

**THESIS COLLECTION**

**Márton Tamás Katona**

**Institutional approach to the co-production of public services**

Ph.D. dissertation

**Supervisor:**

**Miklós Rosta, Ph.D**

Associate professor

Budapest, 2022

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## **1. Research Background and Justification of the Topic**

We would like to contribute to the issue of public goods and the production of public services by examining the cooperation between citizens, NGOs and the state. The issue of the public good has a long history in economics, having been addressed by Adam Smith in his *The Wealth of Nations* and is still a dominant theme in all economics textbooks. However, the problem of public goods and services is not only a question of production (Musgrave, 1959; Ostrom and Ostrom, 1977b) and efficiency (Samuelson, 1954), but also of the principles, values (Buchanan and Musgrave, 1999) and moral considerations (Sandel, 2013) that govern the production of these goods.

For many years, the classical views that entrusted the production of public goods to the state (Pickhardt, 2006) or the market (Tullock, 2005) have been dominant. Although already developed in the 1970s and 1980s, the theory of cooperative public services (coproduction), to which this thesis is most closely related, has been little represented in the mainstream literature until recent years, and is related to Elinor Ostrom (1978; 1996).

The theory is based on Ostrom's lifelong work, which focuses on the perspective of communities, cooperation between actors and collective action. The coproduction literature also focuses on the cooperation between actors (e.g. the state and citizens) involved in the production of public goods and services. In this case, the parties actively cooperate for better outcomes and efficiency.

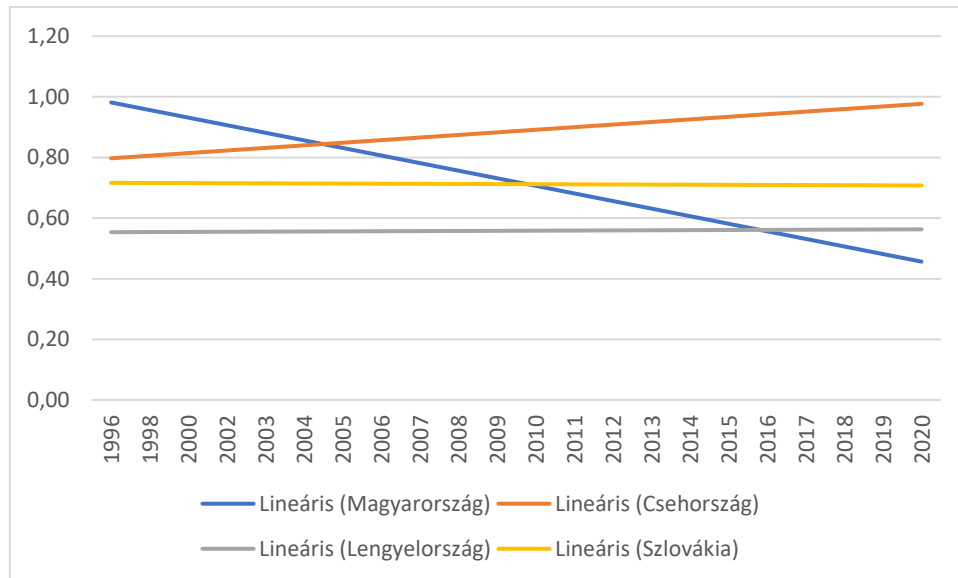
The theory focuses on improving the quality of public goods and services. At the same time, there are many other positive assumptions and expectations. These include, for example, the strengthening of democracy, social capital and trust in society. The problems regarding the quality of public services and the loss of trust in democracy and the state (Rothstein, 2011), the deterioration of state efficiency (Pestoff, 2008) are present in many countries around the world, including Hungary. It is no surprise that it has become one of the most popular issues in recent years: How should the role of the state be redefined and reshaped?

Below, we highlight just one indicator of governance quality and its linear trend in comparison with the Visegrad countries, as an illustration from the World Governance Indicator (WGI), a comprehensive indicator of governance quality produced by the World Bank.

Governance effectiveness encompasses perceptions of the quality of public services, public administration functioning independently of political pressures, the quality of public policy

formulation and implementation, and the credibility of government. As the indicator captures the perceptions and perceptions of economic agents, it can be considered primarily as an output side assessment of governance.

Figure 1. Government Effectiveness



Source: World Bank, own edition

The Hungarian data, as well as the transformation of recent years in the production of public services, including the changing roles of local governments (Pálné Kovács, 2014), the changing role of the state (Hajnal et al., 2018), and the changing political system (Kornai, 2015; Csaba, 2022), lead to the conclusion that it is worthwhile to look into the potential development opportunities in Hungary. Moreover, the comparison with domestic conditions is strengthened by the fact that coproduction theory was first launched at the Bloomington School's Political Theory and Policy Analysis workshop in the late 1970s, where Ostrom mentions the strong centralization experienced in the United States at the time as the root of the theory. At that time, it was a popular view - as it is in Hungary today - that centralised organisations were more efficient and effective in producing public services

However, it is far from clear that this type of collaborative public service delivery is achievable, and if so, under what conditions? Therefore, the research question of our thesis focuses on institutional conditions.

What institutional conditions are necessary for actors, the state and citizens, to cooperate in the production of public goods and services?

In particular, we analyse the impact of formal and informal (North, 2010) institutions. The focus of our research is to gain a deeper understanding of the situation in Hungary. We try to answer our research question by using notions and theories of institutional economics. This also means that we are not only interested in narrowly defined economic or technical conditions. In order to understand the behaviour of actors, we need to understand exactly which institutions affect individuals and how (Hodgson, 2003). Because these institutions can vary greatly from society to society, we cannot obtain a general solution that is independent of time and space, an interpretation that is common to both the old and the new institutional school (Csaba, 2021).

Our dissertation is based on an interdisciplinary perspective, because with the emergence of the state and the citizens' need for cooperation, we cannot ignore the results of political science, public administration or historical issues. Myrdal (1978) describes it as an important moment when he recognised that there are no economic, sociological or psychological problems, only problems that need to be examined from a historical perspective. Therefore, according to him, because of the complexity, our main question is what are the relevant and irrelevant conditions (ibid.) in a given problem.

## 2. Methodology

In order to explore the impact of formal and informal institutions in Hungary, we conducted empirical research in two county capitals, Székesfehérvár and Kecskemét. The relevant actors of the cooperation we investigated are local politicians (local government MPs, deputy mayors, mayors), bureaucrats (heads of departments, local government staff) and citizens (leaders and members of NGOs, local residents).

The main elements of the empirical research were in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, workshops organised by us for relevant actors. Based on the results of these activities, we will show which are the most important institutional conditions that determine the establishment of cooperation in the production of public goods and services in the domestic context.

The choice of Székesfehérvár as a location was motivated by the fact that the Corvinus University of Budapest Székesfehérvár Campus was established during the period of our research, and I participated as a young researcher in the work of the Centre for Economic Analysis and Public Policy Research, which was established in the scope of the EFOP research on Smart Specialisation. The other location of the research is Kecskemét, which is in a similar situation to Székesfehérvár in terms of several characteristics (e.g. number of NGOs), so we thought it worthwhile to expand the range of actors under analysis and to examine the conditions of cooperation in Kecskemét using a similar methodology.

For institutional analysis, three theories formed the basis of our dissertation:

- (i) North's (2010) theory of informal and formal institutions, which was used to analyse the effects of formal and informal influences, written and third-party enforced rules, and unwritten rules, norms and conventions.
- (ii) To examine the general assumptions and conditions for collective action (Keefer, 2018; Ostrom 2010), we considered the factors used in collective action theories, such as heterogeneity, past experiences, and the impact of social capital.
- (iii) The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, which is associated with Ostrom (Ostrom, 2011), was used to study primarily the rules that influence the action arena and the characteristics of actors and communities.

For institutional change, we draw conclusions from the model of (Mahooney and Thelen, 2010). In interview-based research, different sampling methods are used, such as purposive sampling, quota sampling, where selection is based on some specific characteristic or group membership, and the snowball method (Parker et al., 2019).

In our study, we used a mixture of quota-based sampling and the snowball method. In the quota-based sampling, we selected our interviewees based on their position in the municipality: on the side of the municipality, we interviewed local councillors and municipal leaders, on the side of the bureaucrats, we interviewed the heads and staff of relevant departments and units, while on the side of the citizens, we interviewed mainly the heads and staff of local NGOs. The snowball methodology provides an opportunity to explore social networks in more depth and to explore the local network of actors (Noy, 2018), which is why we mainly used this method for NGOs. This allowed us to explore conflicts and trust between actors in more detail. Regardless of the sample selection, the interview methodology has several limitations and risks to consider. On the one hand, it is important to always take into account who is saying what, from what position, for what purpose and under what circumstances (George and Bennett, 2005). The risk of interviewing politicians is that they may portray themselves in a more favourable light to the voters, creating a more idealised image of public policy-making than in reality (*ibid.*). Moreover, the precise measurement of institutions (Voigt, 2013) is not always straightforward, and informal institutions in particular can cause difficulties (Voigt, 2018).

During the data collection, 26 in-depth interviews (Babbie, 2003) were conducted, lasting on average 60-90 minutes. Most of them were audio-recorded, if the interviewee gave permission. We indicated to our interviewees that what they said would be anonymised, in order to increase trust between interviewer and interviewee. In addition to the interviews in Kecskemét and Székesfehérvár, we conducted 4 interviews with heads of department and heads of unit in ministries. We interviewed heads of department and heads of division of the Ministry of the Interior, the Prime Minister's Office and the former Ministry of Human Resources (the area now belongs to the Ministry of the Interior).

In addition to qualitative interviews, we also used a focus group interview methodology in Székesfehérvár. Different potential actors of cooperation (bureaucrat, politician, civilian) participated, 7 persons in total. With the focus group interview, our aim was to approach the institutional conditions of cooperation from a new perspective, possibly introducing new elements. The focus group interview provides an opportunity to investigate group processes



and group dynamics, which is particularly necessary when researching group norms (Vicsek, 2006). In terms of methodology, it is necessary to consider what factors, e.g. location, sense of comfort, may influence the participants (ibid.)

The third element of the research was the two workshops we organised in Székesfehérvár. The first was attended by participants from the municipality, the second by participants from NGOs. The participants of the workshops were randomly invited. Our expectation for the workshops was that by asking the actors in such a group format, we could explore more thoroughly the dynamics of each premise (how much interaction between actors develops, which ones provoke heated debate), we gave them different group tasks, on which we gave a preliminary presentation, preparing them on the topic. We tried to assess the differences in their opinions and attitudes before and after the presentation. We also wanted to test the relevance of knowledge.

The tools described above were combined with document analysis (strategies, concepts, legislation, etc.) and statistical data collection. A large volume of audio material generated during the field research was transcribed into a verbatim transcript, which was later analysed using MaxQDA software, with the help of a coding procedure based on the three main theories. A total of nearly 50 people were interviewed using the three methodologies during this phase of the research.

In addition, in our dissertation, in addition to mapping the institutional conditions in the country, we made a case study of cooperation in an educational field to examine the different rules and conditions. For this case study, following a similar methodology to the previous one, we conducted interviews with the actors of the collaboration, statistical data collection and document analysis.

Institutional schools often use the case study methodology (Alston, 2008), which we also adopted. The strength of case studies is that they provide the opportunity for a deeper explanation and understanding of processes and the exploration of cause and effect relationships, for which statistical methods and formal models are weaker (George and Bennett, 2005; Yin, 1981). The limitation of the case study methodology is often the way in which the case is selected, which can also determine the conclusions. Our choice of case was made using a snowball method and we did not impose the condition that we wanted to study successful

collaboration. The case selection was therefore limited only by the fact that we were looking for a case at a stage of public service delivery. Having found several such cases in the two municipalities, we then selected the subject of the analysis on the basis of sector. The choice of the case of education was strengthened by the fact that the education case has been one of the classic examples in the coproduction literature since the first generation and that there have been many subsequent studies on the subject, so we were motivated to contribute to this part of the literature by presenting a Hungarian case..

### **3. The results of the dissertation**

In our dissertation, we sought to answer the question of the formal and informal institutional conditions that influence the cooperation between the state and citizens in the production of public services. According to co-production theory, the characteristics of public goods (lack of rivalry, difficulty of exclusion) and the impossibility of separating production and consumption in public services require the cooperation of both parties, producer and consumer, in order to improve the quality of public services.

The main theories, conditions and criticisms of public goods are presented. The literature on cooperative public services was then presented in detail. Our contribution to the domestic literature was to present in detail the coproduction theory, which has been rarely or not at all discussed so far and which is nowadays increasingly dominant, especially in research on collective action, public management and public services.

Our contribution to the international literature is that we have attempted to distinguish between generations and eras in the case of this theory. From our analysis of the literature, we found that there are significant differences between the first generation, starting in the 1970s, and the second generation, starting in the mid-2000s. Among these, we identified, for example, the relationship with the process of public service production, where the first generation, according to a well-known concept in the economics literature, focuses mainly on the way in which inputs are used and the production of outputs, where the key question is from which actors and how inputs are received and how they are produced, and in which structure the production takes place.

In the second generation, however, the focus is more on specific sub-phases of production, such as commission, planning, production and evaluation, which allows for other aspects of analysis. An important difference is that while the first generation is dominated by theories and approaches from economics and political science, the second generation is more dominated by theories and approaches from public administration and public management, and the non-profit sector.

The results presented in our domestic empirical research confirmed the findings of international research in several cases, but several conditions appeared in the Hungarian cases that are not discussed in the international literature. Our main findings, based on our research in two municipalities, can be summarized as follows:

One of the most important motivations for local governments to cooperate in a fundamentally resource-constrained and increasingly shrinking environment is to reduce expenditure. As a consequence, municipalities see citizens and NGOs as a substitute relationship, which reduces cooperation to the production phase.

Incentives for cooperation in national rules are weak and often counterproductive. Both rules concerning municipalities (e.g. the Municipalities Act) and rules concerning NGOs (e.g. the NGO Act) make cooperation difficult.

Among the formal rules, the biggest incentive is provided by tenders for national and international (mainly EU) funding. The cooperation and involvement required by tenders has a real and effective impact on the cooperation of actors. NGOs are seen as resource collectors. Cooperation is thus a tool that is needed to obtain funding (e.g. from the European Union). Although the formal institutions of the European Union impose cooperation between local government and NGOs, the direction of this cooperation is contrary to the general approach. It is not the cooperation that leads to an improvement in the financial situation, e.g. through efficiency improvements and new knowledge, but the acquisition of additional resources that leads to cooperation.

A prerequisite for cooperation with the municipality is that NGOs have the right knowledge and competences. Such conditions include, in relation to our previous statement, participation in tenders and meeting administrative requirements. These competences are lacking in a significant proportion of NGOs and their capacity to obtain them requires further development.

The way in which de jure national and local rules are decomposed into operational level rules applied in the field of action will influence the possibility and implementation of cooperation. This is called flexibility, where three types of flexibility are distinguished:

(i) Cost-based flexibility: in line with transaction cost theory, flexibility refers to adaptability and more efficient operation. Cooperation requires that actors' expectations are oriented towards an expected reduction in transaction costs.

(ii) Rule-based flexibility: This is described by the size of the gap between de jure and de facto rules, which is a conflict based on the difference in the interpretation of the rules by the actors, the difference between " must and could ". Cooperation depends on the actors' perception that this gap is greater than zero. If it is zero, the local authority is only implementing what is required by national rules. Since there is little or no incentive to do so, cooperation does not take place. If the gap is greater than zero, i.e. the municipality performs an activity that is not expected but possible (flexibility in the rules), cooperation can take place.

(iv) Political flexibility: the flexibility that determines the openness of politicians, their role perception and the decisions they take in relation to it. The politician is the key player in the creation of cooperation within the municipal actors, without his/her will cooperation cannot be created. The success of cooperation is most influenced by the commitment and openness, or flexibility, of the actors involved.

The political environment influences how cooperation is achieved. In cases where polarisation within the community is high, cooperation is less likely to occur. In addition, the likelihood of cooperation between different actors may be influenced by political belongings, an aspect that is not or only marginally present in international cases. Polarisation and divergent political views also reduce the willingness of citizens and NGOs to cooperate. Our results show that the field of cooperation plays an important role, as the degree of engagement overrides the differences between actors.

The rules of entry and the costs of entry influence the establishment of cooperation. The cost of entry is high for citizens and NGOs in the cases we studied. As the search and information transaction costs are minimised by the municipality, it does not look for new partners, focusing mainly on existing ones. As a result, the range of collaborators is selective, which increases inequality.

The role of bureaucrats in terms of entry opportunities is becoming more important. As they know most of the existing and potential partners, they have an information advantage in this respect, which gives them a significant influence on who can participate in collaborations. In addition, the lack of knowledge and skills increases the entry costs in the cases studied. Knowledge, which relates to the benefits and conditions of cooperation, and ability, which has an impact on the way in which cooperation takes place. In a significant proportion of collaborations, digitalisation has increased costs and made collaboration more difficult, as opposed to relationships based on face-to-face contacts.

The number of NGOs, in particular the high number of organisations working in the same field, reduces the chances of cooperation. The municipality, reducing the transaction costs of bargaining and negotiation, cooperates with only a small number of actors. As a result, networking and coordination of NGOs is needed. However, the creation of networks is problematic because of fragmentation and conflicts between civil society organisations. This is greatly eased if there is a coordinating organisation to set up the network and coordinate the actors. This significantly improves advocacy skills and thus cooperation with the municipality.

Partnerships are more likely to be created and successful if they are initiated by the municipality. One of the reasons for this is the lack of resources in the civil sector, which increases the vulnerability of the civil sector vis-à-vis the municipality and the state. Meanwhile, NGOs consider that cooperation is more credible if it is initiated by the municipality.

The ineffectiveness of formal institutions makes informal institutions more important in the establishment of cooperation. Trust between actors plays a key role here. Even in cases where formal institutions work in the direction of cooperation, it will only happen if there is trust between the actors.

Our research has shown that informal institutions and community characteristics are more important than formal institutions for the success of cooperation. Formal institutions at the national level do not provide a real incentive and do not enforce cooperation between the state and citizens, nor between local governments and citizens or NGOs. As a consequence, cooperation depends on personal contact.

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## 5. Own publications related to the subject

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1. Katona, M., Petrovics, N., 2021. Válság és együttműködés. A koronavírus-járvány okozta lehetséges intézményi változások és a kooperatív közszolgáltatások. *KÖZGAZDASÁGI SZEMLE* 68, 76–95. <https://doi.org/10.18414/KSZ.2021.1.76>
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