



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

**Boekbespreking van: Effecten van Herindeling**  
Denters, S.A.H.

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## Book Reviews

J.M.J. Berghuis, M. Herweijer en W.J.M. Pol (eds.), *Effecten van herindeling (Effects of municipal amalgamations)*. Kluwer: Groningen 1995.

Municipal amalgamations are a major instrument in the reorganization of local government in many countries in North-Western Europe. These amalgamations, however, are as pervasive as they are controversial. Both in academia, and among politicians and bureaucrats there is a heated debate on the merits of these reorganizations of local government.

This volume is a report of an ambitious research project designed to investigate the actual effects of amalgamations. The research was commissioned by the Dutch Home Office. This quasi-experimental study concentrated on the effects of the consolidation of nine smaller municipalities (average size: 4,700 inhabitants) in the Dutch province of Groningen into three larger units (average size: 14,100 inhabitants). In order to measure the effects of this reorganization a team of seven researchers collected a vast amount of data for this experimental group, before (1987/8), during (1989), and after (1992/3) the reorganization. In addition, the research team collected data for a control group from two small municipalities that were not involved in an amalgamation. Effects of the amalgamation were considered to be established once three tests had been passed successfully:

- the changes had taken place in all three new municipalities;
- the changes had not taken place in the two units in the control group;
- detailed case studies had produced evidence that certain processes linking these changes to the reorganization had actually occurred (p.42).

The study is broad in perspective. First, it was designed to gauge both the transitory effects of the merger and the long term (structural) effects of an increase in municipal scale. Second, the study addresses both changes in the political and administrative organization (Part I) and changes in policies (Part II). Third, the study covers a rather broad range of policy areas (social security benefits, environmental protection, waste treatment, housing, sports, and fiscal policies).

Following the introduction, and two chapters on theory and methods, the research findings are presented in ten substantive chapters. Each of these ten chapters begins with a short introduction and then proceeds with the formulation of some 'theoretical' expectations and an empirical test to corroborate these expectations.

In Part I the organizational effects of amalgamations are discussed. Rather than presenting a comprehensive summary of all major findings, I will provide a somewhat arbitrary anthology of some of them. After a discussion of the preparations made for the imminent amalgamation (chapter 4), the book discusses the effects of the amalgamation on the functioning of political parties (chapter 5). Parties play a crucial role in (local) democracy. In the long run both the structure of the party system and the internal dynamics of the parties change as the size of the municipality increases. First, strictly local party groups (unaffiliated with national political parties) tend to disappear from the municipal council. Their place is taken by small party groups associated with a national party. Second, the participation of citizens in parties (membership, attending meetings, et cetera) tends to decline. For these reasons amalgamations are likely to affect local politics fundamentally.

Chapter 6 discusses the consequences of amalgamations for the political officials in municipal government (council members and the members of the executive: mayor and aldermen). In addition to various allegedly transitory effects (e.g. a tendency to represent outlying settlements in the council and in the executive), the amalgamation is considered to have structural effects too. The new units are able to increase the number of aldermen (three instead of two) and furthermore have the opportunity to appoint them for more hours (nearly full-time). This, however, does not compensate for the loss of capacity resulting from the reduction of the total number of aldermen in the region (from nine municipalities with two aldermen each to three units with eight aldermen in total). Chapter 7 examines the consequences of the amalgamations for the local bureaucracies. Amalgamations result in more differentiated organizations. Both the number of functional units and the number of hierarchical echelons in the organization increase after the reorganization. Consequently, coordination of bureaucratic activities takes increasingly more time and is being formalized. Finally, amalgamations resulted in a greater reliability of the performance of tasks. After the reorganization it was far easier for the organizations to cope with illness or vacant situations.

Part II presents the results of the reorganization for policies. Most of the findings in this part of the book must be a disillusion for advocates of amalgamations. On the one hand, amalgamations do not result in consistently better performance. The implementation of environmental policies is not improved (chapter 8); the speed at which innovations in waste treatment were adopted in the amalgamated units tended to be slower than in the municipalities in the control group (chapter 10). The local development corporations of the new consolidated units were not consistently more professional than in the two municipalities in the control group (chapter 11). Moreover, the researchers were unable to establish economies of scale with regard to the costs of administration and the superiority in financial management, as claimed by advocates of amalgamations (chapter 13). On the other hand, the researchers do find evidence for considerable transition costs: new policies are adopted more slowly than elsewhere because the reorganization is at the centre of everyone's attention

(chapters 8 and 10) and resources are squandered at the eve of the consolidation (chapters 12 and 13). The book concludes with a summary of its major results.

This book is recommendable for several reasons. First, the research design enables the researchers to establish both short-term and long-term effects, something which earlier studies did not achieve. Some studies were conducted shortly after the reorganization took place and are therefore inappropriate for strong inferences about long-term causal effects. Other studies focus on the long-term effects of changes in the size of municipalities by studying cross-sectional variations in processes and policies in small and large municipalities. These studies are, however, unable to gauge the short term effects of amalgamations (the costs of change).

Second, the case-study method employed in combination with a quasi-experimental design provides the researchers with excellent opportunities to test the theoretical expectations using a strict and simple procedure. Moreover, the research is conducted systematically and in a way that allows a critical review of the research procedures. The research team has made considerable efforts to conduct the case studies in a disciplined way: formulating expectations on the effects of the reorganization; presenting the empirical results in summary tables.

Despite these assets this book has some major flaws. First, the reader is not informed about the rationale for the selection of the dependent variables (the effects of amalgamations). Why are some effects included (for instance participation in parties) and others excluded (most other forms of political participation)? No attempts are made to motivate the choice of the effects, neither in terms of the objectives of the policy-makers, nor in terms of normative criteria derived from democratic theory (political equality, responsiveness, or the protection of liberty).

Second, the logic underlying the theoretical expectations is often 'sloppy'. The study claims to provide a general theory (p.32) from which propositions about the effects of amalgamations can be derived. But in fact most of the propositions are the result of (often plausible) ad-hoc reasoning. In a volume co-authored by seven researchers this inevitably results in some inconsistencies. For instance, in chapter 2 the research team claims that the citizens in larger municipalities are less likely to participate in politics than the citizens in smaller units (p.25) and in chapter 10 the authors hypothesize that formal arrangements in larger municipalities make it more difficult for citizens to influence local decisions (p.196). In chapter 8, however, we are told that in relatively large municipalities relations are more formal and impersonal and thresholds for making a complaint against local government decisions are therefore lower.

Third, not all of the authors consistently employ the strict test procedure (see the results with regard to the reliability of the performance of larger municipalities in cases of illness and vacant situations [p.155] and with regard to the management of refuse collection [p.192 and table 10.1]).

Fourth, the internal validity of the research design is flawed by the selection of the control group. The research team frankly admits that the two units in the control

group managed to escape the amalgamation by the skin of their teeth. The assignment to the control group is therefore definitely non-random. This makes the interpretation of similarities between the experimental and the control group problematic, because the two municipalities that were able to escape from the amalgamation at the last moment, are likely to have gone through most of the processes experienced by the units in the experimental group.

Finally, as the authors hurry to admit, the small number of cases is a major limitation on the generalization of the results (external validity) of this study. The lack of a solid theoretical foundation of this study exacerbates this problem, since this impedes theoretical generalizations.

Notwithstanding these flaws, this book is a useful addition to the literature on the effects of amalgamations. Some of the findings in this book confirm the results of earlier quantitative studies. The cumulation of knowledge from studies employing different methods should make us even more critical of those who claim all kinds of positive effects for this type of reorganization. Even more so, because this book clearly shows that such a reorganization involves major transition costs.

S.A.H. Denters

Annette Zimmer, *Vereine – Basiselement der Demokratie (Voluntary Associations – Basic element of democracy)*. Leske + Budrich: Opladen 1996. DM 29.80

Judged by its title, this book deserves the attention of anyone interested in the role of voluntary associations in democratic societies. We currently witness a renewed interest in civil society and the role of voluntary associations – something that has been spurred in particular by the work of Putnam and the debate it ignited within and outside academia.

Voluntary associations deserve the interest of political scientists for at least two reasons. The first reason is that one may want to find out to what extent such associations – by virtue of providing opportunities for social participation – function as schools of democracy and how they contribute to what is known as social capital. The second reason is that one may be interested in the extent to which these organizations function as intermediaries between citizens and the state, and how these organizations try to influence political decision-making.

This study – a somewhat modified version of the Habilitationsschrift the author wrote at the University of Kassel – aims to give a comprehensive overview of voluntary associations or Vereine. Zimmer chooses to study associations from the perspective of Third Sector research, because she deems the approaches of political science, sociology, or economics too restrictive for this multi-faceted phenomenon. However ecumenical