Local governance in Switzerland: Adequate municipal autonomy cum intergovernmental cooperation?

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Cogent Social Sciences (2020), 6: 1763889
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Abstract: The main aim of this study is to examine how the mature [con]federation of Switzerland approaches local (municipal) governance. It first assesses whether local autonomy arrangement is adequate. The study then assesses how local governments utilize the mechanisms of intergovernmental cooperative bodies to address public service delivery issues that cannot be met by a single local government. In doing so, beyond a secondary data sources, the study has used different instruments of primary data collection, including key informant interview, in-depth interview, and in-house discussion with a group of pertinent experts from the Canton of Bern. The finding of this study reveals that local governments in Switzerland have adequate autonomy in the sense that they have constitutional rights to exist, freedom to choose own’s political and administrative structures, select local leaders without pressure from the cantonal or federal leaders, and local public expenditure responsibilities match with locally raised revenues. Also, different intergovernmental cooperative bodies—inter-municipal cooperation, Swiss municipal association, Swiss cities association, regional conference and tripartite conference of agglomerations—have been utilized for addressing matters that couldn’t be met by a local government per se. This case study, therefore, contends that
effective local governance is a function of adequate local/municipal autonomy and intergovernmental cooperation and consultation.

Subjects: Politics & International Relations; Social Sciences; Urban Studies

Keywords: local governance; municipality; local government; intergovernmental cooperation; federalism; Switzerland

1. Introduction

Two forces shape local/municipal governance in federal systems. The first is federalism that sets territorial, institutional and political frameworks for the multilevel governments. For policy implementation and service provision imperatives, local (municipal) governments are inextricably linked vertically to the upper-level governments and horizontally to the neighboring local governments (Agranoff, 2012). The other force that was barely anticipated at the time when the classical federations, like USA and Switzerland federalism were formed, is urbanization (Elazar, 1975). However, urbanization has already become one of the internal challenges to the institutional and political frameworks set by federalism. In the case of Switzerland, for example, urbanization has brought socioeconomic and political cleavages. On the one hand, the core city holds average and less-resourced population who are sensitive to social policy, while the rich taxpayers live in communes or suburban areas (Kübler et al., 2003). On the other hand, the political ideology tends to vary between urban and rural areas, the former being largely dominated by liberals and the latter is dominated by conservatives claiming to maintain rural identity (Kübler et al., 2003; Ladner, 2007).

Like other classical federations, Swiss federal system gave inadequate attention to local governments at the time when the federation was first established, because the traditional rules and practices put a strong focus on Cantons (Bulliard, 2005; Kübler et al., 2003). Switzerland has, however, been innovative in bringing institutional and pragmatic solutions for resolving the challenges of federal/multilevel governance in general and local/municipal governance in particular. To this end, there has been increasing attention to make the local/municipal autonomy adequate as well as utilize the mechanisms of intergovernmental cooperation for matters of public service provision that cannot be delivered by a single local government.

The main aim of this study is, therefore, to find out how the mature [con]federation of Switzerland addresses local (municipal) governance. The study first assesses the adequacy of local/municipal autonomy in Switzerland. It then identifies how local governments utilize the mechanisms of intergovernmental cooperation to address common matters—public service provision and governance activities—that cannot be met by a single local government. Beyond the secondary data sources, the study has used different instruments of primary data collection, including key informant interview, in-depth interview, and in-house discussion with a group of pertinent experts from the Canton of Bern. The study mainly focuses on the canton of Bern because the author has stayed for three months in this Canton from July through September 2019. The author has also had the opportunity to present his research and participate in the in-house seminar prepared by the Institute of Federalism at the University of Fribourg. This has somehow enabled the author to include a bit of practice examples from the Canton of Fribourg. Due to the financial and time constraints, the informants were purposively selected on the bases of their relevant academic and work experiences in relation to local governance and intergovernmental cooperation in the Swiss confederation in general and the Canton of Bern in particular. These informants were contacted through the networks of the Ximpulse, the Law and Governance Civil Society Organization based at Bern and which hosted the author during the research period indicated above. The author has prepared and sent semi-structured interview guideline questions via email to the purposively selected and to the consented interviewees prior to the interview sessions.
The informants included: Mayor of the municipality of Wohlen in the canton of Bern, Director of the Municipal Administration of Köniz, Law and Zoning expert at Bern Cantonal level, Director of the Association of the Municipalities of Bern, Deputy Director of the Association of Swiss Cities, Director of the Regional Conference of Municipalities in the Canton of Bern, Director of the Association of Swiss Municipalities, In-house group discussion with experts from the Association of Swiss Municipalities, and in-house discussion with a group of senior experts from Ximpulse.

Apart from the secondary sources, the analysis makes use of the results of the interviews and in-house group discussions. The analysis follows two lines of investigation: the first examines whether local/municipal governments have adequate local autonomy expressed in terms of the existence of local institutional security, the freedom to choose own

'politico-administrative structures, and whether the local public expenditure responsibilities match with locally raised revenues. The second line of analysis examines to what extent local/municipal governments are involved in the intergovernmental cooperative bodies to meet matters that couldn't be addressed by a single municipality. At the end, the study shows that effective local governance in a federal setting of Switzerland is a function of adequate local/municipal autonomy and devised mechanisms of intergovernmental cooperation and consultation.

2. Local governance: adequate municipal autonomy cum intergovernmental cooperation?
Local[malunicipal] governments basically shoulder two responsibilities. On the one hand, they have to perform as autonomous local self-governing entities which require adequate degree of decentralization in all it's political, administrative and financial dimensions. On the other hand, the local governments are also responsible for implementing policies of the cantons/states and federal governments. At the interface of these dual roles of the local governments lie the mechanism of intergovernmental relations, either in the form of supervision or cooperation. Unlike the extensive literature on decentralization that focuses on the first responsibility of local governments mentioned above, this study argues that effective local governance in federal and/or multilevel system is not only about adequate local[municipal] autonomy but also a function of the mechanisms of intergovernmental cooperation between different orders of government. To this end, the following subsections briefly describe these two basic indicators—adequate local autonomy and intergovernmental cooperation—which are utilized to assess the local governance in the case of Switzerland, a worth researching mature federal system.

2.1. Degree of decentralized local autonomy
Decentralization can be mainly understood in terms of three dimensions: political, administrative and fiscal. To begin with the political dimension, the assessment of the degree of decentralization involves determining whether the authorities are appointed by the regional and/or central government, or elected by local residents and appointed by local councils. It also involves consideration of whether locally elected politicians' decision-making is democratic and inclusive (Grindle, 2007). Administrative decentralization, on the hand other, aims at transferring decision-making authority, resources and responsibilities for the delivery of public services from the central or regional government to local levels of governments. Assessing this dimension of decentralization involves ascertaining whether local governments meet service delivery obligations such as water supply. Decentralization can improve the delivery of public services if it develops the capacity of the relevant local institutions and creates an enabling environment for participation by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector (Cohen & Peterson, 1999).

In turn, fiscal decentralization entails transferring power to local authorities to make autonomous decisions about revenue-collection strategies and expenditure decisions. The local financial autonomy entails whether the local governments have the freedom to impose local taxation, raise revenue within its assigned sources, allocate its financial and material resources, determine and authorize its annual budget without external interference (Okafor, 2010, p. 126). Interestingly, Beer-Tóth (2009) notes that financial autonomy and the extent of fiscal decentralization can be measured in terms of three further dimensions: revenue-raising power; spending responsibilities; and budgetary discretion. The first dimension, revenue-generating power,
pertains to the right and the ability to determine funding sources and the amount of financial resources. It involves the freedom to decide on local tax and fee rates as well as on the way the revenues are utilized (Dafflon, 1999, as cited in Beer-Tóth, 2009, p. 80). The amount of internal resources at the disposal of local governments is essential for financing at least their mandatory expenditures (Bird, 2000; Dafflon & Madiès, 2009). The own-revenue-raising power available to local governments is thus of special importance (Dafflon & Madiès, 2009, p. 62). Where local governments cover a large portion of their budgets from internal revenue sources, this enables them to make more efficient and independent spending decisions (Shah, 1994). With regard to the allocation external revenue from intergovernmental transfers, the local government’s revenue autonomy can be assessed by examining the participation of local units in the shared financial institutions that decide upon revenue-sharing formulae as well as the utilization of transferred resources (Beer-Tóth, 2009).

The second dimension of financial autonomy—expenditure power—relates to the right and the capability of local governments to determine the nature and magnitude of overall local public expenditure. This expenditure discretion enables them to have the freedom of deciding which goods and services shall be financed from the local public budget and how much money shall be spent on each of them (Beer-Tóth, 2009, pp. 73–79). Yilmaz et al. (2008, p. 21) make a similar argument in positing that a local government’s expenditure responsibilities are an indicator of the extent to which it is capable of responding to local needs. The third dimension of a local government’s financial autonomy is its budgetary discretion to balance revenue against expenditure needs by way of preparing and approving a budget (Beer-Tóth, 2009; Dafflon & Madiès, 2009, p. 45). That being noted, fiscal decentralization is essential for all forms and dimensions of decentralization: decentralized political decision-making powers and administrative authorities at whatever level are meaningless without adequate financing.

On balance, local[municipal] autonomy is said to be adequate if the municipalities have the constitutional rights to exist; if the municipalities have the freedom to choose their own political and administrative structures; if the higher-level leaders and politicians hardly intervene in the recruitment processes of the local leaders, and if the municipalities’ public expenditures match with their public revenues or if they are self-sufficient to finance themselves with only fewer grants in aid from upper-level governments.

### 2.2. Intergovernmental Relations (IGRs)

Apart from the degree of decentralized power granted to the local government level, the achievement of public purposes through cooperative institutions across sectors and jurisdictional boundaries is said to be a central component of governance (Mossberger, 2007; Peters & Pierre, 2000). This directs the focus of studying governance to the IGRs—an important body of activities or interactions occurring between governmental units of all types and levels (Wright, 1988). Being one of the principles that distinguishes federal systems from the non-federal ones (Trench, 2006), the IGR is an institutional and pragmatic device for dealing with the intricate relations in a multilevel setting. A number of reasons are on offer for the increasing attention to the institutions and mechanisms of IGRs. At the very basic level is the idea that the different levels under the federal and/or multilevel systems generally serve the same people (Ricker, 1964), but scholars like Watts (2006) have remarkably identified three main reasons for the increasing importance of IGRs in federal and/multilevel systems. One, there are generally increased activities of governments at all levels which inevitably led to greater areas of overlap and interpenetration, and hence the need to manage this interdependence more effectively in order to minimize intergovernmental competition, friction and conflict; two, the development of new policy areas (e.g., urbanization, environment, energy, etc.) not envisaged at the time when federal constitutions were drafted; and three, the problem of financial imbalances requiring intergovernmental financial transfers and the establishment of processes and institutions for the periodic adjustment of financial relations among governments.
Governance activities need a proactive participation of all levels of government in the intergovernmental system. That is why De Villiers (2012, p. 674) notes that modern day governance requires the mechanisms and institutions of IGRs so as to implement policies and programmes, maximize the standard of service delivery and optimally utilize scarce resources. In this sense, local governments are particularly “linked vertically to states and to their general governments through ranges of national-state programs, legal and fiscal considerations and horizontally linked with associated local governments and NGOs through partnering, contracting or other forms of externalization” (Agranoff, 2012, p. 1). Moreover, the IGR bodies and forums are meant to address issues of effective administration by sharing professional knowledge and skills among officials (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003), which in turn reduces managerial and technical incapacities across the spheres of government.

3. Municipalities in Switzerland: an overview
Municipalities are known by different names following the linguistic lines in Swiss: Gemeinde (in German), Communes (in French), Communi (in Italian) and vischnancas (in Romanche). Municipalities are the basic unit of Swiss politics to which many Swiss citizens have a strong emotional attachment to (Fleiner et al., 2012; Steinberg, 2015). Most municipalities predate the cantons, and they have clear territorial and legal boundaries. They largely enjoy the same sort of semi-sovereignty within their cantons. Gemeinde/commune also confers citizenship, a power which reflects the rooted, bottom-up quality of Swiss political life (Fleiner et al., 2012). As of 2016, Switzerland has 2,287 municipalities with an average population of around 3,640. Forty-eight percent of Swiss municipalities have fewer than 1000 inhabitants and 240 municipalities have fewer than 100 (Report, 2017). The smallest municipality has 14 people, while the largest has over 400,000 (FSO, 2018).

Under the 1874 Federal Constitution, all Swiss citizens were granted the political rights to be enjoyed at municipal level. However, it is the 1999 Federal Constitution that for the first time guarantees the constitutional right for municipal autonomy. In broad terms, due to this constitutional right, municipalities could be considered as one of the three spheres of governments in the federal system of Switzerland. Apart from stating that the municipal autonomy is a constitutional right in Switzerland, the federal constitution is silent with regard to the substance that constitutes municipal autonomy. This has resulted in variation of municipal autonomy from canton to canton, but most cantons accord their municipalities with a high degree of autonomy that corresponds to their historical and emotional importance (Fleiner et al., 2012).

All municipalities have at least three organs, including executive, legislative and audit; and the local people have the highest authority over their municipalities. In terms of municipal structure, there are two broad types of municipalities in Switzerland. These are bipartite and tripartite municipalities. The bipartite municipalities have two organs, namely executive branch and electoral body, while the tripartite municipalities have three organs: electoral body, an executive branch and the parliament (Fleiner et al., 2012). The executive branch, otherwise called municipal council or Gemeinderat, is generally composed of 5 to 9 directly elected officials. In the case of the canton of Bern, every municipality can choose one of the two models of decision-making approaches. In smaller municipalities in Bern, decisions are taken by an assembly of electors (Gemeindeversammlung) or by ballot. The relatively bigger municipalities in Bern mostly make decisions through the directly elected parliaments.

All local governments are legally conceived as municipalities in Switzerland; and there is no separate institutional classification of municipalities into either big or small, rural or urban. There are, however, other non-legal classifications of municipalities for economic and functional reasons. In terms of their political orientation, the informants note, the rural people are generally inclined to conservative and far-right-wing politics who tend to focus on preserving the traditional identity, while the people inhabiting the peri-urban areas often have conservative or liberal political inclinations., but the people living in the city centers are largely inclined to leftist political interests.
Swiss municipalities enjoy remarkable freedom to organize their political and administrative structures, which gave rise to several distinctive local political systems throughout the country (Kübler, 2009). According to the key informant, the French-speaking Cantons, with the influence from French or Napoleonic idea of the state, have relatively less decentralized power of municipalities. Compared to the predominately German-speaking cantons, the French cantons tend to be more prescriptive with regard to the powers and responsibilities of their communes. In the German-speaking Canton of Bern, for example, municipalities are largely free to organize themselves albeit within the framework of the cantonal legislation. Out of three hundred fifty (350) municipalities in Bern, only about twenty (20) municipalities have elected parliaments. The rest municipalities in this canton have assemblies, not elected parliaments. Again, only about twenty (20) of these municipalities have professional Mayors paid from their respective municipalities. Such municipalities have also the clear separation of powers between the executive and the legislature. In this canton, Municipalities directly elect executives or local ministers (usually 5 to 7). Mayor has only one vote in the executive and he/she is not a member of the parliament.

Notably, the people or citizen are in the center of municipal governance in Bern. In this regard, the municipal administrative director of Köniz, one of the municipalities in Bern, explains that there are several instruments for citizen participation at municipal level. Accordingly, the formal instruments include that the local people: elect executives/local ministers, elect the members of the local/municipal parliament, have the right to local initiatives of 2000 signatures, have the right to referendum by gathering 500 signatures, and submit petition (a single citizen can do this). It is also mandatory for all municipal citizens to vote for the change of municipal statutes, endorse municipal projects having more than five million CHF, and to vote for and against other important issues, including zoning changes, tax rate changes and change of municipal territorial boundary. Other instruments of citizens’ participation range from cooperation with village associations, internet (website, e-government services, social media), special commissions (with citizens’ representatives) consultation (e.g land use planning), public announcements and right to contribute/appeal, right to appeal against construction and planning decisions and youth employment issues.

Two institutional mechanisms have been applied to address the municipal/local government issues in Switzerland. The first is through granting adequate municipal autonomy, while the second is through intergovernmental cooperation. The subsequent sections are devoted to discuss these mechanisms.

3.1. Municipal autonomy: adequate and institutionally secured?

The Federal Constitution of Swiss has made no reference to municipalities prior to 1999. Article 50 of the federal Constitution of 1999 reads: “the autonomy of the Municipalities is guaranteed within the limits fixed by cantonal law.” This broad provision along with the scope set by respective canton’s legislation implies the following (Schmitt, 2011, pp. 181–182): First and for most, municipalities have the right to exist-and the freedom to merge with other communes or to remain independent. Neither the cantons nor the federal government can simply impose the change of municipal boundary against the will of municipalities/communes. In fact, under certain conditions, the cantonal law can force municipalities to merge. Though the degrees of municipal autonomy may vary from canton to canton as long as municipal supervision is a competency of the cantons, every cantonal legislation establishes at least three organs of municipal government including legislative (parliament or assembly), executive and auditing. Municipalities have the freedom to legislate, plan and implement the activities which fall within their jurisdictions. In most cantons of Switzerland, local governments are responsible for all local infrastructure, social services, primary schools, land use planning and natural resource management (Fleiner et al., 2012). The land use zoning and regulation is performed by cantons, and the municipalities plan and do the details in accordance with the land use zoning. Secondly, the municipalities have remarkable freedom to choose their own political and administrative structures within the scope of their respective cantonal legislative frameworks, which in turn resulted in several distinctive local political systems in the federation. Large municipalities, mostly
cities, have city councils or parliaments and the members are elected by their citizens. The munici-
palities are particularly free to decide on their election systems and procedures.

Thirdly, Swiss municipalities enjoy significant fiscal decentralization. In this case, the study by
Bulliard (2005) shows that municipalities averagely cover 87% of their local spending responsi-
bilities. They receive fewer grants in aid from the higher governments. Municipalities have the right
to impose taxes (mainly income, wealth and property taxes). The tax rate is decided by the
municipalities can also decide the tax rates either by the voters’ assembly or by the parliament.
The local fiscal equalization also considers the financial capacity between municipalities.
Interestingly, the municipal income tax is shared between municipality of residence and municipi-
ality of work (with consideration of the municipality’s financial capacity). According to the
Senior Experts, the municipalities share of public expenditure is 30% and they also raise roughly
the same amount of public revenue. Hence, the municipalities are financially self-sufficient in the
sense that municipal spending responsibilities match with local raised revenues.

Fourthly, the principle of subsidiarity— all activities not explicitly assigned to higher political levels
remain within the scope of municipal authorities. Accordingly, what can be done at local and close
to the people should be done at such a scale, and all tasks not under federal or cantonal rule fall
under the municipal responsibilities. The municipalities have, therefore, the right to act in all areas
which are not covered by cantonal or federal legislation.

Fifthly, municipalities select their local leaders without coercion from the cantonal or federal
leaders. Though a bit old figure, the study by Ladner (2007) shows that about 60% of the municipal
representatives have an affiliation with the national parties and 30% of the members of local
executives did not have party affiliation. Each municipality, like each canton, has a directly elected
executive by the citizens, and almost all executive bodies combine members from different parties;
and the bigger municipalities have their elected parliaments (Ibid). Hence, the politicians at Cantonal
or the Confederation levels hardly intervene in the recruitment processes of the local leadership.

Last but not least, the federal constitution guarantees the right to judicial protection of local
autonomy. In this sense, though they lack judicial power at local level, municipalities in
Switzerland can appeal to the Swiss federal tribunal if their autonomy is violated (Schmitt, 2011).

3.1.1. Local governments in intergovernmental relations (IGRs) of Switzerland
The case of Switzerland, a developed and mature federation in the West, has devised intricate
intergovernmental cooperative bodies in order to address matters—public service delivery and policy
implementation—that cannot be met by a single local government. At the local/municipal level within
given canton, for example, there are mainly two types of cooperation in Switzerland: Inter-municipal
coop-eration and mergers projects; and the subsequent sections dwell on these two mechanisms.

3.1.2. Inter-municipal cooperation (IMC)
IMC is generally described as a bilateral or multilateral treaties between/among municipalities
within a given canton in Switzerland. IMC has already become a strongly growing trend in
Switzerland that transfers municipal responsibilities to inter-municipal co-operation structures.
IMC is captured as the fulfillment of a municipal task(s) by joining or partnership of two or more
municipalities or by a third legal entity in order to simultaneously serve the participating munici-
palities (Steiner, 2003, p. 554). The smallness of most Swiss municipalities’ accounts for IMC
because of their incapacities (due to lack of sufficient human and financial resources) to indepen-
dently fulfil municipal responsibilities (Report, 2017). IMC is meant to resolve the challenge of
being small to meet the service demands of their residents. IMC also helps the participating
municipalities to be flexible enough with regard to meeting the service delivery demands without
however changing the municipal territorial boundary.
Cantons provide legal frameworks for IMC, either promoting voluntary cooperation or mandating municipalities to cooperate. For example, the cantonal act of Bern on municipalities establishes three convincing procedures for municipalities to be able to cooperate. One, the canton provides a legal framework that favors cooperation; two, if the municipalities are not willing to cooperate, the Canton can use subsidies and grants to incentivize the IMC, and three, when municipalities are not willing to cooperate on voluntary basis, the cantonal act allows the possibility to force cooperation15 (Fleiner et al., 2012, p. 184). In contrast, Article 134 (1 to 4) of the Constitution of the canton of Fribourg explicitly states that the canton: encourages inter-municipal collaboration, oblige the municipalities to accept all aims of association and accomplish one or more tasks through that municipal association.

The informants16 note that the main objective of IMC cooperation is to benefit from economies of scale by applying in some selected sectors, including education, civil protection, fire brigade, water and sewage services, waste disposal, social aid and assistance to the elderly people. On the positive side, IMC has not only increased the effectiveness and efficiency in the provision of public services but also improved the problem-solving capacities of the participating municipalities.17 (Steiner, 2003). The Director of the administration of the municipality of Köniz in canton of Bern18 underscores that IMC a less politicized and flexible mechanism that could be organized in different forms for addressing specific issue. The Mayor of Wohlen,19 for example, notes that IMC helps the local community to retain their independence and sense of identity. In Bern, this Mayor states, there are currently 346 communities. Many of these municipalities have less than 1000 population. This size of municipal population is too small to raise adequate local revenue that could match the spending responsibilities. This problem of smallness might necessitate amalgamation rather than, IMC. Medium to big municipalities in Bern perceive that IMC can solve problems without losing local/municipal identity. The Mayor further notes that the Municipality of Wohlen, which has with 9300 populations would prefer IMC, not merger projects.

On the negative side, a study by Steiner (2003) has remarkably revealed that IMC barely improves the situation of municipal budget in so far as IMC expands the geographical scale of service delivery and the quality of professionalism needed. In addition, the IMC requires meticulous arrangement and discussion, and each participant municipality has to compromise for the sake of common good.20 Some municipalities see IMC as the advantage for bigger municipalities as they tend to decide on small municipalities, because decisions are often taken by inter-municipal organs and not submitted to referendum. The specialists of various municipalities are often deciding on bases of their expertise, which might not correspond to the general municipal interests. This, in turn, blurs the accountability lines and tradition of direct democracy.21 In sum, IMC in Switzerland primarily rests in voluntary cooperation, and cooperation shall be entered into by legal/institutional mechanisms or by making contractual agreements.

3.1.3. Merger projects
In the year 2000, there were over 3000 municipalities in Switzerland. The number of municipalities decreased to 2495 in the year 2012 and there are 2212 municipalities in the year 2019. This change in the number of municipalities is due to the merger projects which were implemented in only 14 cantons out of the 26 cantons since the year 2000.22

There are different reasons for the municipal merger projects. The main driving force is, however, related to efficiency and the benefit from economies of scale. The other is the challenge of the smallness of municipalities to generate adequate local revenue that could match with spending responsibilities; and to bridge the mismatch between municipal and functional boundaries.23 Some municipalities join the merger projects due to the legal and financial supports from their respective cantons. On the one hand, if the cantonal constitution/legal framework foresees it, the cantonal authorities can steer the merging process in line with Article 50 of the Federal Constitution. Article 135(1,2,4) of the canton of Fribourg, for example, provides that the canton not only encourages and favors the merger of municipalities but also a merger project can be proposed by either the municipal
authorities, a popular initiative or by the canton. This article further provides that when the municipal, regional or cantonal interests ask for it, the canton can give the order to merge. Nonetheless, Cantons cannot simply impose the merger project, but the concerned municipalities must be consulted.

On the other hand, Cantons play an important role in triggering municipal mergers through lump-sum payments and administrative assistance. The former has been a necessary precondition for municipal mergers than the latter (Kaiser, 2014). In this light, the study by Strebel (2019, p. 7) reveals that the three cantons, namely: Ber, Fribourg and Vaud have used financial incentives for the merger projects. In cantons offering financial supports to the amalgamating municipalities, there have been quite a lot of merged municipalities.

As the Key informant states, Merger is a project of becoming bigger municipality by involving the regional perspective to traffic, culture, planning and national/international competitions. This informant argues that the underlying assumption of the merger project is to create the optimal size of municipality for benefiting from economies of scale. Nonetheless, the another informant suspects the efficiency logic of merger project that it would reduce the cost of delivering services. Instead, the merging of municipalities usually takes not only a long period but also costly to organize. It also increases the scope and quality of demands for public services. Successful merger project seeks highly professionalized staffs to be hired with high salaries. Consequently, the merger project increases the cost of delivering services rather than lowering the expenses. Moreover, compared to the IMC, the merger projects are more politically sensitive inasmuch as amalgamation changes the preexisting local identities of the concerned municipalities.

3.2. Municipalities in the intergovernmental associations/forums

Municipalities in Switzerland have different intergovernmental organs and forums where they could reflect their interests. These include Association of Swiss municipalities, Association of Swiss Cities, Regional Conference/platforms and Tripartite Conference of Agglomerations (TAC).

3.2.1. Association of Swiss municipalities

Like the cantons who have well-established inter-cantonal conferences/concordats, municipalities also need forums or an entity that represent them. Towards this end, as the informant noted, the association of Swiss municipalities was founded in 1953 and members of the association are municipalities in accordance with the private law of Swiss. There were 534 municipalities when the association was founded. In 2001, there were 2021 member municipalities. Since then the number of members has declined due to the decline of the number of municipalities in Switzerland largely due to the merger projects. Yet, 72% of the municipalities in Switzerland are members of the Association of Swiss municipalities. Municipalities are completely free to join or exit from their membership; and any municipality can join the association regardless of their size, population, language and canton.

As the information from the association Swiss municipalities of Swiss shows the association considers membership as a sign of supporting the activities and relevance of the association for promoting the interest of the municipalities at the [con] federation level. The Association generates half of its finance from membership fee, while the other half from the sponsorship, service contracts and income from advertisement on the association’s journal, i.e., Schweizer Gemeinde.

The key informant underlines that Article 50 of the Federal Constitution not only serves as a the constitutional basis for the establishment of the association of Swiss municipalities but also obliges the Confederation to take the interests of the municipalities into account. The information from the association of the municipalities of Swiss indicates that the Association contains a committee, president and an office. The committee has been constituted by 16 members who are themselves members of a local government and/or representatives of the Swiss parliament. This Committee is responsible for the political and strategic orientation of the association. The leader of the association is the President and the Office of the association is responsible for day to day activities. The office, which
is based at Bern, is headed by a director with 10 employees, structured in 4 departments focusing on political work, communication, administration, publication of the journal of *Schweizer Gemeinde*.

In view of the informants from the association of the municipalities of Switzerland, the association speaks up and lobbies for the political concerns of the municipalities in the federal legislative process. It advises, consults and represents the political interests of the municipalities in the federal working groups and hearings. The association has also been in the huge network of contacts with the cantonal associations of the municipalities, cantonal conferences and other associations. Moreover, the association of the Swiss municipalities provides important information for municipalities with regard to the benefits and challenges of inter-municipal cooperation and merger projects. In this case, the Association has been involved in the Publication of Merger Guidelines that contain information about the advantages and disadvantages of the merger projects, and other practical things that need to be considered during the merger processes. Members of the association, therefore, benefit from concrete services and events such as discounts and free admission to conferences. In fact, the association represents all Swiss municipalities whether they are members of the association or not.

3.2.2. Association of Swiss cities

Association of Swiss Cities also called Swiss union of cities was founded in 1897, and members of the association are municipalities in accordance with the private law of Swiss. Though it was founded long time ago, the association of Swiss Cities has got legally binding basis for its political work under Article 50(3) of the Federal Constitution of 1999 which obliges the Confederation to pay attention to the special interests of cities and agglomerations. This constitutional provision has strengthened the formal legal basis for the freedom of association that is valid also for municipalities. Cities here stand for the morphological and statistical definition by federal statistical office (FSO) in Switzerland, and there are 172 urban spaces designated as cities in Swiss. Of the 172 cities, 133 cities are the member of the association of cities of Switzerland. Member Cities pay 60 cents of CHF per capita/inhabitants annually, and the association also generates revenue from its own project works.

The association is led by a board of 16 mayors and there are professionals who work for the association. These professionals work on a number of thematic issues including social, financial, energy and climate, mobility/traffic, special planning, security, culture, federalism and health (preventive dimension). According to the Deputy Director of Swiss City Association, the association has a number of activities but the main activities include: lobbying for cities to get in touch with federal executive and administration, inform media and make public relations about cities and providing services such as exchange of experiences and networking of cities to address the real problem cities face and to enable the representatives of the member cities establish personal contacts. The association has served as a platform for informal exchange of experiences on pressing urban issues between the cities in the confederation of Switzerland. The association has boosted the collaboration and integral look into urban regions.

The association of Swiss cities has been coordinating the important roles that cities play and would wish to play in Swiss politics and spatial development. The association of Swiss cities represents the interests of the cities at the Federal Government level, and the larger public. It has been serving as a permanent partner in the Swiss Federal Government’s consultation procedure, enabling it to introduce urban concerns into the legislative process at the federal level. One has to, however, note that municipalities are not speaking with one voice at federal level, and the confederation could easily play out one against the other, particularly because they are politically different. They have different opinions with regard to how resources should be spent: either in the interest of rural areas or urban areas.

3.2.3. Regional [urban]conference

According to the director of Regional Conference, the establishment of this platform aims at making the relation between municipalities and the canton of Bern as cooperative as possible. The
The canton of Bern has 346 municipalities. The canton couldn't make coherent relation with each municipality and it was too troublesome for the canton to separately contact municipalities. To this cause, the regional conference has been established to coordinate and ease the contacts between the canton and the municipalities. The regional conference/platform is comprised of assembly of mayors representing their municipalities. These Mayors meet twice in a year. They just discuss on the conference without making votes because the decision remains on the part of the municipality/people.

The regional conference/platform is highly professional. Notwithstanding the right of citizens to have political orientation and opinion, the regional conference does not employ politically active citizens. In doing so, it tries to maintain its neutrality and credibility. The administrative director of regional conference underscores that regional conference is an independent institution. It indeed works for finding the possible grounds for municipalities and cantons to collaborate. The regional conference platform does not act as a decision-making body but as a consultative forum on how to implement policies and address common concerns between municipalities.

The director further notes that the main tasks of regional conferences come from the canton of Bern which is the client for regional conference. Two-third of the regional conferences budget comes from the 79 municipalities and each member municipality pays 18CHF per capita/inhabitant, while the remaining one-third comes from the canton of Bern. Here, all municipalities in canton of Bern are not member of the regional conference.

The key informant notes that Switzerland is a country that has a strong tradition of making association, compromise, cooperation and pragmatism to resolve matters of common concern. The regional conference is also instrumental for such feature of the Swiss federal system. At the functional level, a number of policy sectors are covered in the regional conference activities, including land use zoning, traffic/mobility, culture, regional policy, economy and energy. The regional conference makes plans on these sectors and serves as a platform for coordination of these activities between the canton and municipalities. Nonetheless, it is up to the communes/gemeinde to implement the outcome of the regional conference or not. Yet, the regional concept for transport and settlement plans are binding for the municipal authorities and they can’t change it.

3.2.4. Tripartite Conference of Agglomerations (TAC)

Switzerland is a highly urbanized but the metropolitan or urban regions do not correspond to political administrative boundaries (Widmer, 2012). The institutions in such area are fragmented and have become a challenge for governance because functional urban spaces and territorially bound decision-making structures are not congruent at all (Kübler et al., 2003 as cited in Widmer, 2012). In Switzerland, metropolitan or urban regions are called agglomeration. Urban people commute between workplace, shopping, recreation areas and home in the agglomeration of Swiss. But there is no level of government designed for addressing agglomeration interests and effects. The federal system barely reads agglomeration interests. Consequently, Cities are hampered because they lack planning options as they could not extend into surrounding municipalities (Linder, 1994, p. 77)

Article 44 of the 1999 Federal constitution obliges the federal government and the cantons to cooperate and support each other. Particularly, Article 50 (2 and 3) of the same constitution reads: In its activity, the Confederation shall take into account the possible consequences for the Municipalities. In particular, the confederation shall take into account the special situation of cities, agglomeration, and mountainous regions. This provision has given the leverage for the federal government along with the inter-cantonal conferences, the association of Swiss municipalities and association of Swiss cities to establish TAC and formulate federal agglomeration in 2001 (Widmer, 2012). TAC has been chaired by the Conference of Cantonal Governments (CCG), which is an institution of the horizontal intergovernmental cooperation between cantons, CCG also represents the cantonal interests at the federal level; and ensures whether the necessary coordination and information is available for the attention of the cantons.
TAC meets at least twice a year. It has its working groups. TAC also invite and utilize external experts according to their specialized knowledge and skills. According to the key informant from the association of Swiss cities, there are about 49 agglomerations in Switzerland. These agglomerations have not only made the cities to collaborate on matters of their mutual concerns but also drew different cantons into the same table (e.g. Agglomeration of Basel comprises four cantons). TAC also supports the municipalities in the area of inter-municipal cooperation (Widmer, 2012, p. 16). In this light, TAC serves as a political platform for the three spheres of governments-confederation, cantons and municipalities to deal with issues of agglomeration and to coordinate the whole range of activities in the federal system of Switzerland (Pfisterer, 2015). Interestingly, Widmer (2012, p. 17) underscores that the main goal of the agglomeration policy to “foster vertical cooperation, to promote horizontal cooperation within agglomerations, to generate a systematic orientation of federal policies toward the needs of urban areas.”

The three main instruments of the federal agglomeration policy are the “Tripartite Agglomeration Conference” (TAC), the “model projects”, and the “agglomeration programmes” (Kübler & Schwab, 2001). With the “model projects”, the federal administration supports innovative projects and the best practice models are supposed to be cooperative projects between community, canton and regional levels. The agglomeration programmes are long-term planning instruments that are elaborated jointly by cantons and communes. These programs aim to improve transport infrastructure within all agglomeration areas. It has been through these tools that the federal government partakes in urban governance or tries to involve in bridging the fragmentation between city and communes. Federal government finances the model projects only under the condition that these projects involve area-wide cooperation among the center city and surrounding communes at the cantonal level.

Beyond the sharing of information, TAC has been strengthening cooperation and partnership in the agglomerations/urban region for tackling concrete issues of concern in the agglomerations. Because of the institutional and territorial fragmentation, communes within an agglomeration have to cooperate with other the other communes. Especially the core cities cover services not only for their own commune, but for the residents of the whole agglomeration.” (Widmer, 2012, p. 12) Agglomeration serves as an implementation-oriented tool that is designed to improve collaboration and coordination within conurbations. Scholars like Linder (2010, p. 86–87) say political stature for agglomeration runs against tradition of local autonomy in Switzerland, and the people would consider the boundaries of new creations of metropolitan government as artificial as it could not represent a common cultural community or a political community. TAC makes recommendations to the Confederation, cantons, cities and municipalities.

The confederation can provide an incentive for inter-municipal cooperation while Cantons set forth regulations or directives that aim to promote the inter-municipal coordination and harmonization. Federal government takes inter-municipal cooperation as a prerequisite for rendering financial and knowledge supports for programs related to cities agglomeration. This incentive by the federal government aims to bring vertical collaboration in urban policy, and it has somehow helped to resolve the age-old conflict between core-city and neighboring communes (Kübler et al., 2003, p. 275). In fact, the direct contact between the municipalities and federal government is rare and barely formalized, but the cooperative bodies noted above such as the Associations of the Swiss Municipalities and the Association of the Swiss cities work as lobby organizations. Through these associations, municipalities participate in the pre-parliamentary consultation procedures (Kübler et al., 2003; Ladner, 2007).

4. Conclusion
This study has shown that the success of local governance in Switzerland has been largely accounted by adequate local [municipal] autonomy and intricate institutions of intergovernmental cooperation. On the one hand, local governments have got adequate autonomy because they have constitutional right to exist, the freedom to choose their own political and administrative structures, select local leaders without coercion from the canton and federal leaders, strong political...
will to preserve decentralized governance, and local public expenditure responsibilities largely match with the locally raised revenues.

Equally, intricate intergovernmental cooperative bodies - inter-municipal cooperation, Swiss municipal association, Swiss cities association, regional conference and tripartite conference of agglomerations - have been applied to resolve problems of local (municipal) public service provision and governance problems that could not be met by a single level of government per se. The association of Swiss cities and association of Swiss municipalities are, for example, the two important organizations which stood for the concerns and interests of the municipalities and cities at federal level. In addition, instead of proposing territorial reform or proposing a big metropolitan government, the federal government focuses on improving the coordination and networking between the multiple governments in the agglomeration areas. The federal government has particularly released fund for promoting innovative intergovernmental cooperation in such areas. The Cantons, on the other hand, are not only constitutionally empowered to supervise their local/municipal governments but also they have the duty to respect the municipal autonomy. Interestingly, the people are/were central in deciding and finding solution either through inter-municipal cooperation or by merger/amalgamation projects.

In fact, the constitutionally ingrained principles, including consensus, compromise, partnership, subsidiarity, solidarity and cooperation along with the coming together model—voluntary association of the preexisting cantons—have laid a foundation for intergovernmental relations and willingness of each order of government to cooperate with the other in Switzerland.

Acknowledgements
The author has got the opportunity to conduct this study during his stay as a Marie Curie research fellow under the Local Government Research Innovative and staff exchange (LoGov RISE) project at Ximpulse in Bern, Switzerland from 27 June to 25 September 2019. He acknowledges the top-up allowances he had received from the LoGov RISE project during the research stay. He also thanks Ximpulse and Center for Federalism and Governance Studies of Addis Ababa University, the former for hosting and the latter for sending the researcher. It has to be, however, noted that the top-up allowance the author received during the research stay was meant to facilitate the author’s contribution to the Ethiopian Local Governments dossier within the framework of the LoGov RISE project. The author has not, therefore, received fund directed to this individual research, and he is solely responsible for all the contents and opinions appearing in this research article.

Funding
The author received no direct funding for this research.

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Declaration of interest statement
The author hereby declares that there is no conflict of interest, and the author receives no direct funding for this research.

Citation information
Cite this article as: Local governance in Switzerland: Adequate municipal autonomy cum intergovernmental cooperation?, Ketema Wakjira Debela, Cogent Social Sciences (2020), 6: 1763889.

Cover image
Source: Author.

Notes
1. The author was the Marie Curie research fellow under the Local Government Research Innovative and staff exchange (LoGov RISE) project hosted by the Ximpulse, a law and governance civil society institute based at Bern, Switzerland.
2. <enews.ch/2016/11/09/swiss-fact-44-swiss-municipalities-have-changed-their-official-language-since-1950/>.
3. Interview: Director of Association of municipalities of Bern, 10 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.
4. Ibid.
5. In-house Discussion with the Senior law and governance experts at Ximpulse, 27 July 2019, Bern Switzerland.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Interview: Director of Association of Bernese Municipalities, 10 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.
9. Interview: Director of the administration of the municipality of Koniz, 15 August 2019, Bern Switzerland; and Mayor of municipality of Wohlen, 23 August 2019, Bern Switzerland.
10. Interview: Senior Cantonal Law and Zoning Expert, 5 September 2019, Bern, Switzerland.
11. Interview: Mayor of municipality of Wohlen, 23 August 2019, Bern Switzerland.
12. In-house Discussion with the Senior Law and Governance Experts at Ximpulse, 27 July 2019, Bern Switzerland.
13. Article 3 of the Swiss Federal Constitution.
14. Interview: Mayor of municipality of Wohlen, 23 August 2019, Bern Switzerland.
15. Interview: Director of Association of Bernese Municipalities, 10 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.
16. Interview: Director of Association of Bernese Municipalities, 10 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland; and Interview: Director of the administration of the municipality of Koniz, 15 August 2019, Bern Switzerland.
17. Interview: Director of Association of Bernese Municipalities, 10 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland; and Interview: Mayor of municipality of Wohlen, 23 August 2019, Bern Switzerland.

18. Interview: Director of the administration of the municipality of König, 15 August 2019, Bern Switzerland.

19. Interview: Mayor of municipality of Wohlen, 23 August 2019, Bern Switzerland.

20. Interview: Director of Association of Bernese Municipalities, 10 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland; and Interview: Director of the administration of the municipality of König, 15 August 2019, Bern Switzerland.

21. In-house Discussion with the Senior law and governance experts at Ximpulse, 27 July 2019, Bern Switzerland.

22. www.kpm.unibe.ch/research/research_projects/abgeschlossene_dissertationen/municipal_mergers_in_switzerland/index_en.html.

23. Ibid; and In-house Discussion with the Senior law and governance experts at Ximpulse, 27 July 2019, Bern Switzerland.

24. Interview: Director of the administration of the municipality of König, 15 August 2019, Bern Switzerland.

25. Ibid; and Interview: Director of Association of Bernese Municipalities, 10 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.

26. Interview: Mayor of the municipality of Wohlen, 23 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.

27. Interview: Director of the Association of Municipalities of Switzerland, 26 August 2019, Bern; and In-house discussion with the experts at the Association of Municipalities of Switzerland, 26 August 2019, Bern.

28. In-house discussion with the experts at the Association of Municipalities of Switzerland, 26 August 2019, Bern.

29. Interview: Director of the Association of Municipalities of Switzerland, 26 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid; and In-house discussion with the experts at the Association of Municipalities of Switzerland, 26 August 2019, Bern.

32. Ibid.

33. Interview: Director of the Association of Municipalities of Switzerland, 26 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland; and In-house discussion with the experts at the Association of Municipalities of Switzerland, 26 August 2019, Bern.

34. Interview: Deputy Director of Swiss City Association, 27 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.

35. Ibid.

36. <www.stadt-zuerich.ch/prd/en/index/stadtentwicklung/aussenbeziehungen/political-lobbying-and-public-relations/tripartite-agglomeration-conference-tok.html>.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Interview: Deputy Director of Swiss City Association, 27 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.

40. Interview: Administrative Director of the regional conference in/around Bern, 28 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid; and Interview: Director of Association of Bernese Municipalities, 10 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Interview: Deputy Director of Swiss City Association, 27 August 2019, Bern, Switzerland.

47. <https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/prd/en/index/stadtentwicklung/aussenbeziehungen/political-lobbying-and-public-relations/tripartite-agglomeration-conference-tok.html>.

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