decisions can be attributed to utility-maximizing behaviour on the part of the decision-makers in such a way that they tend to take decisions that ensure the presumed higher probability of re-election rather than an alternative decision that is objectively more beneficial from all points of view. However, the question remains open as to the extent to which this assumption applies to political decision-makers regarding processes that involve inter-municipalization; especially since the decision in favour of intermunicipal structures is usually also likely to be accompanied by an increase in efficiency but may possibly be associated with the dismantling of structures in one's own municipality, which the population is generally critical of.

Explanation of Change Processes Based on Change Management Models

In the relevant research, there is a whole range of change management models, most of which refer to specific contexts. However, two models are of particular importance to realize the objective of developing a change management model that reflects the decision-making behaviour of local politicians regarding inter-municipal cooperation: Lewin's three-phase model (1943; 1948) and Kotter's eight-phase model (2012). The most applied models were valued for providing guiding principles for change that are well suited to be applied in complex and

unique contexts, and to be used in synergy with implementation and improvement models (Harrison, *et al.*, 2021).

Three-Phase Model According to Lewin

Lewin (1943; 1948) assumes that change processes can be explained in terms of the following three cyclical phases:

- Phase 1: Unfreeze (thawing)
- Phase 2: Change (Move) and
- Phase 3: Stabilize (Freeze).

In the unfreezing phase, change is introduced. With it, both counterforces (which hinder the implementation of the change) and accelerating forces (which favour it) develop. Lewin assumes that both are in balance with each other (Miller, 1987). If possible, the favouring factors should be strengthened to be superior to the opposing forces. In the change phase, the involved actors already show an increased willingness to engage in the change, thereby diminishing the counterforces (Lewin, 1948). The freezing phase is characterized by the fact that the involved actors already accept the decision. The task now is to stabilize the new framework so that it can be implemented in the corporate or political culture (Wehrlin, 2019).

From today's perspective, Lewin's model is often criticized. This is mainly because newer change management models view organizations as autopoietic systems that are subject to a constant and dynamic change process. Because of this, the "freezing" phase is considered suboptimal (Schreyögg & Noss, 1995). However, if the complexity approach is the way forward for organizations, then they may have to return to Lewin's work (Burnes, 2004).

Eight-Phase Model According to Kotter

Kotter's (2012) eight-phase model, along with Lewin's three-phase model, is one of the change management models most frequently cited in literature and most commonly applied (Phillips & Klein, 2023). According to Kotter (2012), existing behavioural patterns must meet two basic requirements, without which a change process cannot be successfully completed: First, if change is to be meaningful, it must be iterative and take the form of a multistep process. Second, it needs to be initiated and managed by experts to minimize the risk of failure. Kotter (2012) suggests that about half of all change processes fail because at least one of these basic requirements was not met. Kotter's model (2012; 2014) envisages eight phases of a change process, all of which are mandatory to ensure its success. First phase, creating a sense of urgency, involves convincing all stakeholders involved in the organization of the need for the change project. Creating a sense of urgency evokes emotions that can be used as a catalyst.

Second phase, assemble performance team, focuses on forming a strategy network that involves voluntary actors from different organizational levels (employees, managers, decision makers). The involvement takes place on a voluntary basis and has the task of intervening in the change process in a guiding manner. The fact that other employees are involved in addition to managers increases acceptance of the change project. Those actors who influence the change are referred to as change agents (Doppler & Lauterburg, 2014; Kotter, 2012; Kotter, 2014). Here strategies are defined as integrated decisions, actions, or plans designed to set and achieve organizational goals (Wheelen, Hunger, Hoffman, & Bamford, 2017). Enhancing resilience can be a strategic organizational goal and is the outcome of good organizational practice and effectively managing risk; organizations can only be more or than less resilient, there is no absolute measure or definitive goal (Fisher & Law, 2021). For implementation the strategies have all stages of organizations relied on a hierarchical power structure, with certain people exerting authority over others; the concentration of power and decision-making at the top, separating colleagues into the powerful and the powerless, brings with it problems that have plagued organizations for as long as we can remember (Laloux, 2016). The goal of strategic management should be creating and capturing values, which have been a central concept in the social sciences since its inception (Schwartz, 2017).

In the third phase the strategic vision is formulated. Kotter (2012) emphasizes the importance of communicating the vision simply and plausibly. It should also be emotionally appealing and strategically intelligent to gain broad approval. In addition, however, a certain "radicality" should be evident in the formulation of the vision, which in turn further underpins the urgency generated in phase one. However, specific, and time-bound vision statements have become increasingly unnecessary today, they are typically redundant with other strategic elements, and can be complicated to manage in an increasing rate of change (Beehive, 2020).

This is followed by phase four, which consists of communicating the vision with the goal of securing support and acceptance. This again reflects the basic idea mentioned in Phase 2, according to which strategies are particularly likely to gain broad approval if they are also shared by as many employees as possible and not merely imposed up-on by superiors. The steering coalition of employees, managers and other stakeholders must communicate the vision, but also the strategies behind it, and disseminate them virally so that everyone involved is informed and aware of them (Kotter, 2012).

According to Kotter (2012), the focus of Phase 5 is on granting scope for action. He assumes that employees who are given room to manoeuvre are also more open to participating in the implementation of change. At the same time, giving as many involved stakeholders as possible a say also increases the overall problem-solving potential.

Phases six of the eight-phase model according to Kotter (2012) provides for the need to make short-term successes visible. This premise is based on the human characteristic of impatience. Employees therefore need positive feedback at an early stage to know that the success of the measure is assured. To this end, it is possible to consciously win over stakeholders who have positive emotions toward the change project. If successes and positive emotions are communicated accordingly, the willingness to continue to support the change process increases (Kotter, 2012).

According to Kotter (2012), the seventh phase ("do not let up") is particularly important. Only those who persevere with the change project can proactively prevent lethargy or even the emergence of counterreactions.

The eighth and thus final phase within the model represents the consolidation of strategic change in the corporate culture. Like Lewin's (1948) third and final phase of his model, which involves implementing the innovations in the organizational culture, Kotter (2012) also assumes such consolidation to secure the achieved renewal. However, this is done in such a way that the newly achieved state is not frozen, but rather that the willingness to change is anchored.

While change management models can generally be applied to all decision-making processes within organizations (*i.e.*, including political ones), more detailed knowledge is needed on how decisions in favour of change are made specifically in the context of local politics. For this purpose, the policy cycle provides important explanatory approaches.

The Policy Cycle as a Model of Municipal Political Decision-Making

The policy cycle according to Jones (1970) and Anderson (1975) serves as a simplified explanation of political decision-making processes (Blum & Schubert, 2011). Here, it is assumed that the individual phases of policy making are mostly not linear or chronological. First phase is formed by problem perception and agenda setting. Here, it is a matter of perceiving a problem as such and classifying it according to its priority to subsequently place it on the agenda (Jann & Wegrich, 2014). The policy formulation and decision-making phase involves formulating and clarifying policy objectives and discussing alternative courses of action (Jones, 1970; Anderson, 1975; Bandelow, Herweg, Hornung, & Zohlnhöfer, 2022). In the case of inter-municipal projects, it is essential that the opinions of citizens and voters should also be considered here, as they tend to range from sceptical to negative about inter-municipal co-operation (Bergholz & Bischoff, 2019). The location issue is likely to have a significant influence on this.

The process phase of implementation is about making political decisions measurable. In this phase of implementation, there may be deviations between the politically standardized goals and the actual implementation. This is since the actors in the respective administration who are tasked with implementation must in turn take influencing factors into account or even pursue other interests themselves (Grüniger, 2014). It should be noted that political decision-making and administrative implementation cannot be definitively controlled and can delay, accelerate or even thwart this phase in terms of timing (Blum & Schubert, 2011). The implementation phase is followed by policy evaluation, which focuses on examining the impact of the respective policy. The objective is to find out whether intended goals and effects have been achieved. This is followed by the scheduling/redefinition phase, in which the opinion of sceptics and/or project opponents plays a decisive role. If political sceptics or influential actors consider the political status quo to be inefficient, *e.g.*, due to changing framework conditions over time, it is possible that a political decision will be rescinded (termination). It is also conceivable that an amendment to the status quo (*e.g.*, a law or the like) may become necessary, so that the policy cycle starts all over again (Jones, 1970; Anderson, 1975).

Public Choice Theory as a Theoretical Frame of Reference for Local Political Decision-Making Behaviour

The PC theory, which originally goes back to Schumpeter (1942), also provides another frame of reference for local political decision-making behaviour, which is of great importance for the development of our own change management model for local political decisions. In it, he argues that democracy is an instrument for organizing political institutions as well as for shaping political decisions. From the perspective of the decision-maker, political decisions are primarily made to maximize votes rather than form decisions based on altruistic approaches (Schumpeter, 1942). Thus, he laid the basis that the political decision-making process resembles a barter market (votes for decisions). This political market is understood as the totality of all political relations between political decision actors as suppliers and voters as demanders of political goods (political programs and decisions). Schumpeter (1942), and Downs (1957; 1968) found that regarding political decision-making processes, political parties always tend to satisfy the largest possible number of voters and they therefore move toward the centre of the political camp (Downs, 1957; Kirsch, 2004). As the essential core statements of his study, he points out: "Every agent in the model -whether an individual, a party or a private coalition behaves rationally at all times; that is, it

proceeds toward its goals with a minimal use of scarce resources and undertakes only those actions for which marginal return exceeds marginal costs" (Downs, 1957). Downs thus transfers the model assumption of the rational actor in the form of the time consistent utility maximiser to political actors. Continuing, Downs (1968) postulates that every political decision-making actor uses his incumbent social function primarily to achieve his private needs such as income, power, or prestige (Downs, 1968). Thus, politicians (and parties) appear as vote maximisers, each competing for political office and function, but not as actors primarily trying to achieve certain political goals for welfare reasons.

In Downs' (1957; 1968) analysis, initially abstract and simple assumptions are made. According to this, decision-makers act under certainty. In the context of political decision behaviour, this implies that both voters and politicians are fully informed about all conditions in the political market. Moreover, Downs initially assumes a two-party system. He only later extended his considerations to a multiparty system and the state of uncertainty.

Three central points represent the baselines of Downs' argument analysis, which are no different from private sector markets:

1. Demand exists. Voters are the demanders of political programs (analogous to demand by consumers in exchange markets).
2. There is a corresponding supply. The parties act as providers of political services, programs, and decisions (analogous to the supply by entrepreneurs).
3. A market exists where demand meets supply (analogous to the equilibrium state of neoclassical theory) (Kunz, 2004).

When determining the net benefit, voters also consider (at least indirectly) the probability of whether parties can make the promised decisions. In this elaborate form, however, this only applies under conditions of complete information (for example, about the possible consequences of coalitions, parliamentary opposition, a lack of majorities or similar influencing parameters) (Kunz, 2004). Accordingly, to be able to make a political decision, obtaining information is essential. However, according to Downs (1957; 1968), this in turn is associated with so-called information costs (Downs, 1957). These information costs, but also uncertainty due to lacking information, influence the rational voter's choice (Downs, 1957; Arzheimer & Schmitt, 2014).

Based on the above, it is therefore rational and correct to use PC theory as a theoretical frame of reference, since this approach makes it possible to establish a target concept of decision behaviour, which in turn is important for the development of our change management model.

Methodology

Aim of the Study

Change processes and the decision-making behaviour of municipal politicians about inter-municipal projects represent the central subject area of our study. The intended gain in knowledge is to determine how council representatives decide towards inter-municipal DMOs as a form of inter-municipal cooperation, to what extent experiences already exist in this field, how open they are towards them, and which possible influencing factors have an impact on this decision behaviour (Bezkhlibna & Nykonenko, 2017). This builds on the current state of studies and makes an important contribution to closing the existing research gap in this area. An overarching goal of the study is to construct a change management model involving PC theory, which should help to influence the decision-making behaviour concerning tourism policy of actors in municipal bodies in such a way that the implementation of inter-municipal projects, as shown here in the example of DMOs, is favoured. It could be used, for example, by external consultants who accompany inter-municipal tourism policy processes. Furthermore, it can also serve as a guide for mayors who want to proactively approach and shape change.

Course of the Research

Step 1: Focus Group Interview Followed by Construct of the Research Model

The first sub-goal of this study was to construct a research model that maps the decision-making behaviour of municipal politicians regarding inter-municipal cooperation in general and concerning inter-municipal DMO structures. Additionally, this provides a system for the further steps of the research, including the content design of the questionnaire for the written survey phase. To be able to identify and select in an explorative way the determinants that have an impact on the decision-making behaviour of municipal politicians in inter-municipal projects, a group discussion was held with eleven mayors on June 20, 2016, following a mayors' conference in Siegen, Germany.

The advantages of conducting such a group discussion were, on the one hand, the targeted use of emerging group dynamics to discuss the individual aspects from multiple perspectives. On the other hand, the mayors involved can be regarded as representatives of the municipal/city council, whose members are questioned in writing. Since,

according to the NRW municipal constitution, mayors are not only chairpersons of the council but also members at the same time. They are consequently also part of the target group to be surveyed during the research presented in this paper. In addition, opinion-forming processes can also be identified within the group (Lamnek, 1993) and mayors are usually able to steer such opinion-forming processes due to their position. Based on the assumptions of PC theory, guiding questions were developed in advance, which were then discussed. These were directed at various topics that may have an influence on the decision-making behaviour of local politicians (such as the experience, openness, or attitude of local politicians toward inter-municipal cooperation in DMOs, but also related to information procurement, opinion-forming factors, and the influence of parliamentary group leaders).

The results of the group discussion were documented and later implemented in a self-developed research model (Figure 1). However, these results were only one of the several building blocks for the underlying conceptual research model for this study. In addition to the above-mentioned focus group findings the authors also systematically condensed the findings of their thorough international and national (German sources) literature review as further building block for developing the final research model for this study. Finally, the research team considered specific prior literature reviews in the wider field of tourism and inter-municipal cooperation for developing its overall conceptual research model e.g. (Fyall & Garrod, 2020; Haid, Albrecht, Wiebke Finkler, & Finkler, 2021).

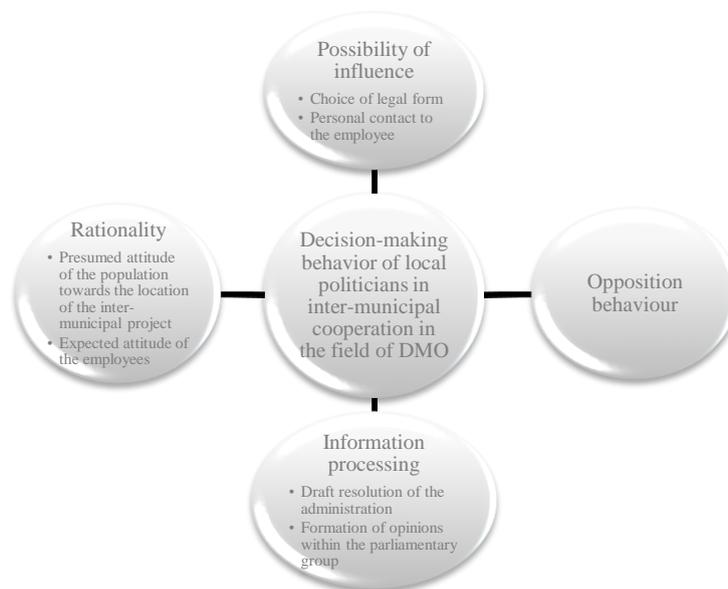


Fig. 1. Research model: Dimensions of decision-making behaviour of local politicians in inter-municipal cooperation in the field of DMO from the perspective of the mayors interviewed.

Following Figure 1, four main dimensions in particular influence the decision-making behaviour of council representatives:

1. The possibility of exerting influence (the higher this is, the greater the general willingness for inter-municipal cooperation).
2. Issues of rationality (if a negative attitude of the population towards the inter-municipal project is expected, the attitude of the council representative will also be negative).
3. Opposition behaviour (inter-municipal projects initiated by the opposition are rejected by their own party for strategic reasons).
4. Information processing (weighing pro and con arguments influences attitude to-wards inter-municipal cooperation).

Further sub-dimensions were also identified, which in turn have an explicit influence on the main dimensions. For example, the choice of legal form (preference for legal forms with as much say as possible) and personal contact with employees have an impact on the possibility of exerting influence (the move away from local and thus decentralized solutions entails less personal contact with employees and thus less possibility of exerting influence on them). Rationality issues also depend on the presumed attitude of the population towards the location of the inter-municipal project (this should be in one's own municipality, if possible), but also on the expected attitude of the employees (due to the merger, some employees will lose their function and express their displeasure accordingly). Information processing, in turn, is influenced by the draft resolutions of the administration (from which the council representatives mainly obtain information) and the formation of opinions within the parliamentary group (a positive attitude on the part of the parliamentary group chairman or knowledgeable experts favours one's own

decision-making behaviour). The research model serves as the basic framework for the subsequent written survey.

Step 2: Survey

The main research, which was carried out as part of our own study, consisted of a written survey of council representatives from every randomly selected third municipality in North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) with a population of less than 100 000 (122 municipalities in total). The survey period ran from March to June 2017, and it was possible to participate in the survey either online or offline. A total of 451 council representatives working in the municipal councils in NRW responded, which corresponds to a response rate of approx. 12% (for simplification, it was assumed that an average of 30 council representatives work in each municipality, which suggests a response rate of 12%).

By implementing the survey as a written survey, several advantages could be generated and exploited:

1. As many council representatives as possible could be interviewed at one point in time, which ensured enormous time saving in comparison to other (e.g., qualitative) procedures (Döring & Bortz, 2015).
2. Due to the absence of a person administering the survey during an interview, personal related interference (such as the unconscious influencing of respondents) could be excluded, so that the results are independent of the researcher (high objectivity of conduct and evaluation) (Bortz & Döring, 2006; Clauß & Ebner, 1989).
3. The results of the survey can be evaluated more objectively overall and are easier to compare and generalize than, for example, results obtained using qualitative methods (Bortz & Döring, 2006; Clauß & Ebner, 1989).
4. Due to the special form of item construction with predominantly closed response formats, the evaluability of the data and objectivity in the evaluation and interpretation of the data can be increased even further (Leutner, Hartig, & Jude, 2008).

To compensate for the limitations that the closed response formats inevitably entail, the surveyed council representatives are queried using rating scales, on the aspects considered important, and predominantly obtained from the group discussion. These have gradations with respect to the categories that can be selected (for example, from “do not agree at all” to “agree completely”) and thus make it possible to provide an opinion that is as differentiated as possible and thus as authentic as possible (Bühner, 2011). This approach to item construction has further advantages that relate to the analysability of the data. Accordingly, the selected scale level of the variables also depends significantly on which analysis procedures are to be applied later (Griese, 2011). Various multivariate analysis techniques require a minimum scale level, including regression analysis, which is used during data evaluation. This is because here, like variance analysis, the relationship between several independent (UVs) and dependent (AVs) variables can be tested in one step. In addition, with the help of regression analysis, statements can also be made about the strength and direction of the relationship (Schendera, 2014). For this reason, the development of a summary regression model represents the essential core of the data evaluation.

With the help of a pretest in which 30 randomly selected council representatives participated, any ambiguities in the wording of the items and comprehension questions could be clarified in advance, and marginal adjustments were made to the items. This seemed particularly important due to the lack of suitable reference test forms. Thus, it was necessary to develop the questionnaire completely on our own, referring to the results from the group discussion. To test the internal item consistency of the respective item blocks, reliability tests were conducted in each case. Four of the respective item blocks show a Cronbach's alpha value of ≥ 0.60 . The values of the other scales amount to $\alpha = 0.30$ and $\alpha = 0.43$, respectively, and are thus still within acceptable range. However, since only individual items of the item blocks are tested in the data analyses and not an overall variable, no negative effects on the study results are to be expected.

Results and discussion

Sample description

The council representatives ($n = 451$) who are actively involved in local politics in the individual municipalities in NRW and answered the questionnaire are on average 53.61 years old ($SD = 11.08$). Thus, the average age turns out to be relatively high, which, however, also implies the positive effect that the local politicians surveyed already have quite a lot of experience. In fact, the average time of serving in local political bodies is 13.84 years ($SD = 9.23$), which confirms this and does not limit it purely to the age of the local politicians surveyed, but also extends it to their professional experience in political office. For a more detailed sample description, see Table 1.

Table 1. Sample description.

| | | <i>n</i> | % |
|------------------------------------|--|----------|------|
| Gender | Female | 95 | 23.3 |
| | Male | 312 | 76.7 |
| Highest general degree | Secondary / elementary school | 4 | 1.0 |
| | School without completed vocational training | 48 | 12.3 |
| | Secondary / elementary school with completed vocational training | 92 | 23.6 |
| | Other secondary schools | 76 | 19.5 |
| | Baccalaureate University | 170 | 43.6 |
| Marital status | Single and living alone | 27 | 7.0 |
| | Single, living in a stable partnership | 42 | 10.9 |
| | Married and living together | 276 | 71.5 |
| | Married but living separately | 17 | 4.4 |
| | Registered civil partnership (same sex) | 0 | 0.0 |
| | Divorced | 13 | 3.4 |
| | Widowed | 11 | 2.8 |
| Children under 18 in the household | No | 281 | 62.3 |
| | 1 child | 41 | 9.1 |
| | 2 children | 51 | 11.3 |
| | 3 or more children | 13 | 2.9 |
| Local political function | Council representative (without other function) | 231 | 59.1 |
| | Group chairman | 68 | 17.4 |
| | Municipality / city association chairman | 13 | 3.3 |
| | Deputy mayor | 22 | 5.6 |
| | Committee chairman, hereunder | 57 | 14.6 |
| | Construction, environment, planning, energy, and technology | 10 | |
| | Operating Committee | 2 | |
| | Family, youth, and social affairs | 8 | |
| | Accounting | 3 | |
| | School, sports, health, culture, and education | 17 | |
| | Other | 7 | |
| | Election audit | 2 | |
| | Water, wastewater, and transport | 3 | |
| | Economy and tourism | 5 | |

Table 1 shows that there is a clear dominance of male respondents. Accordingly, more than three quarters of the local politicians surveyed are male ($n = 312$). Most of the council representatives have a university degree (43.6%, $n = 170$), and another fifth have a high school diploma ($n = 76$). Thus, the formal education level here can mostly be classified as high to very high. 71.5% of the surveyed council representatives are married and living together ($n = 276$). Therefore, this form of marital status represents by far the strongest group of respondents. Council representatives who are single but living in a stable partnership follow a distant second place. This applies to about one in ten local politicians in the sample ($n = 42$). All other forms, on the other hand, occur much less frequently. Almost two thirds of the respondents do not live with a minor child in the same household ($n = 281$), a fact that is probably also due to the relatively high average age of the respondents. And 11.3% live with two minor children in a household ($n = 51$), 9.1% with one ($n = 41$), and 2.9% with three or more children ($n = 13$). Most of the respondents are active as council representatives (without any further function) (59.1%, $n = 231$), 17.4% as parliamentary group chairs ($n = 68$) and 14.6% ($n = 57$) as committee chairs (among them with $n = 17$ most in school, sports, health, culture).

Regression Analysis and Regression Model

The in the following presented data analysis focuses on the regression analysis conducted, including the lines regression model created for this purpose. The dependent variable of this linear regression functioned as operationalization for the decision-making behaviour of city council representatives regarding inter-municipal DMO (see Figure 1). The main independent variables in this regression model referred (see Table 3) to 1) the importance of the organization's main location in its own municipality, 2) the importance of the project related attitudes of the affected local population and public employees, 3) the proposed legal form of the planned DMO project (public, public-private or private). In the following course of this article, we refer to the independent regression variables 1) location issue, 2) legal form of the planned inter-municipal DMP project, 3) previous cooperation between DMO-related employees/staff, and 4) information policies during the respective project development phase.

The overriding question is to find out what influence the parliamentary group's opinion, as well as party affiliation have on the openness of the council representatives toward inter-municipal organizational units. The advantage of the chosen method is that it also reflects the influence of a nominally scaled variable such as that on party affiliation in a breakdown of individual categories. Regression analysis is a statistical procedure that can be used to determine the nature of a relationship between variables. On the one hand, the influence between two or more variables can be tested, but on the other hand, regression analysis also allows the value of a dependent variable to be predicted with the help of the independent variables used. Within regression analysis, there are various methods that are suitable in different ways depending on the scale level of the test variable, including binary logistic regression (suitable for binary DVs), multinomial logistic regression (suitable for nominally scaled DVs with more than two gradation forms), and ordinal regression (suitable for ordinally scaled variables). Since in this case the DV on the decision-making behaviour of the council representatives is represented by an ordinal scaled variable, ordinal regression analysis is used.

Table 2 reflects the model quality, *i.e.*, it provides information on how well the IVs are suit-ed to predicting the openness of the council representatives. Chi-square can be used to determine whether the observed cell frequencies differ significantly from those calculated by regression analysis. In this case, the result is just below the significance threshold of $p \leq 0.05$, above which speaks of good model quality.

Table 2. Quality of the model for regression analysis: Influence of the internal opinion of the parliamentary group and party affiliation on the openness of the council representatives to inter-municipal organizational units.

| | Value |
|--|--------|
| Chi-Square | 13.869 |
| Significance | .127 |
| Nagelkerke Pseudo-R-squared Highest general degree | .049 |

Chi-square does not show a significant improvement with the addition of the IVs, but a tendency towards a statistically significant result ($p \leq 0.01$) can be stipulated. Pseudo-R-squared, however, turns out to be rather low at 0.049, which should be considered when interpreting the estimator values. According to Nagelkerke's pseudo-R-squared, the variance resolution is 4.9%, which is considered rather low and should therefore be accounted for in the relevance of the following results.

Table 3 shows the results obtained for the position estimators. This allows a statement to be made on the extent to which the influence of intra-group opinions or a particular party affiliation speak for or against increased openness on the part of the council representatives. It should be noted that the last category of the IVs in each case can be regarded as the reference category, whose value is set to 0.

Table 2 reflects the model quality, *i.e.*, it provides information on how well the IVs are suit-ed to predicting the openness of the council representatives. Chi-square can be used to determine whether the observed cell frequencies differ significantly from those calculated by regression analysis. In this case, the result is just below the significance threshold of $p \leq 0.05$, above which speaks of good model quality.

Based on the research model created (Figure 1), various factors were identified that influence the decision-making behaviour of council representatives about inter-municipal forms of organization (see Table 3 for details). The influencing factors are in turn important for the subsequent development of the change management model, to be able to use it to explain and positively promote tourism policy decision-making behaviour with respect to inter-municipal cooperation. For this reason, a summary regression model is created based on the research model developed from which de-pendent (DV) and independent variables (IV) are derived.

Since only past decision-making behaviour can be queried in a survey, the variable "openness to inter-municipal projects" is again selected as the DV. It should be noted that the correlation between the attitude toward inter-municipal forms of organization and decision-making behaviour in the past is of particular importance and a highly significant correlation ($p \leq 0.001$) can be established between openness or attitude and past voting behaviour. This

highly significant correlation justifies why specifically this variable was chosen as DV in the regression model.

Table 3. Location parameter for the regression analysis: Influence of the internal opinion of the parliamentary group and the party affiliation on the openness of the council representatives to inter-municipal organizational units.

| Location | Parameter | SF | Significance | |
|--|-----------|-------|--------------|---|
| The organization's main location in its own municipality is rather unimportant. | 2.298 | .829 | .006 | very significant |
| The population's attitude is rather unimportant. | -1.360 | .733 | .063 | not significant (n.s.), but tendency towards significance |
| The attitude of the employees of the organization is rather unimportant. According to the surveyed politicians, the following legal forms are most suitable for the inter-municipal project (see German legal forms mentioned below) ... | -0,567 | .476 | .233 | n.s. |
| ... administration unit (Zweckverband). | 1.738 | .939 | .064 | n.s., but tendency towards significance |
| ... company with limited liability (GmbH). | 2.110 | .983 | .032 | significant |
| ... registered association (eingetragener Verein). | 2.439 | .993 | .014 | very significant |
| ... public institution (Anstalt öffentlichen Rechts). | 2.940 | 1.066 | .006 | very significant |
| The previous cooperation with the employees of the organization concerned is rather important to the decision-makers. | 1.197 | .477 | .012 | very significant |
| The information provided about the advantages and disadvantages of the inter-municipal project is rather important to the decision-makers. If the information about the project comes from the political opposition ... | -0.795 | .360 | .027 | significant |
| ... trust decreases sharply. | -17.709 | .728 | .000 | very significant |
| ... trust decreases somewhat. | -17.424 | .491 | .000 | very significant |

To build the regression model, the ordinal regression analysis procedure is also used here due to the ordinal scale level of the DV (openness to inter-municipal projects). The information for model adaptation is as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Quality of the model for regression analysis: influence of the factors of the research model on the openness of the council representatives of inter-municipal organizational units.

| | Value |
|--|---------|
| Chi-Square | 115.260 |
| Significance | .042 |
| Nagelkerke Pseudo-R-squared Highest general degree | .377 |

However, the fact that the result is only just below this threshold of $p \leq 0.05$ initially indicates that the test variables are suitable for use in the model. In this case, the variance is re-solved by 37.7%, which can also be considered acceptable (e.g., Bortz & Döring (2006) regarding this specific kind of regression model).

The regression model forms the basis for the development of the subsequent change management model. It follows from the regression model that not all influencing factors affect higher openness and thus more positive decision-making behaviour. Furthermore, not all influencing factors are relevant for the development of the change management model. Rather, this only applies to the following aspects or core statements:

1. Location issue: The question of the main location affects the openness or decision-making behaviour toward inter-municipal forms of organization and must be approached with sensitivity in the context of discussions with neighbouring municipalities on initiating inter-municipalization and in discussions with the opinion leaders in the individual parliamentary groups.
2. Legal form: As a result of the regression model, the legal form that regulates the participation rights and thus the influence of the council representatives impacts openness.
3. Previous collaboration with staff (and the inherent opportunity to influence) sways openness to inter-

community organizational forms.

4. Information (e.g., about the advantages and disadvantages of the inter-municipal project) influences openness.
5. Whether the information comes from an opposition party or from the company's own parliamentary group also affects openness.

Construction of a Change Management Model for the Decision-Making Behaviour of Local Politicians Regarding Inter-Municipal Cooperation

Based on key findings and drawing on the change management models of Lewin and Kotter, the policy cycle model with its individual phases relating to political processes (each adapted to the specifics of decision-making behaviour with respect to inter-municipal DMOs), and the assumptions of Downs (1957; 1968) on PC theory, a change management model with six phases is constructed (Figure 2).

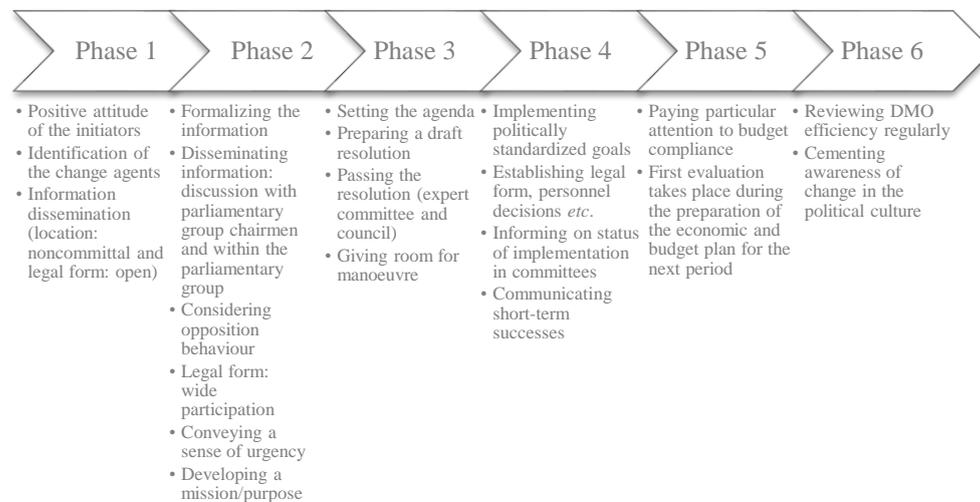


Fig. 2. Generic change management model for influencing (inter-) municipal policy decision-making behaviour (at the municipal level).

Phase 1: Initiation

Here the decisive factor is that the local politician responsible for initiating the project (usually the mayor) has a positive and open attitude toward the inter-municipal project. Together with like-minded people whom he employs as change agents, he can positively influence the decision-making behaviour of other involved actors in a targeted manner. As to the question of the legal form, no concrete decision should be made at this stage since this has a significant influence on the attitude of the decision-makers and could therefore also have a negative impact. In addition, the comparatively important question of main location should always be left open, as this could cause the process of inter-municipalization to fail if a decision is made in favour of a neighbouring municipality at too early a stage.

Phase 2: Conviction

The focus of Phase 2 is on formalizing the information. Disseminating as much relevant information as possible plays an important role here. This should initially take place in the context of a discussion with the parliamentary group chairmen as well as within the parliamentary group. The behaviour of the opposition must always be kept in mind to respond adequately with targeted persuasion. When choosing the legal form, care should be taken in this phase to choose a legal form that leaves plenty of room for participation, as this favours openness toward the project (Bereševská & Papcunová, 2020). Other key elements of this phase include conveying a sense of urgency and developing and disseminating a mission/purpose.

Phase 3: Political Decision-Making

In the context of political decision-making, the focus is on setting the agenda, preparing the draft resolution, and passing the political resolution. Here, too, the focus of discussions should always be on granting the greatest possible opportunities to have a say, to maintain the openness of the decision-makers involved toward the inter-municipal project.

Phase 4: Implementation

In the implementation phase, the politically standardized goals in connection with the inter-municipal project are

implemented in concrete terms. To this end, decisions from prior phases, such as the establishment of the legal form, are now being pushed forward. Furthermore, personnel decisions are confirmed. The dissemination of information plays an important role in this phase as well, which is why here information must be provided about the status of implementation in committees, but successes should also be communicated explicitly and purposefully.

Phase 5: Evaluation

With reference to the principle of maximizing benefits, it is important to adhere to the proposed budget. However, this aspect is also important for the sake of maintaining everyone's (including the voters') acceptance of the inter-municipal project. Budget maintenance is therefore an important part of the evaluation of the inter-municipal project. The first evaluation should take place during the preparation of the economic and budget plan for the next period.

Phase 6: Resolution amendment

In the final phase of the resolution amendment, the efficiency of the inter-municipal project (in this case, the DMO) must be reviewed regularly and the awareness of change must be cemented as much as possible in the political culture.

Conclusion

Based on the survey of council representatives in various municipalities, it was possible to identify and describe in more detail various relevant factors influencing the openness of local politicians in connection with inter-municipal cooperation in general and specifically to the inter-municipalization of DMOs. In this context, it was found that information has a strong influence on decision-making behaviour. Accordingly, the mayor can actively exert influence by means of an information policy, for example, through the preparation of draft resolutions, the provision of information within the parliamentary groups or through his information behaviour vis-à-vis the parliamentary group chairmen. In this context, it was also found that the opinion leaders within the parliamentary groups (such as the parliamentary group chairmen) have a very strong influence on the decision-making behaviour of council representatives.

It was also noted that there is a strong reliance on draft resolutions of the administration and cross-party motions. For these reasons, it would be positive if majority-forming parliamentary groups could be found to submit a cross-party motion to initiate the process of inter-municipalization. Alternatively, the mayor, as head of the administration, should initiate the process of inter-municipalization on the administrative side. Another key finding, which is also important for influencing decision-making behaviour, is to safeguard the ability of council representatives to exert influence around inter-municipal cooperation. In particular, the aspect of the legal form and the associated possibility of exerting influence is the focus of the council representatives. This can be made possible, for example, by choosing the special purpose association as the legal form for an inter-municipally organized DMO. Likewise, it was found that the (main) location of the inter-municipal DMOs influences decision-making behaviour. Here, too, as in relation to most other factors, a high level of say is desired wherever possible, and the risk of not being able to locate the main site of the inter-municipal project in one's own municipality or also to involve one's own (familiar) employees can also explain the aversion to inter-municipal cooperation that is prevalent in many cases.

With the help of the change management model developed based on the findings, a contribution is made to influence the tourism policy decision-making behaviour of actors in municipal bodies to the extent that the implementation of inter-municipal projects is favoured. The change management model is to be understood as a guideline to accompany inter-municipal projects positively and thus to increase the success rate of inter-municipal processes, for example when it comes to the implementation of inter-municipal DMOs. This is linked to the wish that the Change Management Model contributes to the establishment of a political culture in municipal political bodies that recognizes that change is not a snapshot, but a continuous process. Due to the dynamic environment, inter-municipal projects such as DMOs must have the competence of metamorphosis, which requires flexible decision-making behaviour in local political decision-making bodies.

Although these findings and implications are novel and important contributions to the literature in the chosen research field of this study, our research has some relevant limitations. First, the analysed data are from 2016 (focus group interviews) and 2017 (survey). Second, the conducted mixed-methods study was limited to the federal state NRW in Germany. However, looking at very recent literature in the field of tourism and (inter-) municipal DMOs, the overall socio-economic framework conditions in this fields have not changed fundamentally in the last years e.g. (Büscher, 2020). Based on such finding of our recent literature review update, we can assume that our basic socio-economic and policy-related assumptions before conducting the above-mentioned focus group interview and survey in the German federal stat of NRW have been relatively stable in the last years since our data collection.

Moreover, as already highlighted in the introduction section of this article, our re-search team performed an explorative survey, focusing on NRW in Germany. Although NRW is by far the largest federal state in Germany and represents approximately 20% of the German population, our analysed qualitative and quantitative sample are

not 'representative' for Germany, or also not for e.g. the European Union in a strict statistical sense. However, NRW is an 'rather average' tourism region in Germany as well as in the EU with many, often geographically closely located municipalities of all size classes. In this sense, NRW represents – at least in a qualitative way – many common touristic related problems in various German and European states/regions (Tien, Thai, Hau, Vinh, & Long, 2020; Kocak, Okumus, & Altin, 2023).

These relevant limitations of the here presented study, clearly call for further future research. Starting from the findings of our regional mixed-methods study, potential future studies could focus on comparative regional and/or national quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods studies in the fields of (inter-) municipal tourism and destination management. Furthermore, besides Germany and the EU, future studies could also consider, for example, tourism and DMO management in emerging economies or sparsely populated regions/countries of our globe (Sobotková, 2015).

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