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Living apart together

A comparative evaluation of mergers of cadastral agencies and public land registers in Europe

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Abstract

Purpose – Against the backdrop of European eGovernment (eGov) and new public management strategies, public sector mergers are the ultimate transformation after collaboration and integration. The land administration domain is useful to evaluate how and why mergers occur or not. The domain usually comprises two types of organizations, cadastres and land registries. There are both national and international calls to merge these two types, yet some countries have opted to merge these, while others persist in maintaining two separate ones. How and why this occurs is the key question.

Design/methodology/approach – This study applies a mixed-methods approach of data collection and a co-evolutionary perspective on organizational changes. Agencies change alongside perceptions of staff members and external stimuli of policies. These are exposed through narrated personal vignettes and international benchmarking surveys of land agencies.

Findings – Decisions on mergers are primarily embedded in local organizational cultures, and follow non-linear paths and are historically path-dependent. Internal staff members tend to disfavour mergers. Contrastingly, external stimuli such as the benchmark surveys act as national and international stimuli which favour mergers. The common narrative of both perspectives is an increased relevance of “simplicity”, which does not however have an effect on merger decisions.

Research limitations/implications – The land administration domain is perhaps idiosyncratic. It has a long history with discussions on merging collaborating organizations. Still, other domains affected by eGov strategies have so far only focused on operational interoperability and database integration, and less on the potential for institutional or organizational mergers. Therefore, experiences from land administration will be useful in the future.

Practical implications – During the formulation of new eGov projects which foster further collaboration and integration in the public sector, it is necessary to take the merger experiences of land agencies into account. It is especially necessary to be aware of implicit norms which are fostered by positive feedback loops of social networks during mergers, which may influence discretionary

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decisions. In addition, international benchmarks and ranking need to reconsider their benchmarking criteria which currently only focus on efficiency measures.

Originality/value – Mergers may not be a next logical step when collaborating and integrating. Instead, mergers need to be rooted in personal long-standing collaboration practices. Furthermore, individual staff members may only be willing to engage in the operational aspects of mergers if it significantly makes their own tasks simpler and the quality of their work better appreciated by external customers.

Keywords Mergers, Integration, Land registration, Cadastre, Land administration, Land registry

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The current transformation in the organization of public agencies is especially visible in the increased or improved inter-agency collaboration and integration. These are two of the pillars of most eGovernment (eGov) projects (Gil-Garcia, 2012) and are often claimed to be the manifestation of new public management practices (Page, 2005; Cordella and Iannacci, 2010). Collaboration is seen as a kind of strategic partnership between two agencies regardless of its legal form (Ferro and Sorrentino, 2010). In the eGov context, a strategy to collaborate tends to be justified by the mainstream norm that collaboration between public sector agencies is “good”. This value is measured and translated as improved efficiency and better-quality services. Yet, the anticipated positive effects of collaboration are sometimes unjustifiably overemphasized as compared to the negative ones (Ferro and Sorrentino, 2010). The observed challenges of collaboration include power games between agencies, mismatching organizational cultures and insufficient clarity of responsibilities and accountabilities. Similarly, where collaboration primarily emphasizes structure and institutional alignment, integration is primarily conceptualized from a process perspective. Goals of integration are justified by the promises of reduced duplication, more coordinated efforts and efficiency gains (Gil-Garcia, 2012). The observed challenges when integrating include incompatible information architectures, diverging standards and contradicting process management models and legal interoperability, among others.

If the norm of eGov is to increase collaboration and integration, then one possible step further in the transformation is to *merge* those organizations which effectively provide collective services (usually based on a single institutional and organizational framework). Although mergers may lead to more effective and transparent processes and to similar services than if only collaboration and integration would increase, mergers also fundamentally change the individual organizations, in terms of responsibilities and accountabilities, work practices and conventions and often also physical location of people and resources. The implication of mergers is a change in intra-organizational authority accompanied by an organizational reform. Still, the rationale to opt for mergers instead of opting for more extensive collaboration or integration of work processes is often strategic (Yin and Shanley, 2008). Mergers can enhance a competitive advantage (when there is market competition), boost status and reputation (within an administrative hierarchy), improve handling of external demands from clients or customers (hence external demands) and augment the effective authority of the merged organization (Kyvik and Stensaker, 2013).

The land administration domain is representative to evaluate the dilemmas, processes and impact of public sector mergers which are justified by the efficiency

argument. Practically, the land administration domain is a relatively confined domain in which merger discussions have a long history. The domain is concerned with the accurate description and maintenance of records on land ownership and other land rights and restrictions. To do so, two basic processes are necessary: the creation and maintenance of information on land parcels and buildings (usually referred to as the cadastre, or cadastral information), and the registration and updating of rights and restrictions to those parcels and buildings (usually referred to as land registration). These separate activities are in some countries executed by one agency, while in other countries, by two, or even more than two, agencies. The call to merge these agencies has increased worldwide, but various countries have insisted that the two types of agencies remain separate. What could be the reasons for these differences in choices per country in such a confined domain?

The need to understand these reasons is crucial for other mergers arising from eGov activities. In most countries, the land administration domain is closely interlinked with activities relating to standardize public data sets. Land records are one of the authentic registers (or key registers) for most other public information sources. In The Netherlands, there are, for example, 13 such basic, interconnected data sets for the public sector. Being a base register, the data are used in any e-Service from or with any government agency. For example, to apply for a passport, a citizen requester needs to be connected to his or her personal ID. To transfer a house, a seller and the house itself need to be recognized in a cadastral, building and/or address register. All e-Services which require identification need to be connected to one of the key register maintaining these identifications. There are strong quality and accountability requirements built in the design and maintenance of such registers whereby the inter-linkages between the registers are assured. This leads to a historical culture of quality monitoring and assurance within the organizations, and often a tight institutional framework to guarantee this quality. At the European level, there are, furthermore, a number of eGov-related directives steering towards more integration of data sets, also with a particular reference to cadastral data. The INSPIRE directive provides even technical data specifications for recording and maintaining cadastral parcels[1]. Although these are primarily aimed to integrate parcel registers with other spatial data, one may also regard this as an implicit stimulus to further integrate or even merge information processes related to land data.

The question is where all these drivers to merge encounter the impediments of institutionalized practices of the previous separate organizations. More specifically, and with reference to the land administration domain, the main aim is to derive how and why the anticipated gains from increased collaboration and integration between the cadastre and land registers could possibly conflict with anticipated gains or losses of individuals possibly preventing actual merger. The research question is therefore:

RQ1. To what extent do external stimuli leading towards organizational mergers conflict with the individual experiences and behaviour before and during mergers.

Literature on mergers is evaluated first. The subsequent section elaborates on the choice for a co-evolutionary view on organizational change and the implications for empirical data collection. Next, we present the findings, followed by a discussion section which

connects the findings to the properties of the co-evolutionary theory. This leads to a conclusion on the overall research question and to recommendations on designing strategies and policies on merger processes which could apply in other domains of eGov. Figure 1 summarizes the research design of this paper.

2. Literature review

Research on why and how land administration or eGov-induced mergers occur has so far only been sporadic and disjointed from the different strands of literature on mergers. Management literature, for example, tends to emphasize a functionalist perspective as a basis for merger decisions. The rational argument to opt for mergers is that a single organization can cope more efficiently with external demands than multiple organizations (Wang *et al.*, 2012). This is in particular valid if two or more agencies operate in a relatively confined domain and if they provide services to a comparable or limited set of external clients. In such an environment, changes in the external environment, for example in the form of changing demands from clients, affect these agencies simultaneously (Yin and Shanley, 2008). Reversely, if any of the agencies would opt out of the merger or the integration discussions, then it would immediately have an effect for their external clients. This insight does not however explain why the land administration domain then still has variety in organizational (merged or non-merged) forms. Apparently, the rational argument is not decisive in this case. The question is why.

Organizational literature adds a behavioural perspective. It provides evidence that discretionary behaviour, overconfidence and optimism often precede the decisions on mergers (Bogan and Just, 2009). Even when mergers may seem to reflect a strategic organizational benefit, the actual implementation may be more closely tied to gains or losses of specific individuals. If such motivations were present, then the strategic benefit may turn into a loss. Buono and Bowditch (2003, p. 23) note that:

Which role do mergers play in transforming government?

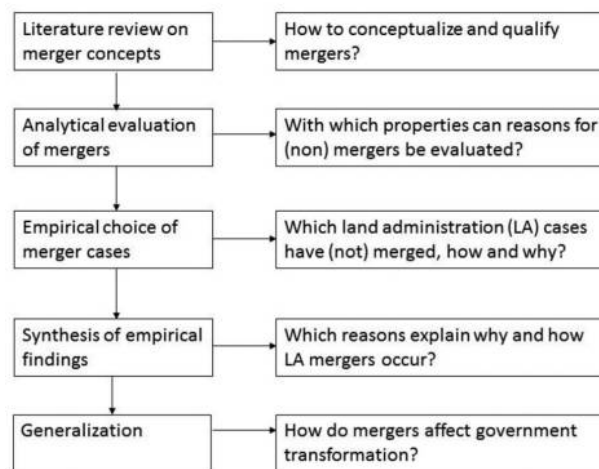


Figure 1.
Research design

[...] what is often overlooked is that mergers not only create upheaval in the lives of individuals but inevitably disrupt the organizations involved as well. The outcome is typically manifested in general declines in employee performance and a postcombination “slump” characterized by losses in productivity, revenues, and businesses opportunities.

This insight may be typical for short-term effects, yet if these effects sustain, they contrast the efficiency and effectiveness gains anticipated by eGov projects in the long-term as well. Individual discretionary behaviour, in other words, may be one of the explanations why efficiency rationality may not be decisive.

Another perspective that organizational literature adds is that mergers may be the institutionalized result of an action net (Lindberg and Czarniawska, 2006). This concept refers to manifestations of collaborative organization which are derived from patterns of gradual collective actions. In other words, mergers may not necessarily be the result of formally combining two different organizations with clear boundaries, but may be the result of gradually increasing informal collaboration by individuals or groups of different organizations. de Vries and Miscione (2012) refer to such a process as crystallization: standard practices, including collaboration and integration, do not occur by decree, but establish themselves gradually. They crystallize by frequent repetition, convenience, pragmatism and gradual acceptance. Influence of external social networks, and the fact that these may differ from country to country, may thus be another explanation for variance in decisions per country.

Cultural theories add furthermore that mergers of two different organizations involve blending of corporate cultures. The theory on corporate cultures is strongly rooted in the overarching theory of cultures (Hofstede *et al.*, 1990; Herzog, 2008). A culture consists of core shared values, which are implicitly translated into rules and norms according to which people behave, and which are explicitly visible in people’s symbols, practices, artefacts and behaviour. Herzog (2008, p. 1) underpins that “shared values and beliefs help individuals understand organizational functioning and thus provide them norms for behaviour in the organization”. Yet again values reflect the good and the bad (basic assumptions) among the organizational members. Values form “the basic concepts and beliefs of an organisation” (Deal and Kennedy, 1992). The difference in values may be a third explanatory factor for the difference in merger decisions.

In public administration literature, mergers form an integral part of recent discussions on adopting business principles in public administration. This stream of thought, usually referred to as new public management (Homburg, 2004; Pollitt *et al.*, 2007), is based on the assumption that government agencies could be more efficient and effective if they acted in a more integrated way and if they were possibly structured as a joined-up government (Pollitt, 2003). Mergers are in line with the current use of the magic concept of “governance” (Pollitt and Hupe, 2011) which emphasizes a reform of public sector agencies whereby responsibilities and accountabilities should become more clearly identifiable. As a result, mergers of public sector agencies could be an important implication of this endeavour, although there is also a lot of critique on the degree of success in practice (Goldfinch and Wallis, 2010). The degree of integration with other public agencies may be a fourth reason for difference in merger decisions.

Common in all perspectives is that during any merger process, behaviour and perceptions of staff members change. Hereby the external environment of the organizations may either trigger and foster a merger decision, or lead to more obstruction before and after a merger. The changes occur gradually and simultaneously,

thus understanding merger processes requires an integrative evaluation of both collective and individual changes in perceptions, behaviour and actions.

3. Research framework

If mergers occur after a gradual increase of collaboration and integration, it is appropriate to adopt a co-evolutionary perspective on organizational changes (Lewin and Volberda, 1999). Co-evolution assumes that changes in the internal environment (e.g. people's perceptions and behaviour, changes in organizational processes) and changes in the external environment (e.g. funding regimes, policies, politics) are interdependent, and that all evolve simultaneously. Figure 1 presents this general research framework.

The key issue is to evaluate to what extent the evolution from collaboration and integration is leading to merging, and to what extent this can be attributed to perceptions and behaviour of internal staff members, or to external drivers and stimuli. This framework differs from conventional organizational theories, which assume the environment of the organization as exogenous and independent. The manifestation of the change from collaboration and integration to merger can be evaluated by five properties of co-evolution: multi-levelness, multidirectional causalities, nonlinearity, positive feedback and path and history dependence.

Multi-levelness refers to the relationship between gradual change within an organization (e.g. allocation of resources, competencies, perception on leadership, etc.) and that outside an organization (budget allocations, competitive context). Multidirectional causalities refer to the principle that organizations and their parts do not merely evolve, but co-evolve with each other and with the changing environment. Nonlinearity is the notion that changes in one variable may produce counterintuitive changes in another variable. Positive feedback is the principle that organizations systematically influence their environment and vice versa. This interaction provides constant mutual feedback and endorsement. Path and history dependence explains that adaptations reflect more an intra-organizational status quo of earlier points in time than a variation in the environment (as suggested by ecology studies) or a variation in distinct external conditions (as suggested by contingency theory).

Studying co-evolutionary adaptations in organizations empirically requires both an insight in how internal staff members perceive change and act on organizational changes. Alongside this, one requires an insight in how external stimuli of policies and directives, benchmarks and guidelines play a role when leaning towards or deciding on organizational changes.

4. Case choice and research approach

We opted for a mixed-methods approach to understand both the internal considerations and staff member behaviour with regard to merger practice and the external forces urging public agencies to merge. Following the idea that the internal and external forces operate together yet manifest themselves in different ways justifies such a mixed-methods approach. To better understand the breadth and depth of the internal perspectives and experiences on (potential) mergers of cadastres and land registers, we requested representatives from cadastre and land registration agencies of the UNECE countries to write a short narrated vignette. These representatives were chosen such that different experiences (from agencies which merged vs agencies which decided not

to merge) and views on mergers (pro or contra) would be represented. The choice to rely on narrated vignettes was to best capture such experiences and views. Narrated vignettes are, simply put, stories generated from a range of personal sources and personal experiences (Wilks, 2004). Vignette descriptions are an appropriate tool when compiling perceptions, experiences, beliefs and attitudes on a context or a phenomenon. We used the narrated vignettes to derive a synthesis of the concourse on mergers in land administration and the breadth of actions, beliefs, opinions and arguments in this concourse. The vignettes are not directly about a particular merger itself, but they describe the feelings and associations which the staff members have once talking about mergers.

Analysing the vignettes relies on a narrative synthesis using storytelling metaphors (Barone, 1992; Czarniawska, 2004; Greenhalgha *et al.*, 2005). The synthesis is guided by coding and interpreting the texts using key prompts, such as references to the context in which they work to reflect the co-evolutionary property of “multi-levelness”, the period of the individual experience (beginning and ending situation) to reflect “path and history dependence”, mentioning of normative values (e.g. what is considered good or bad) to reflect “positive feedback” and reference to positive or negative causes and effects to reflect “multidirectional causalities” and qualifying changes as unexpected to reflect “nonlinearity”.

To further evaluate the external stimuli, we opted to rely on documentary analysis. External views and policy documents on how and why cadastres and land registries should merge (or not) are developed through various international institutions, such as the FIG (International Federation of surveyors) – commission 7, Cadastre and Land Management[2], PCC (Permanent Committee on Cadastre in the European Union)[3], ELRA (European Land Registries Association)[4] and World Bank, among others. Such institutions act as a forum to exchange and advise on best practices, usually by inventorying and comparing each other’s experiences. Such inventories act as a stimulus to adopt alternative strategies, including on mergers, hence they are important to evaluate its implicit norms and assumed causalities. For our study, we relied on two cross-national studies:

- (1) The 2013 World Bank *Doing Business* (WB DB) report (The World Bank, 2013), which has a special section “Registering property”, an associated survey.
- (2) The UNECE/WPLA’s *Survey of Land Administration Systems* (UNECE/WPLA, 2013).

The WB DB measures the ease of registering property for all participating countries and publishes a ranking based on this survey. The ease of registering property is measured by analysing the sale of a registered property in the commercial district of the biggest economic city of a country. The building stands on a 6,000-square feet plot and has a value of USD 700,000. Three elements are measured to determine the ease of registering property: the number of procedures, the cost for the registration and time involved for registering. The *Survey of Land Administration Systems* inventories many quality issues in the UNECE member states and does not include a ranking. *Doing Business* is based on an important quality aspect, easiness of registration, but this is not the only quality aspect that is relevant for land registration and cadastre organizations. *Survey of Land Administration Systems* made an inventory of a wide array of quality aspects for land registration and cadastre organizations.

Both studies do not explicitly advise on mergers, but as they qualify the degree to which current processes of land administration agencies are effective and efficient, they implicitly value the processes of both merged and non-merged agencies. The co-evolutionary properties of the external stimuli are thus derived by interpreting the implicit values.

Figure 2 describes the simultaneous research process of both the internal and external perspectives schematically (Figure 3).

5. Findings

5.1 Internal perspective

To derive the co-evolutionary properties from an internal perspective, land agency staff members of 15 different countries provided their narrated vignette containing their personal experience with mergers and/or merger discussions. We selected quotes (displayed by brackets “[...]”) from these vignettes if these relate to a specific property.

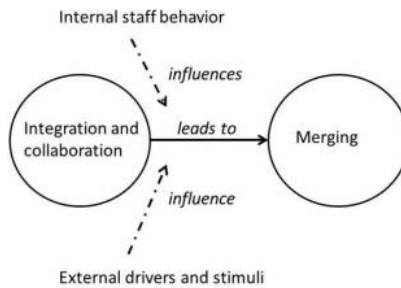


Figure 2.
Research framework

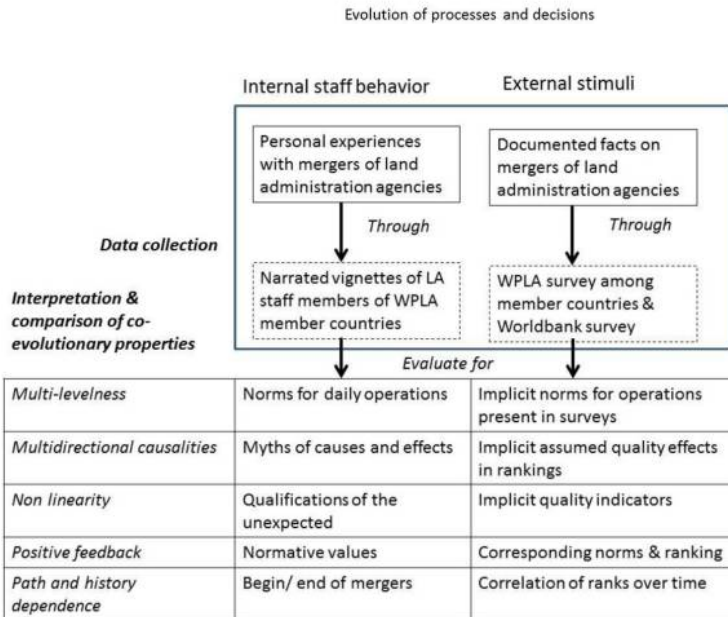


Figure 3.
Research method to study mergers of cadastres and land registries

We did not mention the origin – country of the source, as this would infringe anonymity – privacy.

As far as the *multi-levelness* property is concerned, most vignettes relate the discussion of mergers to the internal daily operational work with clients and citizens. From an internal perspective, changes take place favouring clients as main beneficiaries of daily work (“we place customer service at the core of everything we do”). Citizens are seen as current victims when work processes and end products are fragmented (“individuals or companies often had to make eight trips to the authorities involved in the process in view of completing enrolment operations”), or when different related organizations provide heterogeneous data quality (“discrepancies of the cadastral database [...] being a burden for the citizen”). In this line of thinking, transformation to mergers is not crucial if transformed operations are not serving clients and citizens better.

With regard to the property of *causality*, the majority of stories refer to the introduction of information technology and changes in laws as the main causes for changes in collaboration and possibly changes towards merger of land registries and cadastres. Remarkably, government reform is not explicitly excluded as a significant cause for organizational change (“the trend of rationalising government activities brought many reorganisations from the seventies onwards, but that did not affect the separation”). Instead, the alignment of IT processes, regardless of whether they occurred at registries or cadastres, is perceived as the major cause for the organizational changes (“we follow a technical solution; although organisations are separate, the business process is closely aligned”; “[...] reached a lot of achievements (network rationalization)”).

On the property of *non-linearity*, mergers are often not seen as an end goal, but merely as a coincidental side-effect when changing daily operations (“today, I would say there is very little discussion about merging organisations. We rather discuss interoperability, in all senses, quite a lot”; “during the preparation of the reform of the Land Registry ([...] there was no mention of merger”). This seems to implicate that from an internal perspective, merger in itself is not a magic concept, yet it may emerge gradually (“the most important issue was not whether to merge the institutions or not, but merely which level of services the Cadastre and Land Registry provide”).

Regarding the implicit norms, as a proxy for the *positive feedback*, the absence of intentional personal strategies seems to indicate that the internal influence on organizational transformation is more implicit than explicit. When gradually adopting alternative ways of working, the norms for how to work are embedded in the actual practice and argumentation for the alternative ways. In nearly all of the merger vignettes, a striking argument is the connotation of work to “speed”, “modernisation” and “simplicity”. “Speed” is frequently referred to (“accelerating”; “time saving”; “radically reducing time”; “efficiency”), suggesting that it is indeed considered important and urgent for organizational decisions. Speed is also considered an implicit norm of “modernizing” the organization. There is a large aversion against delays (“the procedure was slow and not efficient”), redundancy (“work is done twice”; “clients have to apply for almost the same thing twice”), as these are likely to lead to disorder (“we have to restore order”; “lawyers and technicians are barely communicating”), and corruption (“the vulnerability to

corruption reappeared”). This implies a preference among staff members for either more hierarchical enforcement after a merger or for tougher coordination during the alignment of inter-organizational processes. Looseness and flexibility are clearly seen as negative values.

The property of *path and history dependence* comes back in all vignettes. All point to a stable starting point of the land agencies. Some already exist for more than 200 years – usually western European countries – others are just established some 10 years ago – usually former socialist states. In most cases, the starting point for a merger was a statutory law or a change arising from the need to regulate for interoperability. Ireland is one of the exceptions where the merger, established in 2012, originated from a strategic public service reform plan for the entire public sector in Ireland. In the countries where mergers took place formally, there is often the recognition that organizing most operational aspects of the merger still required considerable effort and time (“the reform was implemented during the next three years”). Once mergers have taken place, there is no contingency plan in case mergers are thought to be unsuccessful. In cases where they did not take place yet, they are not likely to merge in the near future (“I think that the Cadastre and Land Registry institutions will stay as separate institutions for years to come”; “Land administration is the responsibility of several government organisations and there are no plans to review this structure”; “There are currently no plans on further integration of the Land Register and the Cadastre”).

Finally, the vignettes indicate that a merger can take between 1 year and 20 years. In this process occasionally, pragmatic behaviour with discretionary decisions is common, especially when confronted with interoperability dilemmas (“You will never be able to merge all organisations that deal with land administration, so you will have to find other ways out.”).

In sum, the vignettes reveal that internal influence is generally manifested in gradual acceptance of changes in current work practices. Staff members try to de-emphasize the need for large institutional and legal mergers, yet prefer to work gradually and with a certain autonomy on the alignment of inter-organizational procedures. Interoperability and simplicity are the key norms which guide the internal behaviour.

5.2 External perspective

The external stimuli are reflected implicitly in the WB DB and WPLA statistics and benchmarks. The steps to compare the two surveys and their results were as follows: first, we selected only the questions of each of the surveys which dealt with organizational aspects. Then, we only selected the responses of the UNECE countries. We compared this with the results of the World Bank overall ranking of registering property. [Table I](#) summarizes the comparative results. The first column shows the order of UNECE countries, based on their ranking in the WB DB report. The WB DB ranking is based on three aspects which are relevant when transferring a property in the business district of a city in each of the countries. The aspects are: the number of procedures included in the registration process, the time necessary to complete the procedure and the cost for registering. UNECE countries which were not included in the benchmark study (Slovakia, Azerbaijan, Iceland, etc.) were filtered in first column of [Table I](#). The four columns derived from the UNECE benchmark study present for each

UNECE country	Comparison of institutional surveys		UNECE benchmark study 2013				Category of nationwide coverage of registers in %
	WB Doing Business ranking 2013	Narrative: integrated cadastral and land register?	Separate (court) registration from cadastre?	Fees in € (rank)	Category of speed of registration		
Georgia	1		No	30 (3)	2	4	
Belarus	3	Yes	No	60 (5)	3	5	
Armenia	4		Yes	80 (6)	2	2	
Lithuania	5	Yes	No	X	2	2	
Denmark	6	No	Yes	200 (8)	1	1	
Norway	7	No					
Kyrgyz Republic	11		No	20 (2)	1	2	
Estonia	14	No	Yes	40 (4)	2	2	
Finland	24		Yes	0 (1)	5	1	
Latvia	31		Yes	800 (13)	3	2	
Austria	34	No	Yes	1,500 (15)	2	1	
Sweden	35	Yes	No	11,500 (18)	3	1	
Italy	39		No	100 (7)	2	1	
Serbia	41		No	600 (11)	3	1	
The Netherlands	49	Yes	No	13,800 (19)	1	1	
Macedonia	50	Yes					
Ireland	53	Yes	No	1,600 (16)	5	2	
Spain	57	No	Yes	300 (9)	3	2	
Bulgaria	68		Yes	1,300 (14)	3	2	
Romania	72	Yes	No	800 (12)	3	6	
UK	73	No	No	400 (10)	1	3	
Malta	80		No				
Germany	81		Yes	2,600 (17)	4	1	
Slovenia	83	No					
Cyprus	99		Yes	33,000 (20)	1	2	
Croatia	104	No	Yes		4	2	
Israel	144		No	X	2	2	
Belgium	176		No	X	4	2	

Table I.
Comparison of World Bank and UNECE/WPLA survey results and narrated vignettes

country whether land registers are unified or separated from cadastres; the estimated amount of fees required to register a land right; a qualification of the speediness of the registration process (1 very quick [...] 5 very slow); and a quantitative measure of the amount of land parcels of the entire country being incorporated in the national register. Table II provides the precise legend for two of the columns.

Comparing the columns in Table I leads to the general insight into the external influence.

Multi-levelness is visible in the implicit change norms used by the surveys. Emphasizing and comparing quantitative indicators such as number of procedures and duration of completion of procedures seems to favour organizing forms whereby allocation of resources and coordination of work processes occur under a single (hence, merged) actor.

Regarding the co-evolution property of *multidirectional causalities*, the logic of ranking provides the implicit assumptions of cause and effects. The countries with merged cadastre and land registration organizations rank, on average, 38 in the *WB DB*. The countries with separate organizations rank, on average, 47. This seems to portray merged organizations as better.

While the *WB DB* gives an overview of a wide number of elements which are relevant for doing business, it assumes an implicit linear cause-effect relation between quality of internal processes and quality of impacts. Quality elements which are left out of the benchmark include completeness of registration, degree of nation-wide coverage and linkages to other organizations (such as the tax office). These elements may lead to possible *non-linear* or counter intuitive correlations.

The co-evolutionary property of *positive feedback* is visible, as the report of 2013 seems to convey stimuli through highlighting preferences for merged operations and institutions (even though the *WB DB* list does not state explicitly that merged organizations work much better than unmerged organizations). The examples of “easier procedures” highlight that Italy has merged their “procedures performed by notaries through a secure portal, Notartel, which gives notaries access to the databases of the land registry, cadastre and commercial registry” (p. 69). The normative value of “easier” is thus associated with merged and computerized property procedures. Similarly, in responding to the WB survey preceding the Doing Business reports, countries tend to emphasize issues which are “merged”, or exhibit strategic behaviour to “improve ranking in the Doing Business report” (Traore, 2012).

Both surveys are meant to create *path-dependent* changes. The ranks are meant to stimulate the organizations to improve and to adapt on the basis of comparable

Legend of categories	
Category of speed of registration	Category of nationwide coverage of registers in %
1 = < 1 day	1 = 100
2 = 1-5 days	2 = 81-99
3 = 5-10 days	3 = 61-80
4 = 10-20 days	4 = 41-60
5 = 20-60 days	5 = 21-40
	6 = 1-20

Table II.
Legend for categories
of speed and
coverage of Table I

organizations. The regular yearly publications favour uniformity and re-enforce new public management values of efficiency.

In sum, the external perspective, portrayed through the benchmarking surveys, has an inclination towards emphasizing the need for mergers, using the argument that this would optimize the alignment between chains of tasks and activities by organizations. The ranking could be used to portray national and international stimuli, and ranking merged organizations higher than non-merged organizations could re-enforce and ultimately favour mergers.

6. Discussion

The combined results of the co-evolutionary properties demonstrate that the manner in which individual staff members perceive mergers differs from how international benchmarks portray how mergers should take place. As a result, the collective influence of individual staff members does not controvert the collective of external stimuli. Although the external agencies are more prominent in setting norms on organizational aims, at the same time, the merger decisions do not seem to be influenced directly by external stimuli, such as World Bank rankings or external funding. Instead, given the fact that various comparable countries differ in merger decisions, it seems that local context outweighs the external stimuli when reaching a final decision on merging or not merging. In other words, the rational efficiency logic advocated in management literature does not apply. This assessment can be supported by the following arguments.

First of all, in all cases where mergers took place, the root of the transformation was embedded in gradual adaptation of local work practices. Similar to the findings of [de Vries and Miscione \(2012\)](#), a merger gradually crystallizes instead of being established by decree. Although international ranks can be perceived as strategic, they insufficiently appeal at the operational level where gradual technological changes and adaptations occur at the heart of the inter-agency collaboration. For agencies where the formal merger took place, staff members still perceive considerable challenges in unifying. A merger between organizations does not automatically imply a merge between databases (“the two central databases were kept intact without any changes”). It is likely that local social networks thus have a crucial role in merger decisions and positive feedback norms. If such networks can facilitate and stimulate increased collaborations, then mergers are perceived as less challenging, as there is a network to rely on.

Secondly, the starting point and subsequent development of organizations cannot be detached from current merger decisions. In most cases, agencies use long-standing procedures which were derived from the professional education. Setting these epistemic embedded norms aside is often felt as a step too far. This may thus hamper effective mergers. In countries which uphold work traditions as important manifestations of institutional values for public sector organizations, such as the UK or Germany, mergers, which imply a change of these values, are more likely to encounter opposition. Reversely, where this is less, such as Sweden or The Netherlands, mergers are less challenging.

Thirdly, there is a difference between the internal and the external values of the multidirectional causality property. This difference may explain the internal behaviour during mergers partly. The international norms of efficiency and cheaper public

organizations, which are also hidden in some of the survey questions, only partly emerge as crucial in the vignettes. While the external stimuli portray that only merged organizations provide more efficient services and processes, the narrated vignettes do not reflect this assumption entirely. Efficiency gains are, namely, not directly felt among employees. Instead, they feel a much more urgent need to serve external customers better. Efficiency gains are then merely perceived as coincidental effects of quality and satisfaction gains.

A fourth argument in favour of the stronger influence of the internal drivers is the shared perception of “modernity” and “simplicity” among staff members of different countries. In most vignettes, respondents closely associate modernity with exhaustive exploitation of information technology (including use of web services, electronic submission, virtual customer handling). This view on modernity is connected to a view on organizations as a neutral entity, whereby embracing information technology solutions would further re-enforce this neutrality and possibly trust to external customers. This shared view seems to suggest a strong influence of norm setting and shaping ontologies by a shared social professional network across UNECE territory. The degree to which these norms are universally valid may be questioned. Customers may not have a neutral view on pre-merger and post-merger organizations. Customer values on quality, satisfaction and trust in services may also be evaluated against their own quality and customization, and, ultimately, modernization norms. The point here however is that the norms of the network on modernity seem to be more consistently mentioned by individual staff members than norms of international organizations of modernity.

In contrast, the narrative of “simplicity” is perhaps stronger and more shared with external customers and with international benchmarks. “Simple” in relation to organization is considered a norm which is either packed as non-fragmented (hence merged) or as independent from any resource or hierarchy. This is re-enforced by “simple” metrics or ranks which justify mergers as a rational logical choice to aim for resource and power independency, and not so much for efficiency. The vignettes portray an image that simplicity is not so much attached to the government as a whole, or even to specific eGov programmes, but to direct changes in the tasks and responsibilities of staff members. The multitude of external demands of other programmes have apparently made daily life of staff members complicated. They call for more structured, transparent and unambiguous tasks and responsibilities. A call for simplicity is thus a reaction and not a rational choice derived out of alternatives. Staff members would thus only effectively support mergers if it results in simplicity.

7. Implications of findings on theory and practice of transforming government

Despite the fact that the specific focus on land administration mergers might be too idiosyncratic, the findings provide a good insight in how eGov programmes which encourage and intensify information collaboration and integration among public agencies could derive an organizational transformation. This transformation is largely manifested in the unwritten procedures and attitudes which shape the change and resistance of the original communities of practice. These positive feedback loops are likely to arise in other eGov programmes, which also involve diverse professional and societal communities. When one mobilizes these communities with the purpose to

integrate their work procedures in a multidisciplinary service, one has to redress how historically established integration and collaboration were gradually crystallized, and how autonomous behaviour may have been dominating certain outcomes. It is advisable in this case not to rely on solely legal or institutional instruments to guide the integration, but rather on soft governance tools. Discussing and agreeing with a broad set of stakeholders how their daily work can be made more “simple” may be a first step in that direction.

The individual theoretical views on mergers do not sufficiently explain the practice that in some countries, public land administration agencies decide to merge, while in others, not. This confirms that organizational theorists should identify a special category of mergers, namely, that of public sector mergers which are emerging from increased information collaboration and integration. Hence, there is a need to research how these specific type of mergers evolve and how they exhibit different characteristics and rationalities than “regular” (business) mergers. The cultural perspective, emphasizing that professional values play a role in mergers, is hereby a means to understand the bounded rational behaviour in multidisciplinary cooperation and integration better.

8. Conclusions and recommendations for future research

We conclude that external drivers to merge clash with internal perceptions on what needs to merge at operational levels. The reason is that at this level, efficiency rationality is not necessarily at the forefront. Instead, staff members prefer to integrate, and ultimately merge, through a much more gradual crystallization process in which discretionary decisions, social professional networks resulting in particular attitudes and beliefs towards work practices and previous experiences of integration play a role. As a consequence, institutional benchmarks and guidelines advocating effectiveness and efficiency measures may clash with how individual staff member perceive how mergers should be taking place. While institutional policies tend to regard mergers as a logical continuation of increasing collaboration and integration, individual staff members primarily see an advantage of mergers if their tasks become simpler or if it can increase the opportunities for their personal creativity, for example.

The results also show that international benchmarks will need to re-consider their assessment instruments and criteria. Non-merged public agencies tend to be wrongfully judged as negative, but staff members of different agencies may actually work highly effective on delivering services to customers, given the finding that they find the inability to serve external customers properly as their main bottleneck. Effectiveness of mergers should thus also be based on the discretionary autonomy by which inter-agency work solutions can be developed, and the social network effectively contributes to finding work solutions. As a result we can conclude that mergers are not necessarily the next step when agencies increasingly integrate. One can even dispute whether mergers should be the next step given the actual practices and views among staff members. This finding is relevant for interoperability in general and for merger discussions on land agencies in countries in and outside Europe in particular in developing countries.

Future research should extend the application and refinement of co-evolutionary theory and its properties to evaluate merger processes in the broader land

administration domain (including land valuation, land use planning, land policy and land development). It is especially necessary to evaluate the degree in which implicit norms fostered by positive feedback loops of social networks are enacted. Such research could also help to explain anomalies in mergers in other domains which are directly affected by eGov strategies. What could perhaps be specific about the merger experiences in land administration is that the land agencies have lived through several historically dependent paths and have a long history of collaboration and trials and pilots of mergers. Even though discussions on mergers seem fairly recent, interoperability issues have evolved for a much longer period. The implication of this is that merger-related decisions follow non-linear paths which are rooted in the alignment of change strategies of separate organizations. How this alignment takes place at the operational level only becomes apparent from the changing, co-evolving, perceptions among staff members. Hence, mergers may not be a next logical step when collaborating and integrating. Instead, mergers need to be derived and extrapolated from long-standing historical paths of increased perceived simplicity of tasks for individual staff members.

Notes

1. http://inspire.ec.europa.eu/documents/Data_Specifications/INSPIRE_DataSpecification_CP_v3.1.pdf
2. <http://fig.net/commission7/index.htm>
3. www.eurocadastre.org/index.htm
4. www.elra.eu/

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