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Editorial

Local Governments and Their Study in a Changing World: Contemporary Debates and Research Agendas

Los gobiernos locales y su estudio en un mundo en transformación: debates contemporáneos y agendas de investigación

Os governos locais e seu estudo em um mundo em transformação: debates contemporâneos e agendas de pesquisa

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Abstract

The international expansion of local government studies has diversified theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and research agendas, yet this growth has not brought about a comparable integration of academic traditions or a systematic accumulation of comparative knowledge. This tension is particularly relevant in light of contemporary transformations in local government, characterised by expanding responsibilities, limited autonomy, uneven institutional capacities in many countries, and increasingly complex intergovernmental relations. This editorial examines the development of the academic field, inequalities in the production and circulation of knowledge, and the conceptual and methodological challenges of international comparison. Drawing on debates concerning local autonomy, state capacities, territorial power, democracy, innovation, and intermunicipal cooperation, it situates the contributions

published in issue 96 of Reforma y Democracia within a broader reflection on the possibilities and limitations of comparative knowledge. It argues that advancing our understanding of local government requires distinguishing between institutional powers, effective capacities, and power relations, while developing analytical categories capable of identifying regularities without overlooking the diversity of political and territorial contexts. From this perspective, the editorial proposes contextual comparability as an approach to connecting different academic traditions and developing international research agendas.

Keywords: local governments, local government studies, local autonomy, comparative research, knowledge production, contextual comparability.

Resumen

La expansión internacional de los estudios sobre gobiernos locales ha diversificado sus perspectivas teóricas, enfoques metodológicos y agendas de investigación, sin que ello se haya traducido en una integración equivalente de las tradiciones académicas ni en una acumulación sistemática de conocimiento comparado. Esta tensión adquiere particular relevancia frente a las transformaciones contemporáneas de los gobiernos locales, caracterizadas por la ampliación de sus responsabilidades, las limitaciones de su autonomía, las desigualdades en sus capacidades institucionales en numerosos países y la creciente complejidad de las relaciones intergubernamentales. Este editorial examina la construcción del campo académico, las desigualdades en la producción y circulación del conocimiento y los desafíos conceptuales y metodológicos de la comparación internacional. A partir de los debates sobre autonomía, capacidades estatales, poder territorial, democracia, innovación y cooperación intermunicipal, sitúa las contribuciones reunidas en el número 96 de Reforma y Democracia en el marco de una reflexión sobre las posibilidades y los límites del conocimiento comparado. Se sostiene que avanzar en la comprensión de los gobiernos locales exige distinguir entre atribuciones institucionales, capacidades efectivas y relaciones de poder, así como desarrollar categorías analíticas capaces de reconocer regularidades sin desconocer la diversidad de contextos políticos y territoriales. Desde esta perspectiva, se propone la comparabilidad contextual como orientación para articular diferentes tradiciones académicas y contribuir a la construcción de agendas internacionales de investigación.

Palabras clave: gobiernos locales, estudios municipales, autonomía local, investigación comparada, producción de conocimiento, comparabilidad contextual.

Resumo

A expansão internacional dos estudos sobre governos locais diversificou suas perspectivas teóricas, abordagens metodológicas e agendas de pesquisa, sem que esse processo tenha resultado em uma integração equivalente das tradições acadêmicas ou na acumulação sistemática de conhecimento comparado. Essa tensão adquire particular relevância diante das transformações contemporâneas dos governos locais, caracterizadas pela ampliação de suas responsabilidades, pelas limitações de sua autonomia, pelas desigualdades em suas capacidades institucionais em diversos países e pela crescente complexidade das relações intergovernamentais. Este editorial examina a construção do campo acadêmico, as desigualdades na produção e circulação do conhecimento e os desafios conceituais e metodológicos da comparação internacional. A partir dos debates sobre autonomia local, capacidades estatais, poder territorial, democracia, inovação e cooperação intermunicipal, situa as contribuições reunidas no número 96 da revista Reforma y Democracia no âmbito de uma reflexão sobre as possibilidades e os limites do conhecimento comparado. Argumenta-se que avançar na compreensão dos governos locais exige distinguir entre atribuições institucionais, capacidades efetivas e relações de poder, bem como desenvolver categorias analíticas capazes de identificar regularidades sem desconsiderar a diversidade dos contextos políticos e territoriais. Nessa perspectiva, propõe-se a comparabilidade contextual como orientação analítica para articular diferentes tradições acadêmicas e contribuir para a construção de agendas internacionais de pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: governos locais, estudos sobre governos locais, autonomia local, pesquisa comparada, produção de conhecimento, comparabilidade contextual.

Over recent decades, local government studies have expanded and diversified their research agendas, theoretical and methodological perspectives, and international collaboration networks. However, this growth has not led to an equivalent integration of academic traditions or the systematic accumulation of comparative knowledge. Institutional differences, inequalities in the circulation of knowledge, and the persistence of categories developed from particular political experiences hinder the development of shared explanations.

At the same time, local governments have undergone transformations that have broadened the range of issues addressed by local government research. Although they have become increasingly important for democracy and territorial development, their growing responsibilities

coexist, in many contexts, with limited autonomy, uneven institutional capacities, and dependence on other levels of government. Their involvement in public affairs has expanded, but they do not always have the powers, resources, or institutional conditions needed to exercise their responsibilities.

This tension challenges traditional interpretations of decentralisation. Comparative evidence reveals trajectories of local autonomy marked by advances, stagnation, and setbacks between 1990 and 2020, rather than a progressive and uniform distribution of power (Cravacuore, 2026a; Ladner et al., 2025). These differences also expose the limitations of measuring autonomy exclusively through formal powers (Mauri, 2024). Understanding these trajectories requires distinguishing between formal powers, available resources, governmental capacities, and the political relations that condition their exercise.

The complexity of public problems poses new challenges for local government research. Metropolitan dynamics, territorial inequalities, environmental risks, and social demands extend beyond jurisdictional boundaries, requiring attention to how decisions and resources are distributed across different levels of government. International evidence highlights the importance of examining responsibilities, fiscal resources, and intergovernmental coordination together (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022).

The growing range of issues under study has also expanded the field's analytical perspectives. Traditional approaches to the territorial organisation of the state, political representation, and local autonomy have been joined by research on state capacities, intergovernmental relations, innovation, participation, and territorial development. This thematic diversification, however, does not guarantee greater disciplinary integration. Concepts such as autonomy, institutional capacity, and governance acquire different meanings depending on the context, making it difficult to establish equivalences between local government systems with distinct historical trajectories and institutional configurations.

The challenge is to develop explanations that identify regularities while remaining attentive to institutional and territorial specificities. Expanding the information available on local governments is not sufficient. Developing such explanations requires critically examining the categories employed, clarifying their scope, and recognising the institutional and political conditions that shape their meaning. From this perspective, international comparison can contribute both to identifying common problems and to reassessing interpretations developed from particular experiences.

Issue 96 of *Reforma y Democracia*, devoted to Local Governments Around the World, brings together research on institutional organisation, capacities, democracy, innovation, and cooperation across diverse political and territorial contexts. This editorial examines these contributions in light of contemporary debates and considers the challenges facing local government studies as an international academic field, particularly those involved in producing rigorous comparative knowledge and developing shared research agendas.

The Evolution of Local Government Studies: From Decentralisation to New Interdependencies

The historical trajectories of local governments have shaped differences in their institutional recognition, powers, and relations with other levels of the state. These differences are reflected in research traditions concerned with the territorial organisation of power, political representation, public administration, and local autonomy. Institutional diversity constitutes both an object of study and a challenge for international comparison.

A fundamental tension in local government lies in its dual nature as a political institution and an administrative organisation. It represents a territorial community while also forming part of a state structure within which it exercises powers, manages resources, and implements public policies. This duality has encouraged administrative approaches focused on efficiency, services, and management, alongside political studies concerned with representation, participation, and the territorial distribution of power. Both perspectives illuminate different dimensions of local government, although neither is sufficient on its own to explain the relationships between institutional powers, the capacity for public intervention, and the political influence of territorial actors.

The decentralisation reforms of the final decades of the twentieth century considerably broadened the scope of research. Decentralisation was promoted as a means of improving public management, bringing decisions closer to communities, and strengthening democratic representation. However, its outcomes depended on the political and institutional conditions under which reforms took place (Manor, 1999). Comparative research distinguished its political, administrative, and fiscal dimensions, showing that they do not necessarily evolve simultaneously and that their effects depend on reform sequences and institutional contexts (Falleti, 2005). It also highlighted the difficulties of establishing equivalences between forms of decentralisation and measuring their consequences through aggregate indicators (Rodden, 2004). Decentralisation thus emerged as a research problem extending beyond normative interpretations of its benefits.

Subsequent experiences challenged the idea of decentralisation as a uniform and irreversible process (Cravacuore, 2026a). The transfer of powers may coexist with dynamics of political recentralisation, raising questions about the effective distribution of authority in multilevel systems (Trein & Maggetti, 2024). Moreover, multidimensional instruments such as the Local Autonomy Index have enabled comparisons of local autonomy trajectories across countries and periods (Ladner et al., 2025). These advances have broadened the possibilities for distinguishing the institutional recognition of autonomy from the conditions that affect its exercise.

Territorial reorganisation reforms constitute another area of comparative research. Municipal amalgamations, changes to jurisdictional boundaries, and the creation of new entities are often justified on grounds of administrative efficiency or fiscal sustainability, although they also affect political representation, territorial identities, and intergovernmental relations. The analysis of African and European experiences shows that arguments concerning efficiency and territorial identity acquire different degrees of importance depending on political contexts and intergovernmental dynamics (Kössler & Fessha, 2025). These studies show that assessing territorial reforms requires considering their effects on political representation and intergovernmental relations, alongside their administrative and fiscal consequences.

The complexity of public problems has reinforced interdependencies between governments. Metropolitan dynamics, mobility, social protection, and environmental risks require decisions and resources to be coordinated across different institutions. Multilevel governance approaches have contributed to understanding the distribution of authority across different scales and jurisdictions, beyond the traditional hierarchical structures of the state (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). However, coordination does not imply a balanced distribution of authority: asymmetries in resources, powers, and bargaining capacity condition local government action. The challenge is to explain how powers are distributed and how relations of interdependence develop and operate in practice.

Intermunicipal cooperation provides a response to problems that exceed the individual capacities of local governments through shared arrangements for service provision, infrastructure development, or policy coordination. Research has examined it as an alternative to other forms of municipal reform, although it may also be combined with them, and its outcomes depend on incentives, service characteristics, and institutional contexts (Bel et al., 2024). Its study has helped shift attention from individual government structures towards interinstitutional relations and mechanisms of collective action.

Decentralisation, recentralisation, territorial reorganisation, and new governmental interdependencies have broadened the scope of research beyond institutional structures and formal powers. Effective capacities, power relations, and coordination mechanisms now occupy an important place in local government studies. This diversification presents new challenges for bringing together the field's academic traditions and advancing the development of comparative knowledge.

Building an International Academic Field: Traditions, Inequalities, and the Challenges of Comparative Knowledge

Local government studies constitute an internationally established field of research, although its disciplinary boundaries and academic identity are less clearly defined than those of other specialisations within political science and public administration. Its development has incorporated contributions from public economics, political sociology, law, urban studies, geography, and public policy analysis. This plurality has enriched the available perspectives but has also encouraged the coexistence of traditions that do not always share concepts, methods, or criteria for comparison. A shared object of study is insufficient to establish an integrated intellectual field or develop cumulative comparative knowledge that extends beyond particular institutional contexts.

Early research agendas addressed the territorial organisation of the state, the distribution of power, public finance, municipal administration, political representation, and urbanisation. They subsequently incorporated perspectives on governance, participation, institutional reforms, and new forms of public action (Yi & Qiu, 2025). However, this diversification followed different trajectories. A study of academic research on local government in Argentina reveals a process of consolidation linked to changes in research agendas and local management capacities (Grandinetti, 2023), while an analysis of a specialised Japanese journal identifies a particular emphasis on local finance, accounting, and management (Moteki, 2020). These differences reflect the influence of national contexts on academic agendas and complicate international comparison: similar problems may be analysed through different categories, while shared concepts may refer to different institutional phenomena.

The internationalisation of the field has expanded opportunities for exchange through specialised associations, academic journals, research networks, and comparative projects. However, inequalities in participation and difficulties in developing shared agendas persist. A bibliometric analysis of 1,550 articles published in Local Government Studies between 1974

and 2022 identifies growing international collaboration and highlights the need to broaden geographical representation and strengthen the theoretical and methodological foundations of comparative research (Jing et al., 2024). Internationalisation involves more than bringing together researchers from different countries; it also requires integrating diverse academic traditions into the formulation of research questions, the development of analytical categories, and the construction of comparative explanations. The participation of different academic traditions encourages theoretical renewal by prompting a reassessment of assumptions derived from particular institutional experiences.

These difficulties are embedded in broader inequalities in the production, circulation, and recognition of scientific knowledge. The concentration of academic publishing and the predominance of certain countries and institutions in the most visible political science research (Kaiser et al., 2023), together with geographical asymmetries in the production and legitimation of urban knowledge (Müller et al., 2025), demonstrate that participation in international debates is unequal. In local government studies, these differences are particularly relevant because concepts such as autonomy, decentralisation, governance, and institutional capacity are linked to specific historical configurations. When the most academically visible experiences become general reference points, there is a risk of interpreting other local government systems through categories that do not reflect their particularities. Broadening the geographical scope of the field therefore requires reassessing its analytical assumptions, rather than merely diversifying the cases under study.

These limitations are compounded by fragmented knowledge of the scientific community engaged in local government research. Despite the existence of associations, specialised journals, and international networks, the regional and disciplinary composition of this academic community, its research interests, and the relationships between research traditions remain difficult to determine. The Global Survey on Local Government and Politics, developed within Research Committee 05 on Comparative Studies of Local Government and Politics (RC05) of the International Political Science Association (IPSA), seeks to contribute to this understanding. Its initial findings, presented at the 2025 IPSA World Congress, identified disciplinary, thematic, and methodological differences, as well as regional inequalities in participation in international associations and projects (Navarro & Cravacuore, 2025). This initiative extends the scope of inquiry from local governments themselves to the academic community that produces knowledge about them.

The expansion of the survey during 2026 provided a more detailed picture of research agendas. Its findings highlight local public policies, decentralisation, multilevel governance, and institutional design among the main academic interests, frequently linked to studies of urban, regional, and rural development (Cravacuore, 2026b). This thematic convergence suggests that the diversification of research agendas coexists with shared interests that may encourage dialogue across disciplines and research traditions.

However, thematic convergence does not imply common categories, coordinated research strategies, or integrated international networks of exchange. The survey findings must be interpreted with caution, as the voluntary recruitment of researchers identified through different sources and networks produces neither a census nor a probability sample of the global academic community. Nor can historical trends be established without successive measurements conducted under comparable conditions. Its contribution lies in providing exploratory evidence on the composition and research agendas of the field, identifying potential areas for collaboration, and raising questions about disciplinary specialisation, regional inequalities, and academic cooperation. A deeper understanding of who studies local governments, which problems they investigate, and how they relate to one another is also a condition for consolidating this international academic field.

Strengthening the field requires moving beyond the coexistence of traditions towards their intellectual integration without homogenising them. Comparative research can contribute to this process by contrasting explanations developed in different contexts, reassessing theoretical assumptions, and establishing analytical equivalences while recognising institutional and territorial particularities. The relationships between autonomy, capacities, and territorial power constitute a central theme capable of connecting perspectives that are often treated separately. The aim is not to establish a uniform agenda, but to develop shared research problems that encourage comparable explanations and the accumulation of knowledge sensitive to the diversity of local experiences.

The Challenges of Comparative Local Government Research: Autonomy, Capacities, and Territorial Power

Autonomy is a central category in local government studies, although its meaning is ambiguous. Comparative research has helped move beyond unidimensional interpretations by distinguishing institutional, political, administrative, and fiscal components with varying degrees of development (Ladner et al., 2019, 2025). These advances have facilitated measurement

and comparison but have also highlighted the difficulties of establishing equivalences between institutional systems. The election of local authorities and the formal recognition of powers do not, in themselves, determine the effective scope for decision-making. A municipality may possess extensive powers while simultaneously facing budgetary or regulatory constraints that condition their exercise.

An important conceptual challenge is to distinguish between autonomy, capacities, and territorial power. Although related, these dimensions are not equivalent, and conflating them can weaken explanations of how local governments function. Autonomy refers to the institutional scope for decision-making, encompassing both formally recognised powers and the constraints that condition their exercise. Capacities encompass the institutional and relational abilities to mobilise resources, coordinate organisations, and translate decisions into public action. Territorial power, in turn, refers to the political relations through which different actors influence the definition of priorities, the mobilisation of resources, and collective decision-making, both within the territory and in its relations with other levels of government. This distinction avoids conflating the legal recognition of powers with effective possibilities for intervention, or the latter with the political influence of territorial actors.

Studies of fiscal decentralisation demonstrate the importance of these distinctions. Own-source revenues, intergovernmental transfers, and expenditure restrictions can expand or limit local discretion. Analysis must therefore consider not only the resources administered but also the authority to decide how they are used (Rodden, 2004; Treisman, 2007). Conventional indicators of fiscal decentralisation may overestimate the effective scope for decision-making (Mauri, 2024). These contributions highlight the risks of equating resource availability, decision-making authority, and the political responsibilities of local authorities.

The growing attention to state capacities in local government studies has broadened the analysis of public intervention while also raising conceptual difficulties. Financial resources, specialised personnel, information, and administrative structures are relevant dimensions, but their availability does not guarantee their coordinated and sustained mobilisation. The analysis of state power shows that the possibilities for intervention cannot be inferred solely from formal authority (Mann, 1984). Moreover, capacities are function-specific: an administration may manage routine services effectively while encountering difficulties in formulating development policies, managing risks, or coordinating complex interventions (Grin et al., 2019). This requires specifying which capacities are being analysed and in relation to which municipal functions.

An additional challenge is to distinguish capacities, interventions, and outcomes. Capacities may contribute to local government performance, but their effects depend on the problems addressed, the actions of other actors, and territorial conditions. Inferring capacities from favourable outcomes and then using them to explain those same outcomes constitutes circular reasoning. Local government research must therefore differentiate between available resources, capacities deployed, interventions undertaken, and their observable consequences. This distinction is particularly relevant when comparing digitalisation policies, risk management, and social services, whose outcomes depend on diverse technical, organisational, and territorial conditions.

The growing attention to relational capacities has expanded the range of research questions and units of analysis in local government studies. The possibilities for local action depend partly on resources and decisions external to municipal administrations. Other levels of government, public institutions, social organisations, and economic actors participate in the formulation and implementation of territorial policies. These interorganisational relations may expand the possibilities for municipal intervention, but they may also generate new dependencies. Studying them requires distinguishing between the formal existence of coordination mechanisms and the ability to use them effectively, which are conditioned by resources, technical capacities, and bargaining power.

Intermunicipal cooperation provides an opportunity to examine these challenges. Agreements between local governments may facilitate service provision, access to specialised resources, and policy coordination, but their effects depend on incentives, funding, and the distribution of costs and benefits (Bel et al., 2024). Research must distinguish between the existence of cooperative arrangements, their operation, and their outcomes. The number of agreements signed or networks in which a local government participates does not, in itself, constitute a sufficient measure of relational capacity. Assessing this capacity requires considering the effective possibilities for mobilising resources, influencing decisions, and sustaining joint interventions.

The analysis of territorial power poses new challenges for local government studies, particularly concerning the relationships between institutional autonomy, political influence, and local democracy. Governments with similar powers and resources may occupy different positions in intergovernmental relations or exercise unequal influence over decisions affecting their communities. Explaining these differences requires examining formally recognised powers and available capacities alongside the positions local actors occupy within political relations,

their bargaining power, and their influence over the distribution of resources and the definition of priorities. The distinction between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of mayors' political autonomy allows their relations with other levels of government to be examined separately from the checks and balances operating within their own territories (Došek & Eaton, 2025). For comparative research, this distinction is fundamental: greater autonomy for mayors does not necessarily imply stronger local democracy.

Territorial inequalities also complicate explanations of how local governments function. Demographic, economic, and institutional differences condition the availability of specialised personnel, opportunities for cooperation, and positions within intergovernmental relations. The literature on decentralisation shows that its effects depend on institutional and territorial conditions and warns against establishing linear relationships between autonomy and performance (Faguet, 2014; Smoke, 2015). In this context, greater local discretion may encourage responses adapted to specific needs but may also deepen territorial disparities. Central government equalisation mechanisms may reduce these disparities and ensure common standards, although they may also restrict certain areas of decision-making. The challenge for local government studies is to incorporate these conditions into explanations without treating them as automatic determinants of institutional performance.

The relationships between autonomy, capacities, and territorial power constitute a central research agenda for local government studies. Developing this agenda requires distinguishing formal powers from effective possibilities for decision-making, resources from capacities, and interventions from outcomes, while also examining the political relations that condition them. Rather than proposing a single explanatory model, the aim is to strengthen the conceptual tools needed to understand what shapes local governments' scope for action in different institutional and territorial contexts. These distinctions provide a basis for addressing the tensions between democracy, efficiency, and innovation that run through contemporary debates on local government.

Democracy, Efficiency, and Innovation: Contemporary Tensions in Local Government Studies

The contributions brought together in this issue examine a common problem through different institutional and territorial experiences: the relationship between the objectives attributed to local reforms and the outcomes they actually produce. Democracy, efficiency, administrative capacity, innovation, and territorial equity are not necessarily complementary dimen-

sions. Their relationships depend on institutional configurations, political incentives, available resources, and capacities for coordination. The diversity of experiences allows us to examine the conditions under which particular institutions and policies function, change, or encounter difficulties in achieving their objectives.

Territorial reorganisation reforms constitute a first area of discussion. Municipal amalgamations are often justified by their potential administrative and fiscal benefits, although they also alter the conditions of political representation and the relationships between the localities incorporated into new jurisdictions. The experience of municipal amalgamation in Armenia reveals heterogeneous outcomes in citizen satisfaction with services and local democracy, with no statistically significant differences between the changes observed in amalgamated and non-amalgamated municipalities in the exploratory model considered. The accounts collected describe improvements in administrative access and investment, alongside difficulties concerning representation, consultation, and the territorial distribution of resources (Gasparyan, 2026). Municipal reorganisation therefore raises issues that extend beyond the pursuit of economies of scale and require consideration of its political and territorial consequences.

The relationship between institutional design and actual functioning becomes particularly relevant when administrative reforms take place in contexts of strong political constraints. The South African experience shows that constitutional recognition of local government, the allocation of powers, and the availability of reform programmes can coexist with persistent difficulties in municipal operations. Patronage relations, partisan appointments, rent-seeking, and the instability of political coalitions condition the use of administrative instruments and weaken accountability mechanisms (Tapscott, 2026). These dynamics help explain why administrative reforms may prove insufficient when informal power relations limit the possibilities for institutional action.

Both experiences challenge interpretations that attribute predictable effects to particular institutional reforms. Changing territorial scale, redistributing powers, or introducing new administrative instruments does not necessarily transform the power relations that condition their exercise. Nor can efficiency and democracy be regarded as automatic consequences of a particular form of municipal organisation. Analysing them requires examining how institutional design, resource distribution, conditions of representation, and mechanisms of political accountability interact.

Cooperation between jurisdictions is another area of research concerned with the possibilities for local action. Intermunicipal agreements can address problems that exceed the capacities of individual governments, although the incentives behind their formation differ according to the functions involved. The Mexican experience shows that participation in agreements on urban planning, public works, and joint service provision is conditioned by factors that vary according to the purpose of cooperation. Metropolitan location, economic capacity, urban characteristics, and levels of socioeconomic marginalisation do not show uniform associations with decisions to collaborate. Greater municipal revenue may even reduce incentives to share certain services (Ramírez de la Cruz et al., 2026). Intermunicipal cooperation is therefore not a uniform response to territorial fragmentation, but a set of decisions conditioned by needs, resources, and expected benefits.

Coordination problems also arise when municipal innovations need to be integrated with policies operating at the national level. A home telecare initiative for older people developed in Costa Rica illustrates the possibilities for local action in an area traditionally associated with national social policies. The experimental evaluation identified reductions in loneliness and improvements in mental health, with no observed effects on physical health or hospitalisation. However, favourable outcomes in a municipal initiative do not guarantee its extension to other jurisdictions or its incorporation into a national care system. These possibilities depend on decisions concerning funding, coordination, and the distribution of responsibilities across levels of government (Chaverri-Carvajal & Alvarenga-Fournier, 2026).

These experiences allow us to examine two forms of governmental coordination: horizontal cooperation between municipalities and vertical coordination across different levels of the state. Both may expand the possibilities for local action, although they may also reproduce inequalities in resources and capacities or introduce new institutional dependencies. Intermunicipal agreements and national programmes therefore raise questions about the distribution of initiative, funding, costs, and political responsibilities. The issue is not to establish an opposition between autonomy and coordination, but to understand the conditions under which different combinations of the two contribute to addressing public problems.

The relationships between state capacities and innovation offer another perspective on how local governments function. Research involving 123 Argentine municipalities shows that public innovation does not follow a linear relationship with municipal size and cannot be explained exclusively by the availability of organisational resources. Medium-sized municipalities in the sample display a higher proportion of innovative experiences than large cities, although

only a small proportion of the governments surveyed manage to institutionalise their initiatives. The concept of activation capacity provides a framework for examining the mobilisation of resources through sustained political leadership, strategic orientation, and relationships with external actors (Rodríguez, 2026). From this perspective, innovation is not an automatic consequence of institutional resources, but a process whose continuity depends on political and organisational conditions.

Digital transformation offers another perspective on the relationships between resources, capacities, and outcomes. An analysis of 5,569 Brazilian municipalities from 2004 to 2024 identifies the conditions associated with the provision of informational and transactional digital services. Arrangements combining internal information technology teams with external contracting show positive associations with service availability, particularly for services requiring specific knowledge of local administrative procedures, without demonstrating the superiority of any particular organisational model. At the same time, the expansion of federal platforms coincides with a narrowing of the differences between municipalities with and without specialised teams, particularly in informational services (Avellaneda & Gomes, 2026). These trends raise questions about which capacities can be substituted through shared infrastructure and which continue to depend on the knowledge and organisational processes specific to each administration.

The production and use of information for risk management constitute an additional dimension of municipal capacities. An analysis of contingency plans from 70 municipalities in Rio Grande do Sul that declared a state of public calamity following the floods of May 2024 reveals differences in the availability of risk assessments, instruments for producing and analysing data, mechanisms for intersectoral coordination, and projects for using information. Disaster exposure and conventional bureaucratic attributes have limited explanatory power in accounting for the observed diversity, while external incentives and interinstitutional relations become relevant to understanding the development of informational capacities (Abulatif et al., 2026). The severity of a public problem does not, in itself, guarantee the existence of adequate instruments to address it.

Taken together, these studies broaden our understanding of local state capacities. Financial resources, administrative structures, and the availability of specialised personnel are important but do not, on their own, explain the possibilities for innovation, digitalisation, or risk management. Other relevant dimensions include the ability to mobilise existing resources, continuity of decision-making, access to shared infrastructure, information production, and

relationships with other actors. Nor should these dimensions be confused with the outcomes of interventions. Distinguishing between them makes it possible to examine why governments with similar institutional resources may develop different responses to comparable problems.

Local democracy raises questions about the continuity of participatory mechanisms and the conditions of political representation. Experiences involving the termination of participatory budgeting in five Central European cases show that the creation of participatory institutions does not guarantee their survival. The analysis identifies different configurations of failure, associated with co-optation and institutional hollowing out, fiscal constraints combined with political-bureaucratic disengagement, and discontinuity following electoral changes. In the cases examined, budgetary difficulties alone do not explain the termination of these initiatives (Šaradín et al., 2026). The study brings discontinued initiatives into research on participation, although identifying the conditions that favour their continuity also requires comparison with experiences that have been sustained.

Subnational political representation raises different questions, although they are related to the actual functioning of democratic institutions. The study of the political careers of members of Uruguay's departmental legislatures (*ediles*) from 1984 to 2025 reveals trajectories characterised by limited continuity in office and restricted opportunities to reach higher political positions. Immediate re-election accounts for approximately one-third of incumbents in each electoral cycle, while gender inequalities accumulate throughout political careers (Roel Aspeé & Pandolfo Santurio, 2026). These findings challenge the assumption that subnational representation necessarily constitutes a stage of political professionalisation or a platform for advancement and highlight the importance of party rules, electoral incentives, and unequal opportunities for participation.

Mechanisms of direct participation and channels of political representation constitute different dimensions of local democracy, but both require a distinction between institutional recognition and actual functioning. The existence of participatory mechanisms, representative bodies, and electoral rules provides insufficient information about opportunities for citizen influence, the continuity of democratic experiences, and the trajectories of those holding representative office. These conditions depend on specific political relations, resources, incentives, and institutional arrangements. Territorial proximity does not, in itself, ensure greater participation or more effective representation.

The nine research articles brought together in this issue reveal common problems while reflecting the diversity of their subjects, approaches, and contexts. Territorial and administrative re-

forms raise questions about the relationships between institutional design, efficiency, and political power. Intermunicipal cooperation and coordination across levels of government reveal the conditions necessary to address shared problems. Studies of innovation, digitalisation, and risk management clarify the distinctions between resources, capacities, and outcomes, while research on participation and representation examines the functioning and continuity of democratic institutions. These contributions are complemented by two book reviews that broaden the discussion of the field: one devoted to Ibero-American local government systems and the difficulties of moving from institutional description towards comparative explanations (Nickson, 2026), and another focusing on metropolitan governance, interjurisdictional collaboration, and territorial inequalities in Latin America (Andrew, 2026). Taken together, these works do not offer a single model of local government or findings that can be directly extrapolated across countries. They nevertheless identify shared analytical problems and highlight the political, institutional, and territorial conditions that must be considered to advance comparative knowledge.

The Challenges of International Comparison: Between Regularities and Territorial Differences

The expansion of local government studies and the growing availability of information on local governments have broadened the possibilities for international comparison. It is now easier to identify differences in the distribution of powers, fiscal resources, administrative capacities, or the outcomes of particular policies. However, having more information does not necessarily resolve problems of interpretation. Two local governments may display similar indicators yet function in very different ways, while formally distinct institutions may develop similar responses to particular public problems. Comparison therefore requires identifying which dimensions are genuinely equivalent and which acquire particular meanings depending on institutional and territorial conditions.

These difficulties are particularly evident in the study of local autonomy and municipal capacities. The existence of formally recognised powers does not, in itself, reveal the extent to which they can be exercised, just as the availability of resources does not guarantee their effective use. Nor is observing the outcomes of an intervention sufficient to understand the conditions that made them possible. Differences in intergovernmental relations, bargaining capacities, administrative structures, and territorial conditions can substantially alter the meaning of apparently comparable indicators. The problem is not simply to improve measurement but to prevent the use of common categories from obscuring differences that are relevant to explaining how local governments function.

Comparison also faces difficulties arising from the different scales at which public problems unfold. Local governments have defined jurisdictional boundaries, but many of the dynamics they address extend beyond those territories. Metropolitan areas, mobility systems, environmental risks, and numerous social policies involve decisions and resources distributed across different institutions. Under these conditions, outcomes observed in a municipality cannot always be attributed exclusively to its authorities, just as municipal decisions may have consequences beyond their jurisdiction. Understanding these relationships requires examining the characteristics of each government alongside its position within broader systems of territorial and institutional interdependence.

These issues become particularly important when identifying successful experiences and assessing their potential application in other contexts. An administrative reform, a cooperation mechanism, or a public innovation may produce favourable outcomes under certain conditions and encounter difficulties when those conditions change. Differences in available resources, political relations, institutional capacities, or territorial characteristics limit the possibility of transferring experiences directly. The purpose of comparison should therefore not be restricted to identifying practices regarded as successful but should also involve understanding why they work in particular contexts, what difficulties they face, and which conditions allow them to be sustained.

The research articles brought together in this issue illustrate these difficulties from different perspectives. Territorial reforms and intermunicipal agreements show that similar institutions and mechanisms may respond to different incentives. Studies of innovation, digitalisation, and risk management reveal the differences between available resources, mobilised capacities, and achieved outcomes. Experiences involving care services and participation highlight the importance of political and organisational conditions for sustaining interventions, while the analysis of subnational legislative careers reveals differences in opportunities for representation and political advancement. These contributions do not offer findings that can be directly transferred between countries, but they help identify shared problems and examine the conditions that explain their different manifestations.

Institutional and territorial diversity is not an obstacle that must be eliminated to advance comparative research. Recognising this diversity can instead lead to more precise research questions and a reassessment of explanations developed from particular experiences. International comparison can help identify regularities without assuming that the same institutional arrangements necessarily produce similar outcomes. From this perspective, contextual com-

parability provides an orientation for connecting academic traditions, contrasting explanations, and building shared knowledge while recognising the political, institutional, and territorial differences that characterise local governments.

Final Reflections: Towards an International Research Agenda for Local Government Studies

The international expansion of local government studies has increased the number of research projects, theoretical perspectives, and opportunities for collaboration, but difficulties persist in connecting different academic traditions and building cumulative comparative knowledge. The diversity of institutional experiences offers opportunities to reassess assumptions and broaden the scope of existing explanations, but realising this potential requires overcoming the fragmentation of research and the application of categories developed from a limited range of political systems.

This difficulty becomes particularly relevant in light of transformations affecting local governments. While their responsibilities, agendas, and public visibility have expanded, their effective scope for decision-making has not necessarily increased to the same extent. Growing municipal involvement in social, economic, environmental, and territorial problems coexists with fiscal constraints, unequal institutional capacities, and intergovernmental relations that condition local action. These circumstances challenge interpretations that establish a linear relationship between decentralisation, institutional strengthening, and improved performance and show that formal autonomy is insufficient to understand either the possibilities for local government action or the territorial distribution of power.

Tensions between democracy, efficiency, innovation, and equity cut across different areas of local public action and pose common challenges for research. Studies of territorial reorganisation, political representation, citizen participation, digital transformation, social policies, risk management, and intergovernmental cooperation reveal the limitations of explanations that attribute uniform outcomes to particular institutional arrangements. The effects of these interventions depend on political and territorial conditions, available capacities, the actors involved, and relationships across levels of government. Recognising this diversity helps identify shared problems without overlooking the particularities of the contexts examined.

Advancing this agenda requires developing explanations that can identify common problems while recognising the conditions that make local experiences different. Contextual

comparability provides an orientation for examining these differences and understanding why similar institutions may function in different ways or produce different outcomes. Its contribution is not to establish a general model of local government but to encourage dialogue between research conducted in diverse contexts and broaden the possibilities for building shared knowledge.

Strengthening local government studies internationally also requires reconsidering the conditions under which knowledge is produced and circulated. Broadening the participation of underrepresented academic traditions is not simply a matter of incorporating research from additional countries but of recognising their capacity to formulate questions, challenge established categories, and contribute to shared explanations. Academic networks and comparative research projects can foster this integration when they promote intellectual collaboration that moves beyond the coexistence of national studies and enables different perspectives on common problems to be examined together.

The contributions brought together in this issue help identify several priorities for this agenda. These include examining the relationships between formal rules and institutional practices, distinguishing between available resources, the capacities to mobilise them, and achieved outcomes, and investigating the conditions that favour the continuity or discontinuation of democratic and administrative innovations. Greater attention must also be paid to territorial inequalities and the power relations that condition cooperation, representation, and service provision. These issues do not point towards a universal model of local government but towards research capable of explaining differences without treating them as exceptions to experiences regarded as general.

The central challenge is to translate the international expansion of local government studies into a stronger collective capacity to produce rigorous, comparable, and cumulative knowledge. This requires developing shared research questions without homogenising academic traditions, building categories sensitive to institutional diversity, and strengthening collaboration between scholarly communities. The consolidation of the field will depend on its capacity to compare explanations, reassess its own assumptions, and understand the conditions that make local government experiences similar or different. Increasing the number of studies or countries examined will not be sufficient. The relationship between shared knowledge and institutional diversity offers one of the principal opportunities for consolidating local government studies as an international academic field.

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