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Not a black or white issue: choosing alternative organizational models for delivering early childhood services

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Title. **Not a black or white issue: Choosing alternative organizational models for delivering early childhood services**

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Abstract. This article investigates how municipalities choose their organizational arrangements for delivering early childhood services and the interplay among the regional framework, local legacies, and agency factors influencing these choices. We answered these questions through a mix-method approach and a comparative analysis of four European regions in the same country (Italy). Our data shows that a variety of hybrid organizational models for service delivery is possible, and the fundamental role played by the regional framework in affecting organizational choices - with local factors such as legacy and agency compensating in the event of its absence.

Keywords: Inter-Municipal Cooperation; Contracting out; Organizational tools; Service delivery; Early childhood services

1. Introduction

Is Inter-Municipal Cooperation (IMC) alternative or complementary to contracting out? Are hybrid organizational models possible for the delivery of municipal services? If yes, what political and institutional factors determine the choice of different organizational arrangements? Despite recent developments in the field, public administration literature agrees that only partial answers have been given to these interrelated research questions to which this article intends to respond.

Indeed, empirical studies that examined the reasons that push municipalities to opt for different organizational arrangements for public service delivery have privileged, so far, an explanatory, rationally driven instrumental analysis, primarily based on structural factors related to the type of service, as well as the financial conditions and the demographic size of local governments. Furthermore, two key dimensions underlying the organizational choices of local authorities, namely whether to run a service directly or to outsource it and whether to run a service alone or in cooperation with other municipalities, have been examined separately so far. Moreover, various research methodologies and theoretical approaches have been proposed, hindering a global view of research in this field.

This article aims to fill the above gap in the context of public administration/public management research. In particular, it contributes to the current debate on the emergence of different organizational arrangements for the delivery of local public services from both a theoretical and empirical perspective, focusing on how different contextual factors affect local government organizational choices and seeking to explain variations in different regional institutional design configurations. To do so, we draw upon an increasingly influential theoretical

stance on the study of regional governance that explains how alternative mechanisms for sustaining collective actions among local actors are selected (Feiock 2004; Tavares and Feiock 2018). In a nutshell, we consider the degree and type of collaboration risk as determined by the context in which collaboration takes place, and we thus argue that the multiple principal problems that can exist in choosing organizational tools for public service delivery (Bel et al. 2022; Voorn et al. 2019; Silvestre et al., 2018) can be solved by specific contextual factors able to reduce transactions costs and cooperation risks for local actors (Feiock 2007). This contextual explanation of the emergence of institutional arrangements for service delivery (Casula 2020; Mu and Cui 2023) is used in the article to test the general hypothesis *that IMC and contracting out are not necessary alternatives since a variety of hybrid organizational forms may exist based on different contextual factors that can simultaneously affect municipal choices for service delivery.*

Given this premise and given that the choice of organizational tools for renewing the management of local public utilities in Europe is context-dependent (Steiner et al., 2014), in terms of case selection strategies, this paper will focus on the European context. Specifically, in four subnational cases, we empirically investigate the influence of contextual factors on municipalities' choice to run services alone or in cooperation with other local governments and the type of management arrangement (direct management, contracting-in, accreditation, or full outsourcing) chosen for service delivery. We used a mixed-method approach to assess whether and how three different contextual factors— namely, a) the regional legal framework; b) the local policy legacy in the service sector; and c) the presence or not of local policy entrepreneurs (be they political leaders or top public managers) — can simultaneously affect transaction costs and cooperation risks for local actors when designing different arrangements for service delivery. We paid attention to just one policy area — namely, early childhood services (ECS) — and to four regional contexts belonging to the same European country (Italy) to limit the influence of the different national legislations and factors intrinsic to specific policy sectors. The study of ECS in Italy is a case in point. Several studies have shown the widespread diffusion of both contracting-out and IMC in Italy during the last years (Bolgherini et al. 2018a; Citroni et al. 2013a), especially if compared with other European countries (Bel et al. 2022; Tavares and Feiock 2018).

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 deals with “how” municipalities may deliver social and educational services and critically reviews the literature on organizational alternatives with an eye to the increasing relevance of hybrid arrangements and a focus on ECS in the Italian case. Section 3 presents the theoretical and analytical background to formulate empirical expectations about the contextual factors influencing municipal organizational choices (“why” hypothesis). Section 4 is devoted to clarifying the research design and methodology. Section 5 illustrates the research findings, which are then discussed with the conclusion in Section 6.

2. The “how”: organizational alternatives to deliver social and educational services in Europe

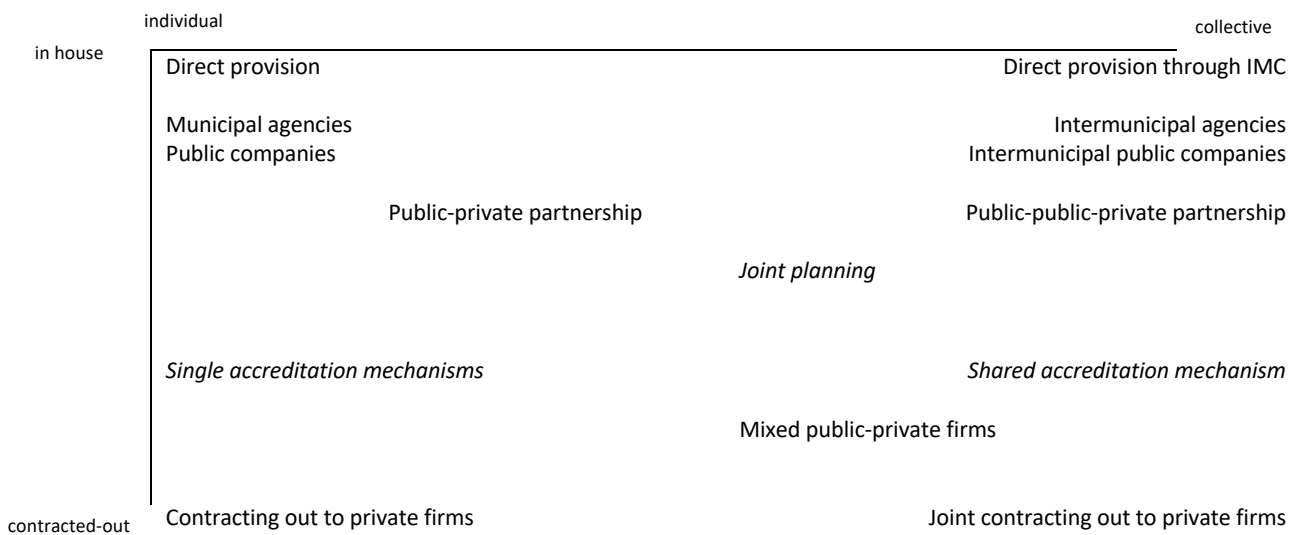
The variety of organizational options for managing and delivering public services by local authorities has been under analysis for at least three decades, especially after the rise of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm and alongside successive waves of administrative reforms (Torres and Pina 2002). Interest in the topic has also increased in the aftermath of the global economic crisis of the late 2000s, which strained the budgets of public administrations and their ability to respond efficiently and effectively to citizens’ needs (Kopric et al. 2018; Lippi and Tsekos 2019).

We can generally classify the organizational options to deliver local public services along two dimensions. First, the main distinction (and the most explored in the literature) is between direct/in-house provision and contracted-out solutions (see, among the others, Bel and Fageda 2007; Hefetz and Warner 2011). According to the NPM “promises”, delivering local public services through for-

profit contracts with both private firms (Savas 2000; Alonso et al. 2015) and municipal corporations (Tavares and Camoes 2007; Citroni et al. 2013a; Grossi and Richard 2016) is supposed to help to reduce the internal costs of hierarchy and increase effectiveness thanks to the private partners' know-how (Dan and Pollitt 2015). Other scholars, instead, had proposed a distinction between individual and collective strategies. For example, more recent research has shown that smaller municipalities increasingly use organizational solutions based on collaborative agreements instead of market-like instruments (i.e., for-profit contracts). It is the case of inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) – which may help to save costs through the realization of scale economies that spread out fixed costs over higher production volumes (Bel and Fageda 2007; Bolgherini et al. 2019) – but also of public-private partnership with not-for-profit entities – which in turn can contribute with their own cognitive, human and financial resources to cheaper and better local service provision.

The above distinction is analytically fruitful since it emphasizes two different rationales behind organizational choices. However, although studies on public service provision in Europe have usually treated IMC as an alternative to privatization insofar as it enables the same benefits (e.g., cost reduction and the pursuit of economies of scale) while maintaining stricter public authority control over service management (Bel, Hebdon and Warner 2018, 175), on an empirical level, collective strategies are not necessarily to be understood as a substitute for market mechanisms. Indeed, it is possible to observe pure inter-municipal cooperation issued to maintain service delivery in public hands (e.g., municipal unions or just shared service arrangements), but also hybrid solutions that combine cooperation and market mechanisms, such as mixed public-private firms (Bel and Fageda 2009), inter-municipal companies (Citroni et al. 2013b; Tavares and Feiock 2018) or joint contracting-out processes. We can thus conveniently locate concrete organizational options in an ideal space defined by the two dimensions mentioned above (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Organizational options to deliver local public services (*additional options specific to social and early childhood services in italic*)



Source: Author(s)' elaboration

Hybrid solutions are particularly diffused in the domain of social and educational services (Dorigatti et al. 2020): at least in the European context, these services are not subject to the same organizational constraints as services of general economic interest, such as competition for the market and full cost recovery. In the sphere of social and educational services, therefore, as compared to other contexts (see, among others: Warner and Gradus 2011; Warner 2006; Warner

and Prentice 2013), there is greater discretion in the options available to local governments in Europe, and thus wider room for maneuver for experimentation and hybrid solutions.

In the Italian case, the range of organizational options for the management of social services, and in particular of childcare services, is remarkably varied: childcare services, which also include nursery schools for children up to 3 years of age (the subject of this work), are mainly organized at the local level by municipalities and private entities (Campomori and Casula 2021), based on regulations issued by individual regions, in the absence of stringent rules at the national level. In addition to the options valid for all services – i.e., direct management (single or joint), management through contracting-in solutions such as municipal undertakings or institutions for personal services, and outsourcing of the service to private entities (including companies in which the municipalities have a stake) – municipalities have the possibility of accrediting nursery schools managed by private entities in the public service system (if the requirements foreseen by regional or municipal regulations are respected and guaranteed) or even to use co-planning tools to design the management of the service together with the Third Sector, sharing responsibilities and costs (Casula et al. 2022). There are also private nursery schools that do not enter the public circuit. Again, in the private circuit, given the lack of places available in public nursery schools, there has been an increase in the establishment of company kindergartens, and more and more families are organizing themselves in forms of private family schools, in which a mother looks after several children in addition to her own. Finally, as regards management through forms of inter-municipal cooperation, since early childhood services are not among the fundamental functions of municipalities, there is no stringent obligation for their associated exercise.

In conclusion, this comparative literature review on organizational alternatives to deliver local public services supports the hypothesis that IMC and contracting out are not necessarily alternatives since various “hybrid” organizational models are available. What is more, this variety of organizational options in Europe, as well as the absence of stringent regulatory constraints, at least at a national level, make early childhood services in the Italian case the ideal terrain for formulating and testing theoretical propositions and hypotheses concerning the “why” of municipal decisions on the management of local public services.

3. The “why”: the determinants of organizational choices

Alongside several comparative public administration studies, which have offered a mainly descriptive analysis of local public service reforms in various countries over the last decades (Kopric *et al.* 2018; Lippi and Tsekos 2019), a variety of approaches have instead focused on the determinants of municipal organizational choices regarding the management of public services, both concerning IMC (Teles 2016) and on the side of outsourcing and contracting out (Clifton *et al.* 2019).

Much of the literature on contracting out has privileged an explanatory, rationally-driven instrumental analysis of municipalities’ decisions. In particular, the starting point for all these studies is the transaction costs theory, which initially gave rise to the neo-institutionalist perspective in economics (Coase 1960) and was later extended to analyzing organizational and production choices in public administration (Williamson 1997). More recent studies have stressed the importance of other independent variables related to the structural characteristics of the municipalities (Brown and Potoski 2003; 2005; Brown *et al.* 2016). One is the financial condition of the local administrations: several scholars point out that there should be a positive relationship between increasing fiscal constraints and the willingness to outsource services since the alternative would be to reduce service levels at the expense of citizens (and political consensus, too) (Bel and Fageda 2007; Petersen *et al.* 2015). A second factor is municipal size, which leads to two contrasting

hypotheses: on the one hand, contracting out practices should be more diffuse in larger metropolitan areas where the number of external providers is high (Chandler and Feuille 1991); on the other, smaller municipalities are expected to benefit to a more significant extent from efficiency gains related to an increase in the scale of service delivery through cooperation (Chandler and Feuille 1991; Hefetz et al. 2012). Finally, public choice theorists point also toward ideological and political factors (Alonso et al. 2015): since the preferences of the median voter condition policy choices, it is reasonable to hypothesize that local officials' decisions on the organization of public services are shaped by citizens' preferences about the role of government in the economic and social sphere (Bel and Fageda 2009; Tavares and Camoes 2010).

About IMC, although scholars agree that it is difficult to generalize the reasons that push local governments to cooperate for the provision of one or more public services due to multiple political and institutional factors influencing each domestic context (Bel et al. 2022), it is possible to distinguish between three motivations that lead municipalities to establish collaborative arrangements (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002; Swianiewicz and Teles 2018). These motivations are not necessarily exclusive to each other. The first is the maintenance of the status quo. IMC is used by small municipalities to defend their *raison d'être* within their national political system and to circumvent plans of territorial amalgamation reforms. Secondly, local governments can see establishing IMC arrangements as a way to maximize the resources available and achieve their common goals better. The third motivation is related to evolutionary theory, viewing establishing an IMC arrangement as a local government's response to the changing situations of their external environment. In particular, municipalities can be willing to cooperate as a reaction to the incentives provided by the upper levels of government (regional, national, and European), then attract vital funding for their support for the provision of local public services.

Answering the "why" question presents theoretical and analytical challenges since, over the decades, various approaches to explain the determinants of municipal organizational choices for the management of public services have proliferated. What is more, as several scholars point out, so far, the sheer correlation between all the variables mentioned above and municipal organizational choices is demonstrably multivocal and often controversial (Petersen et al. 2015; Pallesen 2004; Tavares and Camões 2010), whatever method is used (large N quantitative analysis and small N case studies).

In this work, we hypothesize that the various factors that potentially influence municipal choices should be viewed as a complex fabric of conditions and strategies that reflects the 'politics of instrumentality' (i.e., «the subjective perceptions and political processes that surround the choice of policy instruments», Hood 2007, p. 136) underlying the selection and calibration of organizational tools. More specifically, following Steiner et al. (2018), we suppose that local governments' choices are determined by a combination of structural (i.e., demographic size, local financial conditions, type of service, etc.) and contextual factors related to the characteristics of political-institutional systems (e.g., the type of intergovernmental relations between local, regional and central government) as well as to the administrative/governmental traditions (concerning both the relations with the civil society/private sector and policy style). This article focuses then on analyzing how different configurations of contextual factors – net of the same structural factors – influence local governments' organizational choices for service provision.

Both municipal and regional level contextual factors will be taken into account. On the one hand, following the second-generation rational choice approach to the study of local and regional governance (Ostrom 2005), specific local community characteristics and formal or informal institutional arrangements may be framed as conditions that shape actors' single choice calculations insofar as they reduce transaction risks and information barriers for local players (Feiock 2007; Bel et al. 2022). For example, the choice among different organizational solutions can be facilitated by

homogeneous interests, shared values, or pre-existing networks among local agents (Feiock 2007). On the other hand, although poorly investigated so far, studying the role played by the regional contexts (understood in terms of rules, governance styles, and service management legacy, if any) in facilitating cooperation at the local level is particularly promising when it comes to analyzing the emergence of institutional arrangements for service delivery in the European context. Indeed, given the current trend to decentralize responsibilities for public services to the sub-national level (OECD 2020), regional governments may decide to issue their regulations or other policy instruments (such as incentives of various kinds) to shape service delivery in their territories, by therefore setting a set of constraints and opportunities affecting local actors' behaviors. For both IMC and the management of ECS, the regional framework can be more or less structured, depending on how clearly it defines: a) which option/model the Region wants to push municipalities towards; b) the system of incentives and disincentives (and their size) associated with the different options available to municipalities; c) the role the Region plays in coordinating municipalities' choices.

Based upon these premises, in this article, we intend to test the following theoretical propositions:

Proposition 1: If a well-structured regional framework of rules and/or incentives promoting specific patterns of service delivery exists, then municipal actors' choice among different organizational solutions will tend to align with regional preferences.

More precisely, we assume that a well-structured regional framework of rules and incentives concerning specific service delivery options (both in terms of inter-municipal cooperation and with respect to resorting or not to the market) reduces ambiguity and provides local actors with some key anchors (and possibly financial gains) that reduce uncertainty about potential choices and risks to be borne in case of failure. Consequently, we hypothesize that if and when this condition is met (i.e., a well-structured regional framework does exist), it will be the most influential factor in shaping local decisions, which will move in the direction suggested by regional legislation.

However, the presence of a solid regional framework is not to be taken for granted, especially in contexts such as the Italian one, which is furrowed by profound interregional differences in terms of institutional capacity (Putnam 1994; Vassallo 2013) and by significant variations as regards social and childcare policies (Fargion and Gualmini 2012). In the absence of a reliable regional framework of constraints and opportunities, municipalities are left to make their own choices with greater autonomy but also with a greater risk of opportunistic behavior from their counterparts, be they other local governments with whom they can collaborate or private providers of the service at hand. In these cases, the local context is crucial. On the one hand, relying on the legacy of the past without departing from established practices (either in terms of cooperation with other local governments or in terms of the way the service is managed) may be the safest way to avoid failure or at least to justify it better if it occurs. On the other, the absence of regional guidelines leaves room for local actors who, for various reasons (ranging from strategic calculations to ideal motivations), wish to act as policy entrepreneurs and propose innovative and groundbreaking solutions.

On this basis, let us assume that:

Proposition 2: In the absence of a structured regional framework, municipal organizational choices are driven by specific factors linked to the local institutional context, which is made of a mix of the legacy of the past and agency factors.

While the role of legacies in influencing decisions on local public services towards continuity with the past has already been widely explored in the literature (Swianiewicz and Teles 2018; Teles 2016), less attention has been paid to analyzing how factors relating to the agency side interact with such legacy. This is somewhat surprising given that the public policy literature attributes considerable importance to the agency in promoting policy change and innovation, such as policy entrepreneurship (Capano and Galanti 2021). Policy entrepreneurship can be exercised by local political leaders who invest ideational, relational, and positional resources in the policy process. In Europe, and Italy in particular, this role is often associated with mayors, vested with direct legitimacy and represent the vital political hubs for attracting resources to their territories (Dente 1997). On the other hand, their political and relational resources can also play a key role in building networks, such as inter-municipal cooperation (Galanti 2019). At the same time, however, other scholars have stressed the importance of top public managers and their characteristics for the creation of inter-organizational collaborations as they are the ones who operationally define and implement institutional strategies (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Esteve *et al.* 2013). In this article, we leave the balance between political leaders and chief executives to the discussion of the empirical findings. However, starting from the assumption that local actors primarily aim at reducing risks and potential costs related to uncertainty about the consequences of their choices, we assume that:

Proposition 2-bis: In the absence of a structured regional framework of rules and incentives, local actors will rely on legacy if/until this is available/practicable. Wherever this condition does not apply, decisions will depend on agency factors, namely the presence or absence of policy entrepreneurship that carries on the risks related to organizational change.

4. Research Design and Methodology

We used a case-oriented comparison to explain variations of municipal choices in specific and diverse sub-national institutional design configurations. Case-oriented comparison is, in fact, appropriate to answer both the “how” and the “why” questions given the potential that this research strategy has in favoring «the development of an extensive dialogue between the researcher’s ideas and the data in an examination of each case as a complex set of relationships, which allows causal complexity to be addressed» (della Porta 2008, 207).

Regarding the case selection strategy, our analysis within the European context focuses on the different types of organizations set up for the local management of early childhood services (ECS) in Italy. Focusing on a single country has the advantage of parametrizing the set of constraints and opportunities stemming from the national legislation in the field of IMC and of better highlighting the role played by intermediate levels of government. What is more, Italy is a case in point since the range of organizational options for the management of ECS is remarkably varied in this country, as explained in Section 2: municipalities may choose among direct management (single or in cooperation with other local governments), contracting-in solutions such as municipal undertakings or institutions for personal services, and outsourcing to private entities; they can also accredit private nursery schools or make recourse to co-planning with the Third Sector, sharing responsibilities and costs. Lastly, as ECS are not included in the list of fundamental functions of municipalities, the choice of providing them through IMC is entirely unrestricted. The variety of the available organizational options, as well as the absence of stringent national regulatory constraints, make thus ECS in the Italian case the ideal terrain for testing and formulating hypotheses concerning the determinants of the choices made by municipalities and the relevance of regional contexts.

For this purpose, to maximize variability, our analysis focuses on four Italian regions – namely, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Veneto, and Tuscany – with diverse regulatory and incentive systems in the field of IMC and ECS that created a different system of constraints/opportunities for their municipalities: Tuscany and Emilia Romagna as early as the 1990s had already passed laws that defined a clear and articulated system of rules and incentives for local authorities wishing to cooperate, giving preference to the form of the MUs as the way to IMC; concerning legislation on ECS, both regions explicitly define the model towards which to strive, promoting the integration between services and between public and private providers, as well as taking on a steering role regarding local strategies. Lombardy and Veneto, on the other hand, have less structured regulatory frameworks, characterized by a reactive and non-interventionist style: in terms of IMC, Lombardy essentially adapts to the rules established by national legislation, while Veneto leaves local authorities’ maximum autonomy of choice, without interference from above. Regarding the legislation on ECS, we do not find in either Region a solid development of clear guidelines for local authorities. In Lombardy, other instruments based on financial resources are preferred to regulation, while in Veneto most operational decisions are delegated to private operators (Table 1). Moreover, academic literature has shown different regional legacies concerning IMC and social and education services: since the mid-1990s, both Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna used their legislative leeway to promote services based on large districts and inter-municipal cooperation, while Lombardy and Veneto limited their action to coordinating local actors, leaving municipalities free to choose the size of the service areas (Fargion 1997). Different patterns of partisan politics also characterize the four regions: Emilia Romagna and Tuscany have historically been at the forefront of the red sub-culture and have been under center-left government continuously since the birth of regional institutions. Lombardy and Veneto, on the other hand, were Christian Democrat regions until the end of the first republic (in the early 1990s) and have been in center-right hands for the last 25 years (see, among others: Putnam et al. 1994; Vassallo 2013; Bolgherini and Grimaldi 2017). Lastly, in Italy, these four regions are where IMC has consolidated more in recent decades (Bolgherini et al. 2018b; Casula 2016).

Table 1. The four regions compared.

Region	Regional framework IMC	Regional framework ECS	Legacy - IMC	Legacy - Social and education services	Political color of regional govt.s (since the 1990s)
Emilia-Romagna	Strong system of rules, incentives, monitoring tools.	Regional framework very specific in its guidance to local governments about options for managing ECS. Explicit promotion of an integrated model.	Strong role of the Region in promoting IMC since the 1990s	Direct management by municipalities	Continuity, center-left
Lombardy	Non-interventionist style. Both for rules and incentives regional rules mostly follow national provisions.	Weak regional planning. Direct cash grants to households to freely choose among private providers.	Strong role of the Region in promoting IMC only in the last decade	Pluralist model: the public is on par with the private sector	Continuity, center-right
Tuscany	Strong system of rules and incentives.	Explicit regional model defined by law: mixed management and strong public steering	Strong role of the Region in promoting IMC since the 1980s	Direct management by municipalities	Continuity, center-left

Veneto	Non-interventionist style. Initiatives to promote IMC follow a bottom-up logic, placing value on the autonomy of individual municipalities.	Weak regional planning. Outreach of services on the ground is delegated to private entities, particularly religious associations and parishes.	Weak role of the Region in promoting IMC since the 1990s.	Pluralist model: the public is on par with the private sector	Continuity, center-right
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We chose Municipal Unions (MUs) as a unit of analysis instead of single municipalities. On the one hand, MUs are the most institutionalized organizational forms of IMC in Italy (Bel et al. 2022; Hulst and Van Montfort 2007). In fact, they are the only inter-municipal agreement in Italy that leads to the creation of a new second-tier local authority with its own political and technical bodies, used for the joint management of two or more municipal functions. Second, and consequently to the previous point, focusing on MUs allows us to better understand municipal organizational choices in the specific ECS domain. As municipalities that have joined a MU had already decided to solve structural problems of scale in providing services through IMC, looking at whether and why ECS were transferred to the MU allows us to highlight the distinctive features of the nature of the service. The relevance of studying MU in this article is also justified by the significant proliferation of this type of IMC in Italy during the last decade. Currently, there are 554 MUs in Italy¹, while they were 535 in 2017, 343 in 2012, 289 in 2007, and 179 in 2002 (see, Bolgherini et al. 2018b). This increase has mainly involved the four regions analyzed in this article. Hence, in a decade (2010-2020), MUs increased from 24 to 43 in Emilia-Romagna, from 53 to 80 in Lombardy, from 1 to 23 in Tuscany, and from 28 to 44 in Veneto. What is more, according to a recent official national census,² MUs in Italy now involve 2,782 municipalities, with an average of 6,2 municipalities participating in a MU.

Empirically, we opted for a mixed-method strategy combining a web survey of all MUs in the four regions and in-depth interviews with local politicians and officials responsible for ECS in a selected sample of four MUs (one for each Region). To parameterize the influence of structural variables and thus be able to test better our theoretical propositions concerning the influence of regional and local contexts, we selected four MUs that were similar in the number of adherent municipalities, demographic size, and socio-economic wellbeing. On the other hand, we expect the four MUs to be very different regarding contextual factors (since each falls within one of the four regions mentioned above). They also provide a wide range of the possible organizational choices available in Italy in the field of ECS, namely: i) accreditation with IMC in the case of the MU in Tuscany (i.e., the accreditation of private service providers was not decided, managed and agreed by the individual municipalities, but by the MU acting as a unit); ii) accreditation without IMC in the case of the MU in Veneto (the accreditation was decided, managed and agreed by the individual municipalities that constitute the MU); iii) contracting-out with IMC in the case of the MU in Lombardy; and, iv) public provision with IMC in the case of the MU in Emilia-Romagna. Since our aim is not only to test the theoretical expectations already available in the literature but also to explore the interaction between regional and local context factors, the mixed method design looked particularly suitable "in terms of qualitative research providing contextual understanding coupled with either generalizable, externally valid findings or broad relationships among variables uncovered through a survey" (Bryman 2006). As recorded in the literature, mixed methods may help "to overcome the epistemological differences between quantitative and qualitative paradigms" (Bergman 2008, 4), combining the test of existing knowledge with an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of a research phenomenon (Lund 2012). Heuristically, we consider the quantitative

¹ https://dait.interno.gov.it/territorio-e-autonomie-locali/sut/elenco_unioni_comuni.php

² <https://openitaliae.it/unioni-di-comuni/dati-generalioni#introduzione-unioni-di-comuni>

and qualitative components of the research to have equal status (i.e., they are given the same importance) (Greene 2015; Schoonenboom & Johnson 2017), as they allow us to answer two separate research questions and to help fill two different gaps in the literature.

In detail, at the end of 2021, two surveys - one designed for MUs in charge of ECS management (Questionnaire 1) and another one for MUs not in charge of ECS (Questionnaire 2) - were sent to all 190 MUs in the four regions covered by the study. In addition to some structural characteristics of the MUs, the survey aimed to identify the prevalent management arrangement for ECS (direct management, contracting-in, accreditation of private providers, and outsourcing) and the policy-makers' views on how several factors (i.e., demographic dimension, budget, human resources, service-related technology, regional regulation, previous IMC experiences, local political homogeneity, and agency factors) affected the decision to a) transfer - or not - the service to the MU; and b) the choice of management arrangements. The surveys were composed of open-ended, closed-ended, and scaled questions. Seventy-four questionnaires were collected, geographically distributed as shown in Table 2. To minimize the risk of self-selection of the sample, we adopted a statistical procedure that takes into consideration some context variables often used within the academic and practitioner debate on polycentric territorial structures (ANCI 2005; ESPON 2016) – namely, the number of municipalities of the MUs, their average population and being a mountainous or non-mountainous area. This statistical procedure, often used in studies of local government using survey data from a similar unit, allowed us to validate the representativeness of the sample: in practice, we checked whether the MUs that responded to the survey had structural characteristics that were in line with the average values present in each of the four regions with regard to the three context variables mentioned above. The questionnaire included open-ended fields where respondents could comment on the choice of service management methods. This information was retrieved for the four in-depth cases and was used to integrate the validation of the interviews and the other data gathered.

Table 2. Respondents to the web survey of all MUs in the four regions

Region	Total MUs	N. respondents	% of respondents
Emilia-Romagna	43	24	56
Lombardy	80	23	29
Tuscany	23	13	57
Veneto	44	14	32
<i>Total</i>	<i>190</i>	<i>74</i>	<i>39</i>

In-depth interviews within the four selected MUs were aimed instead at investigating the regional framework's role, as well as the importance local agency and legacy factors had for the organizational choices of the municipalities. To this purpose, 12 semi-structured interviews (3 for each MU) were conducted with inter-municipal officials in charge of ECS management. Each interview was aimed at 1) reconstructing the ECS organization; 2) understanding how ECS are managed (associated management or not; direct management, accreditation, outsourcing, or any indirect management); 3) reconstructing the decision-making process that led to the extant organizational structure, with particular reference to any "critical junctures"; 4) to understand the main factors that influenced MUs organizational choices for ECS management, in particular, related to i) structural constraints; ii) constraints linked to the regional context (regional legislation; presence of previous experiences/legacies); iii) constraints due to the specific sector; iv) factors of a political nature; 5) the presence or not of subjects (internal or external to the organization) who guided/influenced the process. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each. At the end of

each interview, key informers were asked to share any other relevant information on ECS management in their MU, as well as possible internal documents and reports produced over the years and the ones available online.

Quantitative and qualitative data obtained with this field analysis were then triangulated in order to trace two different policy narratives (Fisher and Foster 1993), answering the "how" question (i.e., whether IMC is alternative or complementary to contracting out) and the "why" question (i.e., the main factors, be they related to the regional framework, the policy legacies, and the agency factors, behind the choice of specific organizational arrangements for ECS management). Table 3 shows how triangulation happened and the sources used to answer the two questions, while the policy narratives are presented in the next Section.

Table 3. Sources used to answer the "how" and the "why" questions

Research Question	Issue/factor investigated	Sources used		
		Secondary data	Survey data	Semi-structured interviews (Open question)
"How" question	<i>IMC and contracting out are not necessarily alternatives</i>		Multiple choice question (more options available): - (Questionnaire 1) "Please indicate the prevailing management method (in terms of the approximate percentage of available places)." - (Questionnaire 2) "In the event that the municipalities belonging to the Municipal Union (all or some) have conferred social services on the institution, what is the prevailing management method?"	Description of the current state of the organization of early childhood education services: conferment or not to the Municipal Union and in which steps; functions conferred; responsibilities and any other contacts (who supplies and who manages).
		- Official National Reports - Official Regional Reports - Reports by regional Units of ANCI	Scaling question (1 = "not important at all" – 4 = "very important ") - (Questionnaire 1): "We now ask you to specify how much the constraints linked to the regional legislation on Unions (regulations, incentives, etc.) may have pushed towards assigning functions relating to early childhood education services". - (Questionnaire 2): "We now ask you to specify how much the constraints linked to the regional legislation on the Municipal Unions (regulations, incentives, etc.) may have pushed towards the choice of the management methods adopted".	Description of the possible role played by the presence/absence of the constraints linked to the regional legislation (regulations, incentives, etc.).
"Why" question	<i>Role of legacy factors</i>	- Official National Reports - Official Regional Reports - Reports by regional Units of ANCI	Scaling question (1 = "not important at all" – 4 = "very important ") - (Questionnaire 1): "We now ask you to specify how much the previous associative experiences may have pushed towards assigning functions relating to early childhood education services". - (Questionnaire 2): "We now ask you to specify how much the previous associative experiences may have pushed towards the choice of the management methods adopted".	Description of the possible role played by the presence/absence of previous associative experiences.
		<i>Role of agency factors</i>	Scaling question (1 = "not important at all" – 4 = "very important ") - (Questionnaire 1): "We now ask you to specify how much the presence of subjects inside or outside the organization who have guided your strategic choices may have pushed towards assigning functions relating to early childhood education services". - (Questionnaire 2): "We now ask you to specify how much the presence of subjects inside or outside the organization who have guided your strategic choices may have	About the decision-making process and its junctures, have subjects inside or outside the organization guided/influenced the organizational choices the most (possibly referring to a policy entrepreneur)? Please describe them.

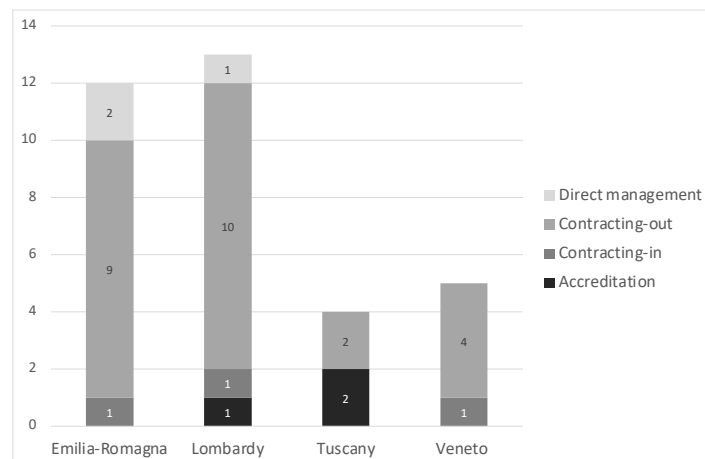
5. Research findings

5.1. Answering the "how" question: Is IMC an alternative or complementary to contracting out?

Concerning how municipalities manage ECS, our research began by asking whether the use of IMC was a strategy alternative to contracting out set in place to keep the service in public hands while increasing its efficiency and effectiveness through economies of scale, or whether it should instead be understood as an option that does not exclude – but rather coexists with – all possible management arrangements.

As illustrated in Figure 2, our survey data clearly show that IMC and contracting out are not two alternative solutions: looking exclusively at the 34 MUs (out of 74) to which municipalities have transferred responsibility for ECS (i.e., those cases in which municipalities have decided to use IMC for service management), contracting out turns out to be the most widely used arrangement almost everywhere. It is also worth noting that even in the MUs located within the same Region, IMC is combined with all other organizational solutions, such as accreditation (two cases in Tuscany and one case in Lombardy), contracting-in (one case in Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, and Veneto, respectively), as well as direct management (two cases in Emilia-Romagna and one case in Lombardy), which, however, plays a residual role. Therefore, our data show that IMC is not necessarily a tool for strategically maintaining service management in public hands; instead, the reasons behind the choice to run services in cooperation should be explored along with those affecting decisions on the overall arrangement of service provision in more general terms.

Fig. 2. MUs with responsibility over ECS by Region and prevalent management modality (absolute values)



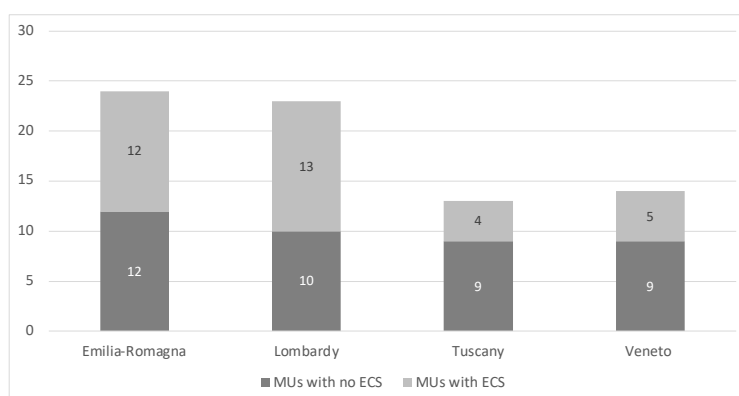
5.2. Answering the "why" question: what determines local governments' organizational choices?

As for Proposition 1, namely, that a structured regional framework on both IMC and field-specific aspects of ECS should have constrained local governments' choices, evidence confirms our expectations only regarding sector-specific regional legislation. Indeed, the choice to transfer ECS to the MUs seems unaffected by the features of regional regulations on IMC: in Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, the two regions with the most robust regional framework and the most generous incentives system for associated management, only 4 out of 13 and 12 out of 24 municipalities

conferred ECS to the MU, with figures not dissimilar to Veneto and Lombardy where regional rules and benefits are weak (Figure 3).

Conversely, the matter changes if we turn to regional regulations on the specific field of ECS. In this regard, the influence of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscan ECS legislation (Reg. Law 19/2016 and Reg. Regulation 41/r/2013, respectively) on the decisions made by municipalities was considered important or very important by most survey respondents (10 out of 12 in Emilia-Romagna and 4 out of 4 in Tuscany) and by the people involved in the in-depth interviews. Both regions have comprehensive regulatory frameworks that municipalities must follow when planning local ECS supply. These frameworks define ECS as a sector of significant public interest to be managed in integration with the rest of the preschool educational services (the so-called 0-6 services) in a district perspective and with a synergic relationship between public and private/third sector supply. The Tuscany Region, in this regard, has set up a proper model that explicitly promotes a system of mixed public-private management, in which public and private providers collaborate within the framework of a system of standard rules drawn up by the local institutions (Region + municipalities) and in which the quality standards of the services, the requirements for accreditation and the pedagogical coordination activities (that are common for everyone) are defined by the public administration. The system adopted by the MU under study follows precisely this model, which is «accepted without any particular strategic reasoning»³.

Fig. 3. MUs with and without ECS transfer by region (absolute values)



Our Proposition 1 is confirmed not only for Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, where the regional legislation on ECS is robust and well-structured, but also - albeit for opposite reasons - in Lombardy and Veneto. In Lombardy, the interviews conducted in the MU under study highlighted that the regional planning on ECS is relatively poor. Recently the Region has privileged measures that encourage families to resort to the market (such as "Nidi Gratis", a regional contribution that covers the share of monthly fees owed by families for attendance at nurseries and micro-nurseries) rather than turning to public facilities, which are rather scarce. In Lombardy, 37% of the municipalities do not have their crèche (Openpolis 2019). In the Veneto region, both survey respondents and those interviewed in the MU under study deemed regional regulations substantially irrelevant in influencing the choices of the municipalities, given that the absence of a robust regional framework leaves the municipalities without any foothold to which they can latch the choice of their organizational model. So much so that in the MU examined, decisions on ECS remain entirely in the hands of the municipalities, which are left with essentially no incentives and no clear regional

³ Cfr. Interview with official working in a MU, Tuscany Region.

guidance to follow in their organizational choices. Under this condition, according to Propositions 2 and 2b, local actors should ground their decisions on contextual factors that can reduce uncertainty, such as legacy. Alternatively, in the absence of that, they should rely on the presence of actors with the will to undertake specific options.

Veneto, in many ways, serves as an emblematic case study. Our findings highlight that here legacy factors were decisive in the "choice" not to transfer the service to the MU, while agency factors were decisive in the choice of specific management arrangements. More in detail, the prevalent choice to not transfer ECS to the MU is grounded in the historical weakness of the Veneto municipalities in terms of ownership of childcare services, which in turn has to do with the historical-cultural profile of the territory: nursery schools have always been predominantly in the hands of the local system of Catholic parishes and organizations.⁴, which is a typical trait in a region notoriously assimilated to the "white" catholic subculture in the years of the so-called First Republic (Putnam et al. 1994; Vassallo 2013). At the same time, ECS are traditionally entrusted to the parental network, with limited demand for the service until recently. It is no coincidence that 8 out of 11 survey participants answered that the nature of the service influenced the choice not to transfer the service: on the one hand, there was no need up to a certain point.⁵ On the other, "certain types of sectors, such as social and educational services, are bound by a political salience that often drives administrators to want to keep direct control."⁶ This apparent politicization does not so much translate into willingness to manage the ECS directly but rather into maintaining the "environmental" balance and safeguarding the relationship between the individual municipality and other organizations within its territory (in this case, parishes, and related local interests). In this sense, although the MU contributed somewhat to the service once it entered the agendas of municipalities (e.g., by providing human resources in those municipalities where these were insufficient or through guidelines to ensure equity in access fees), this soft coordination role remained largely informal. Conversely, MU played a solid "agency" role in choosing the main type of management adopted (accreditation). With the creation of the new entity, in fact, a cohesive group of social workers, some of whom had worked in the municipalities that later merged with the MU, was created, who personally led the technical tables with the municipalities to decide on the type of management and accreditation procedures, in a context in which the municipalities did not have the space to manage the service on their own because of the legacy elements mentioned above.

The role of agency factors, even more so than legacy, becomes visible in the management strategy chosen by the MU examined in Lombardy, to which – unlike that of Veneto – municipalities have transferred responsibility for ECS. In this case, too, a decisive agency role was played by technical leadership: in fact, according to the interviewees, the decision to outsource was a technical decision, in which a leading role was played by the sector manager, particularly concerning the proposal of the tender specifications and their contents.⁷ By contrast, there has never been any honest political debate, as the demand for public service in the MU territory is very low.⁸ This increased margin of autonomy of the sector manager also results from the legacies related to this policy sector in the municipalities belonging to the MU examined: also, as a consequence of the abovementioned regional contribution encouraging families to resort to the market, there has

⁴ Cfr. Interview with official working in a MU, Veneto Region

⁵ Cfr. Interview with official working in a MU, Veneto Region.

⁶ Cfr. Interview with official working in a MU, Veneto Region.

⁷ Cfr. Interview with official working in a MU, Lombardy Region.

⁸ Cfr. Interview with official working in a MU, Lombardy Region.

never been a pressing demand for building a crèche due to the presence of parenting networks and the emergence of the private sector, which has been able to supply the little existing demand.⁹

6. Discussion and concluding remarks

This article investigated how municipalities chose their organizational arrangements for delivering ECS and the mix of factors influencing their choices. These two interrelated questions have been answered through a comparative analysis focused on Municipal Unions (MUs) in four different European regions belonging to the same country, which were selected trying to parametrize structural variables in order to focus on the interplay among the regional framework, local legacies, and agency factors. The survey data on all MUs were paired with a rich qualitative analysis of four specific cases to test our theoretical propositions and formulate hypotheses about the combination of different contextual factors to be put forth in future research. We are aware that the article's focus is limited to ECS, and our analysis cannot claim any generalization since it was carried out on a small number of cases; however, we feel that our research findings contribute to the debate on how local public utilities are managed and delivered from multiple perspectives.

First and foremost, survey data clearly show that IMC is not necessarily a strategy implemented by municipalities to maintain direct management of services but is an organizational solution compatible with all possible service delivery options, particularly with contracting out. The decision to manage services through cooperation with other local governments is thus a choice that transcends purely instrumental considerations and should be framed within the more complex choice-making process that considers at once the possibility of providing the service alone or in cooperation and any possible ways of dealing with private entities.

Second, our research findings highlight a hitherto neglected aspect in the literature addressing the problem of organizational choices made by municipalities in the area of public services, namely, the role that a well-structured regional framework can play in reducing many of the transaction costs and risks inherent in organizational settings diverse from single direct management, both in terms of legitimacy and instrumental convenience. In a sector such as ECS, which has been under stress in recent years due to a shortage of human and financial resources, and where the quality of the service is of utmost importance in terms of public attention and political consensus, the opportunity to ground organizational choices on a clear regional regulatory framework does help local actors reduce uncertainty about the tangible consequences and consensus of their choices. Compared to the expectations we had formulated in Proposition 1, however, it is just the regional regulatory framework related to the policy area where the service provided falls that matters in the sense specified above rather than that on IMC. Indeed, survey data show that the decision to run ECS in cooperation by municipalities already associated in an MU seems to disregard any assessment of the constraints and opportunities (e.g., incentives) provided by regional regulations on IMC. This may depend on the fact that, simply because they have formed an MU, some incentives have already been obtained by municipalities; but it may also be due to the political salience of the specific area of ECS, which makes it particularly costly (in terms of uncertainty and consensus) for individual municipalities to delegate control to a new overarching entity. Testing Proposition 1 in other policy areas with characteristics other than ECS might help unravel this question.

Third, the research findings confirm the hypotheses underlying our propositions 2 and 2b, which enrich the debate – especially in the European context – about the determinants of municipalities' organizational choices through the formulation of more explicit and sharper

⁹ Cfr. Interview with official working in a MU, Lombardy Region.

expectations about “how” contextual factors (such as legacy and local agency) intertwine while conditioning decisions on service delivery. In the absence of regional legislation that provides municipalities with a framework to anchor their choices, local actors seek to reduce uncertainty by clinging to field legacy, which represents not only a set of tried-and-true solutions but also reflects the system of interests that has settled over time around specific organizational arrangements. Where, however, such a legacy is not available (e.g., where municipalities have little experience in managing the service, as in the case of Veneto) or where it is no longer attainable (e.g., due to changed environmental conditions or to inadequate resources), decisions depend instead on the presence of local actors who have not only specific political preferences, but first and foremost knowledge on how to organize the service, and succeed in driving their recipe in through the rest of the administration. Indeed, our in-depth analysis of the two MUs in Veneto and Lombardy revealed that, in the absence of a robust regional framework and a legacy to cling to in choosing the type of provision of ECS, it was the technical component of the administration that played this agency role: on the one hand, especially if they have been working in the field for a long time, technical staff have continuity in the role that fosters the creation of communities of practice on which the political component – which is instead relatively transient – relies (as in the Veneto case); on the other hand, the technical component holds specialized knowledge that becomes all the more complex the closer service entrustment approaches market mechanisms, as in the case of contracting-out through competitive bidding. In these cases (as in the Lombard one), in the absence of clear preferences expressed by the political side, the technicians inevitably drive the decision-making process by saying what works and what does not. This point provides new insight into the hypotheses formulated in the literature concerning the relevance of political factors in the choice of service delivery solutions, as it emphasizes the potential “political face” of the technical component, which due to the knowledge held, can assume a decisive role in driving decision-making processes. In this direction, as suggested by Esteve et al. (2013), further research aimed to investigate the characteristics and the role of this technical component would be helpful.

Last but not least, our research findings can also offer some valuable guidance to decision-makers and practitioners engaged in the pursuit of organizational arrangements for service management, warning them against one-size-fits-all solutions and suggesting careful evaluation of contextual factors in order to choose solutions that are not only technically feasible but also politically acceptable. Even in this light, the validity of our theoretical and analytical framework, the appropriateness of the mixed method we have adopted, as well as the heuristic validity of our propositions could be tested in more than one future research direction: on the one hand, as mentioned earlier, by applying the same framework to a policy area other than ECS, in order to assess whether and how much the special nature of the service at stake conditions the observed results. On the other hand, by increasing the number of cases under quantitative and qualitative analysis, either by extending - for example - the research to all Italian regions or by proceeding with a cross-national comparison that goes so far as to consider the national regulatory framework among the independent variables.

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