Local public service delivery decision-making: the case of household waste management in Flanders

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Introduction

Most Western European local governments experience challenging times. While dealing with an extended period of fiscal austerity, the demand for high-quality public services remains ever-present (Pollitt, 2010). In addition, there is a surge of decentralization of tasks to the local level in several countries, which makes their mandate even more challenging and demanding (Halaskova & Halaskova, 2014). To face these challenges, local governments question and rethink their daily working by employing different strategies. Public managers and their employees are simultaneously involved with cutback management and innovation management (Van der Voet & Vermeeren, 2017). One of the strategies to cope with these challenges is to re-evaluate the service delivery arrangements.

For each service, local governments have to decide whether to provide the service themselves (‘make’), if external (non-) private actors are engaged (‘buy’), or if partnerships are developed (‘ally’) (Skelcher, 2005). Since these ‘Make, buy, or ally’ (MBA) decisions, or service delivery decisions¹, can have an important impact on citizens in terms of changes in quality, pricing, accessibility and governmental steering capacity (Girth, 2012; Milward & Provan, 2000), it is relevant to understand the underlying decision-making mechanisms. Our research question is: “Why do local government choose for particular service delivery modes and which factors explain (re)considering these modes?” In sum: what are the rationales behind these MBA-decisions?

To contribute to this purpose, this paper does three things. Firstly, it gives an overview of literature in which attention is given to the determinants and variables employed to research the service delivery decision, as well as some critiques on these and on the used methods and conceptual frameworks. Secondly, this paper proposes the first steps to an alternative conceptual framework that aligns better with the reality of MBA decision-making. Thirdly, this paper zooms in on a more specific service area, namely: household waste management. Relying on a database of 2015, we give an overview of the service delivery arrangements in Flemish local governments with regards to household waste and elaborate on why and how there seems to be such a big variety in these arrangements despite the supposedly monotonous employed mode of service delivery: the inter-municipal cooperation (IMC). Together with the preliminary results of one of these IMC’s, that is currently re-evaluating its service delivery. Lastly, this paper provides some considerations regarding various methodological and theoretical issues to improve our knowledge on the factors that drive local governments to make MBA decisions.

¹ Throughout the paper these concepts will be used as synonyms.
I. Explaining local public service delivery decisions: literature overview

1. Theoretical roots
Governments have traditionally relied on public bureaucracies to deliver public services. Over the course of the years, and especially since the budgetary constraints in the 1970s and by the exploding debts in the 1980s and 1990s, it became painfully clear a modern democratic government cannot deliver all tasks themselves (Sundell & Lapuente, 2012; Verhoest, De Herdt, & Vanholsbeeck, 2010). Because of this, a significant number of local governments have outsourced the services for which they are responsible (Brown & Potoski, 2003c; Garrone & Marzano, 2014). These decisions were often part of a package of reforms, which in the literature, is labelled New Public Management (NPM) (Schoute, Budding, & Gradus, 2017). Since the 1980s these reforms and its underpinning determinants were discussed and researched markedly.

Public Choice Theory was the first to comprehensively analyze delivery choices within the domain of public services. According to the theory, monopolization of services will result in overproduction and inefficiencies, whereas contracting out will lead to lower spending (Bel & Fageda, 2007). Another theory at the core of many conceptual framework, the Transaction Cost Theory, relaxed this positive view on contracting out and argues that contracting out can deliver cost savings whenever the transaction costs (such as administrative costs and costs from incomplete contracts) are not extensive. Therefore, conditions that influence the level of transaction costs should be central in determining when a local service can be successfully contracted out. Service related characteristics are important for understanding the nature of transaction costs and the contracting-out process (Schoute et al., 2017). While nowadays local government decisions on service delivery are studied from different perspectives, mainstream research is still rooted within a rationalistic-economical tradition, and most notable indebted to the New Public Management legacy.

2. Organizing the families of explanatory factors
A variety of determinants have been tested the past decades to explain service delivery choices. Despite the assumption that the decision is a dynamic and complex phenomenon, most studies still seek their salvation in testing a recurrent set of explanatory factors (Lamothe, Lamothe, & Feiock, 2008). So while there is no absolute agreement on what factors might influence the decision, the most prominent literature reviews and meta-regressions comfortably group these factors into 4 main categories: fiscal stress/restrictions (1) and economic efficiency/cost reduction (2) represent the economic family, while political interests (interest groups) (3) and ideological attitudes (4) serve as a
political angle to study the choice. Economically, governments may be inspired by some combination of fiscal restraints and anticipated lower costs, while, politically, leaders may be moved by loyalty to an ideology or a desire to win the support of key interest groups (Bel & Fageda, 2007; Bel & Fageda, 2009; Bel & Fageda, 2017; Boyne, 1998). When scholars investigate inter-municipal cooperation or non-profit contracting, they observe that mainly spatial (e.g. geographic proximity of cooperating municipalities) and organizational factors (e.g. council-manager form of government is less subject to political interference) explain these decisions over other factors such as costs and economic efficiency (Bel & Warner, 2016). A wide range of variables are used to test the impact of these determinants. Table 1 shows the 4 families of determinants and the corresponding variables addressed in the above-mentioned literature reviews and meta-regressions. The table groups 23 possible variables that have been “most considered” in research.

![Table 1: Families of factors and employed variables explaining MBA decisions. Based on literature reviews and meta-regressions: 1) Boyne (1998); 2) Bel & Fageda (2007); 3) Bel & Fageda (2009); 4) Bel & Warner (2016); 5) Bel & Fageda (2017).]

3. Visualizing the MBA decision

Conceptualizing the local public service delivery decision making, authors employ a two-step process where decision makers first tackle the question whether the service still has to be provided by government. If the answer is yes, they need to look in a second stage at which service provision mode they are going to use (Brown & Potoski, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Here we broadly distinguish between direct public service delivery, intergovernmental service delivery, non-profit contracting and for-profit contracting, where the latter two are situated outside the classic public sphere (Hefetz & Warner, 2012). In figure 1 this process is visualized. On the left hand side of the MBA decision the determinants

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2 Note that these studies only consider quantitative multivariate studies and that there indeed exists a quantitative method based research bias in the literature. A systematic literature review reveals qualitative based method research is sparse (Vos & Voets, 2017).
are listed having a (potential) effect on the delivery decision. Note that this decision not always comprises of two steps since in several cases the delivery of services is legally required by higher governments. Once the decision(s) has/have been made, this has a (potential) effect on the price, quality, accessibility and governmental steering capacity regarding the service, as seen on the right hand side of the figure (Girth, 2012; Milward & Provan, 2000). Notwithstanding these effects are relevant, certainly in the light of the perception of these effects in the MBA decision-making, we are focused on the motivations of local government to take these MBA decision, and thus will focus on the left hand side of the figure.

**FIGURE 1: Visualization of MBA decision-making process employed in literature.**

4. Key methodological issues in MBA research
Research on the determinants explaining the service delivery decisions seems to be dominated by a quantitative method approach. This research bias could be motivated by the assumption that econometric (multivariate) methods are indeed more suitable to generalization to other contexts (Bel & Fageda, 2007). It is remarkable, however, that this bias seems to endure despite a meta-regression analysis found that the results of these studies are quite sensitive to its characteristics, such as the period and region analyzed or the nature of the service and the size of the municipalities included in the research, wherefore exactly no generalizations should be made (Bel & Fageda, 2009).

Moreover, most studies are still affected by a potential problem of reverse causality since they typically employ a yearly cross-section of data. The direction of causality, therefore, is hard to capture and interpret (Bel & Fageda, 2007; Boyne, 1998). Moreover, from correlating various responses obtained from survey questionnaires, one could doubt if such analyses allow strong (causal) inferences (Geys & Sorensen, 2016). Because of this cross-sectional nature, research also becomes *de facto* static.
It is indeed nonsensical to explain a twenty-year-old decision to outsource a service, by looking at the ideological profile of the current political coalition or the present presence of market competition. Consequence of this is the low explanatory power of the empirical studies (Bel & Fageda, 2009). Moreover, since methodological choices, such as studying just one service or several, are also likely to influence results, the main contribution offered by research today lies not so much in determining which factor is the most influential, but instead in the identification of the different kinds of factors that may have an influence on MBA decisions (Carrozza, 2010).

The perceived effects of the motivations vary with the chosen research design, the employed factors and variables (and the quality of the available data) in the study, as well as geography and time. For example, unlike previous findings, recent studies find some evidence of ideological motivations playing a role (Bel & Fageda, 2017). Recent studies do, fortunately, rely on better and more comprehensive databases and use more refined empirical techniques that enhance our understanding of the dynamics of these decisions (Bel & Fageda, 2017).

II. Towards a new conceptual framework depicting the MBA decision-making process

1. Service delivery arrangements vs. MBA decisions

What research tend to do is, however, explain service delivery arrangements on a certain point in time (Y) by employing different explanatory variables, having a possible effect on that reality (X). Researchers using panel data try to overcome this cross-sectional problem by bringing in more dynamics into the research design by accounting for delivery arrangements situated on different points in time (Y’s) employing the same sets of determinants evolving over these periods of time (X’s). Despite this already proved to be useful, for example in improving the explanatory power of models, it remains a hard challenge to develop systematic relationships between determinants and service delivery arrangements, especially the timing of the shift in delivery mode (Geys & Sorensen, 2016; Kodrzycki, 1998; Picazo-Tadeo, González-Gómez, Wanden-Berghe, & Ruiz-Villaverde, 2012).

In our opinion, service delivery arrangements and the actual MBA decisions are two distinct, despite being connected with each other, concepts. While research has been mainly been focusing on attempting to explain delivery arrangement on a point in time, or more points in time in the case of panel data, grasping the actual MBA decision and analyzing its determinants is something else. Three main concerns can be formulated related to focusing on explaining delivery arrangements:

- By explaining a service delivery arrangement in year x by employing explanatory variables corresponding to year x, implicates decision-makers decide determine the delivery of
services based on information they often do not yet have at that moment. Moreover, it suggest the shift did indeed happen in year x because of the determinants in year x.

- Some authors try to solve this complication by applying explanatory variables preceding year x with several years, in the assumption that this would be more accurate since decision-makers are more likely to have access to this information and thus rely on them to make an MBA decision. However, the same critique persist: how do we know the determinants in year x-n or x-2n were responsible or important for the service delivery mode in year x, or a potential MBA decision? The decision to contract out a particular service may lie deep in the past (Boyne, 1998). Interesting in this aspect is a study where panel data.

- Having attention for an extended period of time is key to comprehend the dynamic nature of these processes (Zafra-Gómez, Pedauga, Plata-Díaz, & López-Hernández, 2014). This does, however, not necessarily implicates a better understanding of the switch of these arrangements, nor the impact of determinants on this decision.

2. Detecting MBA decisions within time and context

The complexity of MBA decision-making

Public researchers agree that decision-making has become more complex. Therefore, we rely on an article by Teisman that elaborates on how this complex decision-making can be analyzed (Teisman, 2000). He compares three conceptual models: (1) the phase model, (2) the stream model and (3) the rounds model. Each model has its specific assumptions and specific insights.

- The **phase model** is the most common approach employed by researcher and policy practitioners. Decision-making consist of a number of distinct stages and each phase has its specific characteristics and participants.

- The **stream model** depicts decision as a coincidence of 3 concurrent streams: (1) problems (2) policies/solutions, (3) politics/participants.

- The **rounds model** assumes there are different decision-making rounds in which the interaction between different actors results in one or more definitions of problems and solutions. It is mostly used for decision-making processes with a long duration and where changes in processed often take course (Teisman, 2000).
Figure 2 represents these three models and their characteristics.

![Figure 2: A depiction of three models for the analysis of decision-making processes (Teisman, 2000).](image)

The moment of policy, or decision, is framed differently in the models. In the phase model the decision is set at a certain point in time, while the steam model assumes that policy stream from an event in which the streams coincide. In our understanding and based on some explorative interviews, the rounds model aligns best with how MBA decision-making works in the reality. Especially because the model assumes that such a “moment” considered in the 2 alternative models does not exist. Policies or decision-making results from a series of decisions taken by various actors (Teisman, 2000). In the case of household waste collection in Flanders, we elaborate more on this aspect of the importance of different actors.

3. Depicting MBA decision-making processes

(Current) service delivery arrangements can in fact be understood as the products of previous rounds of MBA decision(-making). Visualizing this process in figure 3, there exists a certain period t in which MBA decision(-making) can occur. Year x symbolizes the year in which the local government enjoyed the autonomy or competence to deliver a service, and counts as the first MBA decision(-making). Year x+t reflects the delivery arrangements after a period t. We consider local governments constantly struggling with challenges during period t in which they seek solutions. In these discussions local governments can start an MBA decision to overcome a certain crisis or challenge which possibly results in rethinking the service delivery arrangement. Note that an MBA decision can also imply keeping the current service delivery, and a local government not necessarily switches the delivery mode.

It is important to understand that the 4 families of factors (fiscal stress/restrictions, economic efficiency/cost reduction, political interests (interest groups), ideological attitudes) can play a role in the initial MBA decision in year x, during period t and in year x+t. These determinants are forces that are always there, but most likely in a different explanatory combination in each unique setting, but not automatically lead to MBA decision-making, an MBA decision, or a switch in service delivery.
Therefore, it is key to trace the discussion history and service delivery arrangements of services. For example, it is possible that a current MBA decision is highly influenced by several MBA decision-making rounds held in preceding years. Alternatively, some services never experienced an MBA decision-making round or MBA decision. Possible reasons are for example that local governments are legally required to deliver a service in-house, or that the delivery of a service has never been questioned.

**FIGURE 3**: Possible path of local governments in service delivery design.

Illustrative we indicated a possible path local governments could experience in designing a particular service. In the example a local government made an MBA decision in year x. It experienced two highly intense periods of discussions (I & II) on the design of a service because of diverse challenges. In both these debates this culminated in an MBA decision-making process and an MBA decision. Contrary to period I, in which this discussion led to a switch in service delivery, the local government decided to stay put and keep on delivering the service as before. In year x+t the delivery mode of the local government is thus still the same as it was decided during the first decision-making process. This example indicates that only looking at explanatory variables in year x+t cannot explain the fact that the local governments. Moreover, by tracing back these processes, scholars can get more insight in the dynamics of MBA decisions.

Abovementioned example demonstrates the need to add something new to the two-step decision-making process since this view is rather limited and mechanical. It gives the impression that decision makers continuously play with these MBA considerations, something which is surely not the case due to the limited attention spans they have. One of the major weaknesses of almost all empirical studies,
is the fact that scholars have little attention for the importance of concepts as path dependency, catalyst factors and inertia, incrementalism and the impact of agency and structural elements (Carrozza, 2010; Lamothe et al., 2008). This way, research overestimates the strategic decision-making skills of local governments.

MBA decisions do not take place in a vacuum, but are embedded in time and context. Innovation, for example, will arise from the cumulative effect of a series of incremental changes (Walker, 2008). One service delivery decision thus may have a rich history of discussions in which different mixes of determinants are important. This limitation of capturing the actual decision-making process in current studies has also been acknowledged by several authors (Chandler & Feuille, 1994; Geys & Sorensen, 2016; Rodrigues, Tavares, & Araujo, 2012).

4. Digging deeper in the history of service delivery designs

Following (Carrozza, 2010), we believe that the analysis of the factors favoring MBA decisions, could be strengthened through the adoption of a historical perspective, even if it can lead to more contextual results. Moreover, researching one particular service (area), or a limited number of services, could prove insightful for numerous reasons:

- It enables the researcher to study decision(-making) and service delivery arrangements in an environment where service related characteristics are constant. Since most research designs include a large number of services, and explain the service delivery of these services by several determinants, the particular contextual setting of a service is not accounted for. By relying on large surveys, which are in most cases simply concerned to identify the prevailing pattern of service delivery (Boyne, 1998), the true effect of determinants on a service/services could be spurious. A common finding in literature reviews, for example, is the diverging reported effects of determinants related to the number of services included in the study (Bel & Fageda, 2007).

- By focusing on just one service, the researcher is able to “dig deeper” for possible motivations for opting for a service delivery. Since quantitative studies rely on the use of a the same determinants (over time), there is always the possibility that other changes and reforms in the same period are important in explaining (developments towards) the use of service delivery modes (Geys & Sorensen, 2016). It is difficult to explain why changes occurred within a given time interval and are difficult to capture by means of regression analysis. For any given local government, a case study may be needed to pinpoint the determinants (Kodrzycki, 1998).
Since the delivery of services consists of many different subservices, one service (area) should be disaggregated further. The production of a service or a good on the one hand, and the delivery of that same service or good are after all links in the same production chain. They can – and will perhaps – be performed by the same organization but this is not necessarily the case. This difference mainly highlights the fact that services disintegrate into several sub-processes, and that all those sub-processes links together can each be separately subject to such a make-buy-ally-decision. More finely grained data could provide deeper insight into the interaction between service and provider and the mutual influence between the sub-services (Marvel & Marvel, 2009).

Current research is mainly focused on determinants related exclusively on the local governments. Within the family of factors of fiscal stress/restrictions, some relations are uncovered with higher governments, such as the level of grants to local governments or the existence of a possible tax limit (see table 1), but still there is an absence of the multiple actor environment in which local governments in operate. For example: in Flanders municipalities can only get a subsidy for certain services if they deliver the service via a certain mode. The same applies to municipalities operating in an inter-municipal cooperations (IMC) since several years: only incorporating determinants relating to the municipalities, does not accurately grasp the determinants that play within the IMC, nor within the municipality.

III. The service delivery of household waste management

We argue it is useful to conduct more qualitative method based research to capture more dynamics and depict this manifold decision-making process. Therefore our research project will focus on a specific service area in Flanders: household waste management and its underlying service delivery arrangements. Part two of this paper will address the first findings regarding the overall landscape of actors and tasks/services in the waste management sector, and their interrelations, as well as some examples of specific case where we’re following a household waste management IMC that is currently re-evaluating its service delivery.

The choice for household waste management as a service area in Flanders, that has several underlying services such as waste collection and waste processing, is furthermore based on several motivations:

- It considers a long-standing competence and thus a relevant domain to research changes in service delivery modes (Belfius, 2012).
- Flemish municipalities enjoy the autonomy to decide how to deliver the service (Elinder & Jordahl, 2013).
- The service area is considered quite technical and “hard”. This indicates that performance levels are relatively easy to measure and stipulate in a contract, and thus potentially a suitable candidate for sourcing out (DeHoog, 1990; Jacobsen, Buysse, & Gellynck, 2013).

1. The service delivery of household waste management

Recent years have witnessed significant changes in the complexity of the organization of the solid waste service in Europe. Municipalities are immersed in a complicated process aimed at adapting refuse collection and treatment services to new challenges (Benito-Lopez, Moreno-Enguix, & Solana-Ibanez, 2011). A set of European Union directives obliges member states to reduce their waste production and to adopt measures to recover waste by means of recycling (Article 3 of Directive 2006/12/EC), while concurrently, the management of solid waste services has undergone major changes with a growth in the contracting out of this service. Today, private production in urban solid waste is extremely widespread in Europe (Bel & Mur, 2009; Bel & Warner, 2008).

Due to cost, health and sustainability related concerns, a lot of municipalities are forced to evaluate their solid waste management programs. This evaluation comprises cost-effectiveness in terms of collection, transporting and processing (Jacobsen et al., 2013). Studies regarding the cost of municipal solid waste (MSW) management demonstrate that the question of the cost of solid waste management is very complex. Examples of determinants having a thorough effect on the cost of solid waste management are, among others, municipality characteristics (population, density, area), the quantity/quality of the solid waste and its composition, the collection and transportation, distances and labor expenses (Gellynck & Verhelst, 2007). Since little support is found for a systematic link between privatization and cost savings, managers are encouraged to approach the MBA decision in a pragmatic way (Bel & Warner, 2008).

Research on the determinants of service delivery arrangements regarding MSW management at large relies on the same families of factors discussed earlier (see table 1). Studies’ results show that explanatory factors such as the demand for waste collection, the neighboring effect (municipalities close to others already contracting out are also more prone to do so), the transfer by central government and interest groups are relevant in explaining contracting out, but these decisions seem to have been motivated by pragmatic rather than ideological reasons (Bel & Miralles, 2003; Dijkgraaf, Gradus, & Melenberg, 2003). Other research suggests local governments are interested in more than just costs (Hefetz & Warner, 2007). Municipalities likely diverge from the cost-minimizing alternative,

2. The delivery of household waste management in Flanders

Because of differences in institutional arrangements, public service markets, and national traditions regarding government intervention, local public service provision can vary greatly. For example, research has shown that choices made in organizational reform (such as regarding service delivery) seem to be related with the nature of the political system and the sizes of the municipalities (Bel, Dijkgraaf, Fageda, & Gradus, 2010). Since these structures and historical traditions might influence MBA decisions and service delivery arrangements, we describe the situation in Flanders regarding MSW management.

Background

Flanders is the Dutch speaking region of the federal state of Belgium, situated between The Netherlands and France, bounded by the North Sea (see figure 4). The region has about 6 million inhabitants and a population density of 444 inhabitants/km². Belgian regions have their own parliament and government with extensive autonomous regional competences in (amongst other) the policy area of environmental policy. The Flemish waste authority OVAM (Public Flemish Waste Company) is responsible for defining the MSW management policy. In Flanders, household waste consists of mixed household waste collected through curbside collection, bulky household waste and municipal waste such as street-cleaning residues, waste from markets and illegal dumping (Jacobsen et al., 2013). The local governmental level, which consists of 308 municipalities in Flanders, governed by their own elected local government, remain responsible for waste prevention, collection and processing of household waste (Verschuere & Vancoppenolle, 2010).

*FIGURE 4: Map of Belgium with Flanders in the north.*
Service delivery arrangements in Flanders: IMC as default option?

Waste services can be provided in three ways: (1) **pure private provision** occurs when consumers contract with private vendors on an individual basis, (2) **pure public production** is where government owns and operates a service, (3) **new hybrid forms of public private partnerships** where public ownership may be mixed with private operation (Bel & Warner, 2008). Over time Flemish municipalities took the decision to engage in public IMC’s or supralocal joint ventures to obtain economies of scale. Solid waste is a basic local service and compulsory for all municipalities to deliver, so service levels are more homogeneous, which is a facilitator for cooperation (Bel & Warner, 2015).

In total there are currently 28 household waste IMC’s active on Flemish territory. Presently only 2 municipalities are not a member of such an IMC (black areas in figure 5) (Reekmans, 2017). This implies that, over the course of time, quasi all municipalities felt the need to cooperate with other municipalities for waste management. At first sight, thus, there exists a monotonous employed mode of service delivery regarding waste management: the IMC.

![Figure 5: Household waste IMC in Flanders. For more information: https://interafval.be/onze-leden.](image)

However, based on a database of Interafval (the cooperation between the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG), all Flemish waste IMC’s and other local authorities for 2015, there exists an extensive discrepancy on a) the management transfer from the municipal level to the IMC’s level, b) the tasks and services provided by the IMC’s, c) the service delivery arrangements of the IMC’s. These are all discrepancies we are puzzled about how they came about and evolved over time in the light of MBA decision-making. In the following section we describe these differences by gradually disaggregating the data. Note that the database only accounts for 22 of the 28 existing IMC’s,

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representing 275 out of 308 municipalities, and we neither account for the service delivery arrangements of the municipalities that did not engage in an IMC.

a) Management transfer to the IMC’s level

Table 2 shows these 22 IMC’s ranked on the number of associated municipalities for the year 2015. A first thing that stands out is that there is a clear variety amongst these IMC’s regarding the number of municipalities involved, as well as the number of inhabitants the IMC represents. Some IMC’s have up to 45 member municipalities, while others are cooperations with only a couple of municipalities. Without going into details, we also divided the IMC’s in 5 subgroups of inhabitants represented (see table 3). Generally speaking, we can see, unsurprisingly, the higher the number of municipalities in an IMC, the more inhabitants the IMC represents.

What is clear from this table, and figure 5, is that MSW management is considered to be a policy domain for which cooperation with other actors is required.

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**Table 2: Overview of the competences and management transfers to Flemish waste management IMC’s. Based on database Interafval. x = management transfer / red = no management transfer / orange = partial management transfer.**

What is, however, more striking is the discrepancy of management transfer from the level of the municipalities to the IMC’s. Dividing MSW management in 9 different services, we witness some
municipalities gave at a point in time the complete transfer of management to the IMC level. Examples are IMC’s 1, 3, 7, 15 and 21. Some other IMC’s, such as IMC 13, have a completely different governance structure when it comes to the competence over the services, and thus, deciding on the service delivery arrangements. This relates to a broader issue: namely what defines a IMC? Over the world there is large variety in IMC’s regarding the degree of institutionalization, types of tasks performed, quantity of function performed, governance and governing board (Bel & Warner, 2015).

The so called “top services” performed by the Flemish waste IMC’s are waste prevention, processing residual waste and communication. This is not surprising since these IMC’s were in particular established to deal with these competences on a scale that transcends the municipal’s level. Compelling is that municipalities clearly prefers to keep the service “public cleanliness” in-house.

Important to note is that these management transfers are highly dependent on former decisions made by former municipal governments. In Flanders, waste IMC’s are agreements between municipalities for a period of 18 years, that is 3 legislatures. The overview in table 2, thus, is partly the product of path dependency: the set of decisions is limited by decisions one has made in the past, despite past circumstances may no longer be relevant (Leiren, 2015). For example, one of the Flemish mayors indicated recently he wanted to contract out MSW services to the private market, but is tied to the MBA decision former governments made (Reekmans, 2017). In the case we’re following, that is case 12, municipalities and IMC are currently negotiating whether to prolong the IMC agreement in 2021 for another 18 years. Elections in Flemish municipalities will take place in October 2018 and the current negotiations form an exercise in which direction the municipalities want to go regarding service delivery arrangements. This proves once again the importance of detecting these negotiations and not just trace the decision in a moment in time and explain this choice via determinants or forces present at that exact time.

This divergence in management transfer is particularly important for municipalities’ autonomy in deciding on the MSW management policy. Once a municipality decided to join or co-founded an IMC, there tied to this IMC and the management transfers. It is therefore key to trace these decisions back in time to understand (1) management transfers or MBA decisions then and (2) the service delivery arrangements as a (partial) product of these power relations. It goes without saying that decisions related to service delivery of these MSW services become more complicated when more municipalities or actors are involved, especially in the case of IMC’s where one large municipality takes the lead and other smaller partners bind with its decisions. Only having attention for explanatory variables at the municipal level thus becomes more irrelevant to explain MBA decisions and service delivery arrangements, since another level of decision-making is highly involved.
MBA decision-making becomes a wicked exercise in keeping touch with the local context, but also representing the IMC’s interests, as well as its members. In case 12, which represents 9 municipalities, this is also the case. It is a waste IMC with municipalities with divergent characteristics: there is one very large municipality, while the others are relatively small; there are considerable differences in challenges regarding WSM, the financial capacity differs etc. This proved to have some serious drawbacks in managing the IMC and deciding on the future of the IMC, referring to the so called principal-agent problems with IMC (Bel & Warner, 2015). These actors, and their interrelations, should be considered in understanding MBA decisions. By doing so, via the rounds model in particular, the researcher does not only include the government aspect, but also the governance facet (Teisman, 2000). It is, by consequence, these different management transfer arrangements that (partly) structure (future) MBA decisions and delivery arrangements. The degree of institutionalization of these IMC’s, relating to formal and informal arrangements, is thus important to capture and understand MBA decision-making. One could expect more variation of service delivery arrangements between municipalities in services where no management transfer took place.

b) The tasks and services provided by the IMC’s and the service delivery mode

From table 2 it appears that all these IMC’s perform the same 9 services and in a similar extensity. However, waste IMC’s are active in a wide range of activities. Some focus only on household waste collection, waste prevention and the management of container parks. Other IMC’s specialize in the processing and recycling of waste and have specific infrastructure (Belfius, 2012). It is hence not sufficient to only look at abovementioned management transfers. Moreover, abovementioned services can be divided in subservices or tasks with specific characteristics. Illustrative we disaggregate the waste collection at home service into 3 sub entities: (1) PMD (plastic bottles and metal packaging), (2) paper and cardboard), (3) residual household waste. By doing this, one gets an even more diverse range of tasks and service delivery arrangements.4

c) The service delivery arrangements of the IMC’s

According to table 2 all IMC’s got the management transfer of the service related to waste collection at home except for IMC 13 and 14. Table 4 shows the service delivery arrangements for the 3 distinct subservices on the level of the 22 IMC’s. Clearly IMC’s do not provide all these subservices themselves when they acquired the management transfer from the municipal members. In 13 IMC’s these 3 subservices are outsourced to a private company or another IMC. Interestingly, it does not seem to

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4 Besides these 3 relevant fraction of household waste, also organic waste and glass are important fractions (Jacobsen et al., 2013). However, the data are too incomplete and disperse to elaborate on this.
matter whether the IMC has a lot of members or representing a relatively high share of inhabitants to outsource. IMC 15 outsources 1 subservice: paper and cardboard. It is important to note these are aggregate data, and do not always tell the situation for every separate municipality. For example: IMC’s 13 and 14 do not have full management transfer over the service waste collection at home, but table 4 suggests IMC 13 is delivering the 3 subservice in-house and IMC 14 has outsourced these. One should always keep in mind that the specific service delivery of a (sub)service by a municipality is not accounted for in these data.

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**TABLE 4**: Service delivery of subservice waste collection at home. Based on database Interafval.

Moreover, regarding IMC 12, diverse things stand out:

- According to table 2, IMC 12 acquired the competence level of the municipalities for waste collection at home, but more detailed data from the IMC and Interafval, 2 of the 9 municipalities have a deviant service delivery. One municipality outsourced the waste collection at home for all fractions to another provider, while another one collects several fractions itself because they still have a garbage truck at their disposal. So, despite the IMC having gained the competence level, still some deviant practices occur.

- Table 2 also indicates IMC 12 does not have the management transfer on recycling parks management. In reality, the municipalities indeed still manage these parks themselves (“make”). However, to really understand this MBA discussion, one has to trace this back to former IMC agreements. Apparently, the discussion whether to bring the recycling parks management to the IMC level have been raging for several years now, the so called different “rounds”. Currently, there are more municipalities in favor of working together via the IMC, but these decisions need unanimity among the members.

This has several implications for researching MBA decisions:

(1) One could wonder whether the responses municipalities provide in surveys are accurate. In essence the IMC, and the participating municipalities are responsible for the service delivery of the (sub)service, but the table suggests that in the end it is not the IMC actually providing the service, but instead a private firm or another IMC. The IMC thus made an MBA decision to contract out.
(2) It raises questions on how these delivery arrangements and MBA decision-making evolves over time. IMC contracts are valid for 18 years, but what happens during this long period of time? It could be possible that IMC's decide to contract out an entire service, or subservice, to other actors for a period of time when in competence of the management transfer. Also, municipalities that did not transfer the management competence to the IMC, can make MBA decisions during this period.

3. Further research steps regarding MWM services in Flanders

We need to reconsider how we study the overall MBA question that arises in municipalities, acting in an complex environment of tasks and actors. We propose to “dig deeper” instead of relying on aggregate data to understand the deeper causes, the “how” and “why” MBA decisions are made and service delivery arrangements came into being. For the understanding of the service delivery arrangements of Flemish waste IMC’s we also departed from a cross-sectional point of view since the database only gives insights for 2015. The next step could be setting up a pilot case in which we research one IMC, its service delivery arrangements and other aspects such as management transfers and governance, and trace back these arrangements. A process-tracing method, hence a more qualitative method, can be clarifying in capturing the complexity of service delivery arrangements and MBA decision-making by various actors and different policy levels for (sub)services. Therefore, attention first goes to the “macro” aspects such as current service delivery arrangements and earlier IMC agreements and thereupon “filling up” this timeline with other, more “micro” relevant MBA decisions based on interviews, document analysis (e.g. the multi-annual plan of the local government, the budget, and meeting notes of the management team and college of mayor and aldermen and IMC. The final aim is to reconstruct the different decision-making rounds over a longer period that led to the current arrangements.

Conclusions

This paper discussed public service delivery decision-making and its determinants. The view of the literature made clear researchers employ a variety of determinants and variables to explain why local governments opt for certain delivery mode. While our understanding of these decisions have been improved over time, some important issues are still not addressed. Most studies still have difficulties in developing systematic relationships between determinants and service delivery arrangements and in capturing the complex MBA decision-making and the actual MBA decision.
The first steps to an alternative conceptual framework has been presented with more focus on depicting the MBA decision-making process. Hence we are not only in search of (current) service delivery arrangements, but also of MBA decision (-making). Based on the rounds model of Teisman, this paper suggests another view of looking at (current) service delivery arrangements. More focus should be put on tracing the discussion history, and hence on time and context, as well as the multiple actor environment and the disaggregation of services. The study of these aspects on one particular, or a limited number of service, could prove insightful for these reasons.

Therefore, we explored on the service area of household waste management in Flanders. A first screening of the landscape suggest the service delivery of waste management series are quite monotonous: only 2 municipalities are currently not a member of an inter-municipal cooperation (IMC). However, based on a database of Interafval, it is clear there exists an extensive discrepancy on the management transfer from the municipal level to the IMC’s level, the tasks and services provided by the IMC’s and their service delivery arrangements. These elements are important to consider to understand service delivery arrangements and MBA decision-making, embedded in its contextual setting.

Based on the new conceptual framework presented and the preliminary findings on the MSW management case, researchers could benefit from paying more attention to the process of MBA decision-making and role and interrelations of the various actors. Hence, the analysis of MBA decisions and service delivery arrangements commutes from the (local) government aspect to the governance facet. Understanding the institutional setting in which actors play, improves the framework to understand why particular actors (re) consider service delivery modes. Also, by disaggregating services, new insights can be developed regarding the complexity of the mix of additional service delivery arrangements below the aggregate level of services. Digging deeper in the history of service delivery arrangements, and understanding and constructing these decision-making rounds, could prove to be insightful in understanding the dynamics of these MBA decisions.

Acknowledgements

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