

POLICY BRIEF

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Municipal Amalgamations in Flanders

Key Findings and Policy Implications for Strengthening Local Governments

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Municipal Amalgamations in an International Perspective

Across the world, municipal amalgamations have been pursued as a means to improve the efficiency, capacity, and effectiveness of local governance. Countries such as Denmark, Japan, Canada, and Australia have implemented large-scale municipal mergers, often motivated by expectations of cost savings, improved service delivery, and stronger administrative capacity (Karkin et al. 2019; Yamada and Arai 2021; Strebel 2019). By consolidating smaller local governments into larger entities, policymakers aim to achieve economies of scale, enhance strategic regional planning, and address demographic and financial pressures. In regions facing population decline and shrinking tax bases, such as parts of Japan and Canada, amalgamations have been seen as a necessary measure to maintain local services and financial sustainability. Additionally, mergers are often promoted as a way to professionalize administration, attract specialized personnel, and ensure municipalities can handle increasingly complex governance challenges, from infrastructure development to climate adaptation.

Despite these objectives, the measured effects of municipal amalgamations are mixed. While some cases show cost reductions, particularly in administrative functions, many studies highlight significant transition costs and limited long-term savings (Callanan et al. 2014; Ferket et al. 2014). Service

Highlights

Expanded policy agendas: Municipal mergers created broader policy scopes, enabling larger projects but needing harmonization.

Improved policy and operational capacities: Mergers increased resources, personnel, and expertise, enhancing service delivery. Transition challenges remain in fully utilizing these capacities.

Cultural integration over structural integration: While structures integrated well, cultural integration among staff and leadership was a key challenge, impacting capacity and service quality.

Enhanced service quality perception: Improved leadership and expertise contributed to better-perceived service quality in some cases, but adaptation struggles highlight improvement areas.

Critical role of middle management: Middle management was a key factor in driving change and ensuring service delivery, necessitating targeted recruitment and training.

Employee well-being disparities: New hires showed higher satisfaction, while pre-merger staff faced decreased commitment and trust, needing support.

quality improvements are also inconsistent, with some municipalities benefiting from enhanced regional planning, while others experience reduced local responsiveness and accessibility (Steiner 2003). Larger municipalities may enjoy increased governance capacity, but they also face challenges in integrating different administrative cultures and political structures. Furthermore, concerns over democratic accountability frequently emerge, as amalgamations can lead to a loss of local identity and reduced citizen engagement, particularly in smaller former municipalities (Steiner & Kaiser 2017). These international experiences highlight the complexity of municipal mergers, underscoring the importance of careful implementation, long-term planning, and strategies to maintain democratic legitimacy while enhancing efficiency.

Studying Municipal Amalgamations in Flanders

The history of municipal amalgamations in Belgium, and more specifically in Flanders, has been shaped by successive waves of territorial reform, each driven by different political, administrative, and economic rationales. The first major wave of mergers took place between 1961 and 1971, when the federal government sought to reduce the number of municipalities to improve economic efficiency and streamline local governance.

While local governments are increasingly considering mergers, partly due to fears of future mandatory consolidations, challenges such as citizen resistance, politically-driven motives, and a lack of transition capacity have plagued many of these mergers

However, it was the large-scale consolidation of 1977 that had the most significant impact, reducing the number of Belgian municipalities from 2,359 to 596 through a top-down, mandatory process. This reform was met with resistance from many local governments, as it was primarily dictated by the national government without significant local consultation. Despite this, the 1977 reform remains the foundation of Belgium's modern municipal structure, with only minor adjustments in the years that followed.

In 2001, municipal mergers became a regional competence, allowing the Flemish government to take a more tailored

approach. However, for many years, no significant efforts were made to further consolidate municipalities, as local resistance and political sensitivities remained strong. It was not until 2016 that the Flemish government introduced a voluntary merger framework, offering financial incentives and administrative support to municipalities willing to merge. This led to the first voluntary wave of municipal amalgamations in 2019, reducing the number of municipalities in Belgium from 589 to 581. The Flemish government has since reaffirmed its commitment to further mergers, with a second voluntary wave scheduled for 2025. While local governments are increasingly considering mergers, partly due to fears of future mandatory consolidations, challenges such as citizen resistance, politically-driven motives, and a lack of transition capacity have plagued many of these mergers.

For this reason, the Flemish government decided to conduct an independent assessment of the effects of municipal mergers through a consortium of Flemish universities (i.e. the University of Antwerp and Ghent University). The research was conducted using a multi-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses to assess the effects of mergers on policy, administration, and service delivery. The study focused on the municipalities that voluntarily merged in 2019, providing a first empirical evaluation of their experiences. Details on the study and results can be found

(in Dutch) in the research report of Callens et al. (2024), which can be found on the following website: https://www.steunpuntbestuurlijkvernieuwing.be/files/ugd/b8884e_3a290c52011945cca793b65440b99d1a.pdf.

Three methodological steps were taken. First, exploratory interviews were conducted with general managers and policy

coordinators from the merged municipalities to understand the merger process, identify key governance changes, and refine the focus of the study. These insights were then used to design a survey, which formed the study's core empirical component. Answers from a broad group of 326 municipal stakeholders, including mayors, aldermen, council members, senior administrators, and frontline staff, were collected to assess their perceptions of the mergers' effects on policy, internal management, and service delivery. Finally, the results were further explored in focus groups with political and administrative leadership, providing qualitative depth to the findings and allowing for discussion on key challenges

and best practices in the post-merger transition. This mixed-method approach ensured a comprehensive and triangulated analysis, offering policymakers valuable empirical insights into the administrative consequences of municipal amalgamations in Flanders.

Key findings

Policy effects

The research indicates that municipal mergers in Flanders led to an expansion of policy agendas, as the newly formed municipalities inherited and combined the priorities of their pre-merger counterparts. While this broadened the scope of local policy, it also created challenges in harmonizing different policy frameworks. In the short term, many municipalities opted to maintain most of their existing policies, delaying substantive changes until governance structures stabilized. However, successful policy integration depended on the degree of alignment between the merging municipalities, with those that had similar policy priorities experiencing smoother transitions. Internal collaboration between departments also played a crucial role, as effective cooperation allowed for more coherent policy-making. Despite these opportunities, municipalities faced difficulties in balancing legacy policies while introducing new initiatives. This highlights the need for structured policy harmonization strategies, which were missing in these municipalities.

Administrative effects

The study found that financial and personnel capacities increased in the merged municipalities, partly due to economies of scale and additional financial support from the Flemish government. The mergers led to a professionalization of administrative structures, with larger municipalities able to attract more specialized expertise and implement more sophisticated governance frameworks. However, the process of integrating different administrative cultures proved to be a major challenge. Employees who had worked in the pre-merger municipalities often struggled with a loss of identity and commitment, while newly hired staff adapted more easily to the new structures. The role of middle management emerged as a key factor in determining the success of the

transition, as strong leadership was crucial in maintaining operational stability and fostering a unified organizational culture. In municipalities where leadership gaps persisted, staff uncertainty and resistance to change were more pronounced. Additionally, internal coordination improved in some areas but remained a challenge in others, particularly in municipalities where structural reorganization was slow or inconsistently implemented.

Service effects

Despite concerns that mergers might disrupt service provision, the study found that service quality was generally perceived as stable or improved in most municipalities. The increased financial and human resources enabled investments in infrastructure, digitalization, and process optimization, leading to more efficient service delivery in some areas.

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However, the degree of improvement varied significantly across different service domains. Services that benefited from increased specialization, such as urban planning and environmental management, saw notable enhancements, while more community-oriented services, such as local citizen engagement initiatives, experienced fewer direct improvements. While the mergers created more formal mechanisms for citizen participation, actual engagement levels remained largely unchanged, suggesting that structural changes alone are insufficient to boost civic involvement. The study highlights that effective post-merger service improvement requires both financial investment and careful management of employee adaptation, ensuring that front-line staff feel supported and engaged in the new municipal structure.

Policy recommendations

1. Strengthen transition management for mergers

The research underscores the critical role of transition management in ensuring the success of municipal mergers. Many of the observed challenges, such as difficulties in harmonizing policies, integrating administrative cultures, and managing personnel adaptation, stem from insufficient planning and support during the transition phase. To address this, municipalities should develop comprehensive transition strategies that include clear milestones, structured communication plans, and dedicated resources for managing change. The Flemish government can further support these efforts by providing targeted guidance, best practice frameworks, and financial incentives for municipalities that adopt structured transition plans. Additionally, extending post-merger support beyond the initial years would help municipalities stabilize and fully realize the benefits of the merger.

2. Prioritize cultural integration

While structural integration (such as merging administrative systems) is a necessary first step, the research highlights that cultural integration is even more important for long-term success. Differences in organizational cultures between merging municipalities often led to internal tensions, lower employee commitment, and resistance to change. To mitigate these issues, municipalities should invest in leadership development programs, team-building initiatives, and change management training to foster a shared organizational identity. Special attention should be given to long-serving employees who may struggle with the transition, ensuring that they feel included in the new municipal culture. Clear internal communication and participatory decision-making processes can further enhance employee engagement and integration.

3. Strengthen the role of middle management

The research identifies middle management as a key driver of successful municipal amalgamations. Middle managers play a crucial role in translating policy changes into operational realities, maintaining service continuity, and supporting employees during transitions. However, many municipalities faced leadership gaps in these positions, leading to inconsistencies in administrative integration. To address this, municipalities should invest in leadership recruitment, training, and internal career development programs to ensure a strong and stable middle management layer. The Flemish

government could also provide leadership training programs or mentorship networks to support municipal leaders in managing post-merger challenges effectively.

4. Develop long-term policy harmonization strategies

Municipalities that merged in 2019 expanded their policy agendas by combining the priorities of the pre-merger entities, but harmonizing these policies remains an ongoing challenge. To prevent inefficiencies and policy fragmentation, municipalities should develop long-term harmonization roadmaps, gradually aligning policy frameworks across all administrative domains. These roadmaps should include clear timelines, stakeholder consultations, and phased policy integration strategies to ensure smooth implementation. Additionally, best practices from municipalities that successfully integrated policies should be documented and shared to guide future mergers.

5. Support employee well-being and job satisfaction

Employee well-being emerged as a key concern in the study, particularly among staff who had been employed before the mergers. These employees often experienced lower job satisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, and increased uncertainty. To counteract these effects, municipalities should establish structured post-merger support programs, including regular employee feedback mechanisms, mental health resources, and career development opportunities. Offering mentorship programs that pair pre-merger employees with newly hired staff could also facilitate knowledge-sharing and team cohesion.

6. Provide continued support for future mergers

With additional voluntary mergers anticipated in 2025, the Flemish government should build on the lessons from the 2019 mergers to improve guidance and support for municipalities considering consolidation. This could include the development of a central knowledge hub where municipalities can access best practices, toolkits, and case studies on managing mergers effectively. Furthermore, providing technical assistance and financial incentives for municipalities that adopt evidence-based transition strategies could further enhance the outcomes of future mergers.

Conclusion

Municipal amalgamations offer significant opportunities to strengthen local governance, enhance administrative capacity, and improve service delivery, but their success depends on how they are planned and managed. The research on the 2019 Flemish municipal mergers highlights both the benefits and the challenges of these reforms. While merged municipalities have gained greater policy capacity and more professionalized administrations, they have also faced hurdles in cultural integration, leadership gaps, and staff adaptation. To fully realize the potential of municipal mergers, policymakers must prioritize strategic transition management, invest in strong leadership, and support employee well-being. With more voluntary mergers expected in 2025, the lessons from the 2019 wave provide valuable guidance for both municipalities and the Flemish government in refining their approach. By addressing these key challenges proactively, future municipal amalgamations can be more effective, inclusive, and sustainable, ultimately leading to stronger and more resilient local governments.

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