Foreword

It is a great pleasure to contribute a foreword to this impressive volume. The publication is an important step forward to extend our knowledge about institutional reforms at the local level and to advance theory in the comparative study of local governments. It offers a rich empirical overview for researchers interested in comparing local government systems and reforms in various countries, and for practitioners interested in local practices and experiences. By engaging different theoretical perspectives as well as country-specific analyses of local-level reform developments, this book proposes ways forward for advancing the understanding of local government reforms and the comparative study of sub-national public administration. The volume brings together authors from more than 15 countries all over the world, who cover a huge variety of theoretical perspectives, comparative approaches, empirical research issues, and disciplinary traditions. In 19 chapters, these authors describe and compare the trajectories of local government reforms in various countries, how local actors (mayors, councilors, administration, and citizens) are affected by the reforms and to what extent these changes make a difference concerning efficiency and democracy, not at least with regard to possible unintended effects and negative impacts. The contributions gathered in this volume cover horizontal re-organization, such as municipal amalgamations and inter-municipal cooperation, as well as vertical re-allocations of public functions in processes of decentralization. While putting a strong emphasis on administrative and functional reforms, the volume does not however neglect issues of local democracy, politics and elections nor the more recent debates on social media use by local governments, for instance when faced with high policy pressures and wicked problems. Some chapters also refer to the peculiar challenges developing countries and post-communist countries are faced with, e.g. in terms of anti-corruption policies, accountability, and local capacity building. One proposition that arises from these analyses is that the creation of strong local governments is considered a possible solution for enhancing democratic values and liberalist principles in general. In summary, the book presents an extensive, and at the same time nuanced, analysis of local government reforms in various countries. It combines breadth and depth of analysis in single-city studies, few cases comparisons and “large n” country-analyses. The contributions provide the reader with deeper insights into specific reform processes, as well as with middle-range theories and broader views on general trends of local-level reforms from a trans-European or international perspective. Finally, yet importantly, as the Chair of the COST-Action IS 1207 “Local Public Sector Reforms: An International Comparison (LocRef)”, I am particularly delighted to acknowledge this volume as a remarkable achievement of international networking and collaboration. It is evidence for the success of academic cooperation across borders, institutions and disciplines: a “must read” for studying and teaching comparative local government on an international scale.

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