



Local Government in Switzerland

Responses to Urban-Rural Challenges

edited by

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November 2021

The Country Report on Local Government in Switzerland is a product of the LoGov-project: “Local Government and the Changing Urban-Rural Interplay”.

The H2020-MSCA-RISE-2018 project aims to provide solutions for local governments that address the fundamental challenges resulting from urbanisation. To address these complex issues, 18 partners from 17 countries and six continents share their expertise and knowledge in the realms of public law, political science, and public administration. LoGov identifies, evaluates, compares, and shares innovative practices that cope with the impact of changing urban-rural relations in major local government areas (WP 1-5).

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This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 823961.



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Structure of Local Government



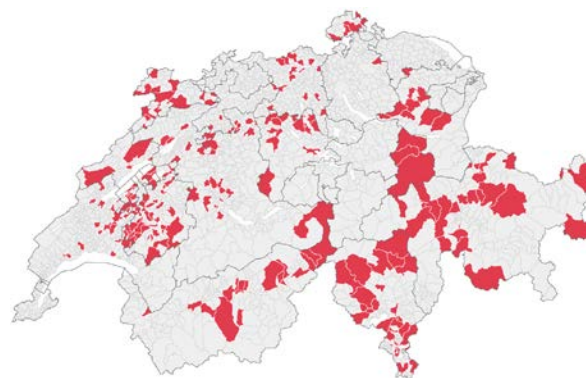
4.1. The Structure of Local Government in Switzerland: An Introduction

Eva Maria Belser, Flavien Felder and Bernhard Altermatt, *IFF Institute of Federalism, University of Fribourg*

The number of local governments in Switzerland has decreased massively during the last two decades. When the federation in 1848 came into being, it was composed of 25 cantons and 3,203 communes. Three hundred of them disappeared through amalgamation until 2000 (one hundred of them because of a profound structural reform in the Canton of Thurgau). Then, the local government landscape began to change massively. In 2012, the number of municipalities decreased to 2,495, and in 2018, the number went down to 2,222. Currently, a few hundred municipalities are in the process of amalgamation or consider doing so. This process amounts to a total reduction of about one third of communes/municipalities and characterizes an overarching tendency in Switzerland's structure of local government.

The process of mergers is driven either by the communes themselves (bottom-up) or by the cantons (top-down). The Confederation has no competence to interfere with local government structures, or to plan, implement or prevent mergers from taking place.

While some cantons have massively reduced the number of communes, others have not. The great variance between cantons are not due to demographic differences but to different legal regimes and also political cultures. One group of cantons allows for mandatory mergers of communes (but rarely uses the mechanism), a second group financially incentivizes mergers, and a third group leaves the initiative entirely to the communes. The graph to the right illustrates that the process has been unequally distributed across the whole country. Mergers most frequently take place in cantons offering support and financial benefits to interested communes. Major territorial restructuring has taken place in highly fragmented and partly rural cantons, such as Glarus, Ticino, Fribourg/Freiburg, Graubünden/Grischun/Grigioni, and Vaud, smaller ones in most cantons.



■ Fusionierte Gemeinden in der Schweiz 2001–2014
Quelle: Studie Studerus/Schaltegger, 2016

The graph to the right illustrates that the process has been unequally distributed across the whole country. Mergers most frequently take place in cantons offering support and financial benefits to interested communes. Major territorial restructuring has taken place in highly fragmented and partly rural cantons, such as Glarus, Ticino, Fribourg/Freiburg, Graubünden/Grischun/Grigioni, and Vaud, smaller ones in most cantons.

Mergers equally occur in rural and urban settings but follow completely different motives. In rural environments, they typically respond to financial constraints, difficulties to find adequate personnel and to deliver increasingly complex local services. In urban areas, mergers serve to bring cities, which have grown into spreading agglomerations with surrounding communes, into one political entity and to improve planning and urban development on a scale



corresponding to the social and structural reality. However, numerous planned mergers have failed, mostly due to popular refusal driven by strong local identities or financial considerations.

Because of rapid urbanization and the very different and flexible approaches of cantons to this phenomenon, differences of communes within cantons and between cantons are increasing in many ways. The largest commune of Switzerland, the City of Zurich, has more than 400,000 inhabitants, the smallest one, Corippo in the Canton of Ticino (currently merging with neighboring communes), only 14. In the mountainous Canton of Graubünden/Grischun/Grigioni, more than half of the now 128 communes are populated by less than 1,000 people; in the urban Canton of Basel-City, there are only three communes, one of them a very small municipality. The great differences amongst the communes, with respect to population, area, as well as human and financial resources, are a challenge to the symmetric structure of federal Switzerland.

Inter-municipal cooperation plays a crucial role. It is usually based on inter-municipal treaties, which are bilateral or multilateral, and often lead to the establishment of inter-municipal institutions and associations. While the democratic deficit of these structures is often deplored, communes confirm that inter-municipal cooperation is becoming increasingly important. It is practiced in order to profit from scale effects and to prevent further centralization of competences at the cantonal level. Most Swiss communes cooperate in the field of population protection, fire services, health services, education, water and sewage as well as waste disposal; more than half of all communes seek partnerships in the field of social aid and assistance to the elderly as well.

To the surprise of most observers, recent research has questioned the efficiency of communal mergers in certain respects. Researchers have been able to show that the process of merging municipalities itself is costly and, in most cases, does not immediately produce the expected cost-saving effects. This is presumably because many merging communes have already strongly cooperated before their union and realized the cost-saving potential before merging. The research results question whether cantons should continue to strongly incentivize amalgamations or not.⁷⁴

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This project has received funding from
the European Union's Horizon 2020 re-
search and innovation programme under
grant agreement No 823961.

