

**Provision of public and social services in European countries**  
**Any lessons to learn for the Asia-Pacific region?**

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## **Abstract**

In European countries, the provision of public and personal social services has historically gone through profound shifts between the public/municipal, private and societal sectors. Covering a broad selection of European countries, this article explores the institutional development of service provision and the factors impinging on it. In pursuing a developmental approach, different historical stages are distinguished and explored (pre-welfare state, advanced welfare state, neo-liberal policy period and recent fiscal austerity phase). The analysis is guided by the question whether this development has shown convergence or divergence between phases, countries and service sectors. In conclusion, the question is raised whether, from the point of view of Asia-Pacific countries, lessons could be drawn from the European experience.

## **Keywords**

Public service provision; marketization; social service provision; Europe; Asia-Pacific

## **1. Introduction**

This article aims at exploring the institutional development which the delivery of public and personal social services has undergone in European countries in the interface between the public/municipal, the private and the societal sectors. The article addresses public services as well as personal social services in analysis. Public services are in English parlance mostly referred to as “public utilities” and in European Union (EU) terminology as services of general economic interest (SGEI). They significantly compromise water, sewage, waste management, public transport and energy. By contrast, personal social services, which in the EU terminology are labelled as social services of general interest (SSGI), typically provide personal care, such child care and elder care. Unlike most other publications which deal with the two service sectors separately, this article makes its point to treat them together in order to tap the comparative potential. In the following analysis, the sectors of energy, water and personal social services provision are singled out as exemplifying public and personal services respectively.

The article covers a broad range of EU member countries. In order to enhance the analytical and comparative potential, the countries are selected along the North-South as well as the West-East axis, with the latter, importantly, including the ex-communist transformation and accession countries. In analysing the institutional development of the provision of public

and social services, this article pursues a historical approach. Hereby four stages are discerned (Millward, 2005, Wollmann, 2016a): the pre-welfare state setting during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the advanced welfare state climaxing in the early 1970s, the neo-liberal policy period since the early 1980s, and the most recent phase marked by the global financial crisis and ensuing fiscal austerity policies since the mid-2000's. As research and publications on this recent phase are still scarce, it will be given particular attention in our analysis.

Besides the author's own work, the article is significantly based on the findings of an international research project that was conducted between 2013 and 2015 in the frame of a European Union-funded research project on *Local Public Sector Reforms* (see Kuhlmann and Bouckaert 2016, Schwab et al. 2017). One of its working groups was explicitly directed at a comparative study on the provision of public and social services in European countries and involved researchers and experts from most EU member states. Results of their research have been published in an edited volume (Wollmann et al. 2016) which will be drawn on and quoted in this article.

The article is guided by the question whether, how, and why the institutional development of public and social service delivery shows convergence or divergence between the phases, across countries and across service sectors. In conclusion, the question will be raised whether, from the point of view of Asia-Pacific countries, lessons might be drawn from the European experience. It should be borne in mind that in view of its broad coverage (in terms of phases, countries and service sectors), the article can hardly avoid being broad-brushed and selective.

## **2. Historical development of the provision of public and personal social services in European countries**

### *2.1. Pre-welfare state period in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century*

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the ideological auspices of *laissez-faire* liberalism, the national governments largely refrained from intervening in the provision of public infrastructural services, such as water, sewage and energy, while leaving it largely to the local authorities to build up and provide such services. This early engagement of the local authorities came to be somewhat deridingly called “municipal socialism” by contemporary conservatives (Kühl 2001). By contrast, the local authorities largely stayed aloof from

providing social care and help for those in need and misery who gathered in the cities in the wake of rampant industrialization and urbanization. Instead, elementary pre-welfare state kinds of personal social services and aid for the needy were provided by bourgeois philanthropists, religious charities, workers' cooperatives and self-help groups that, as an "informal sector" (Munday, 2000) and as the "social community" (Wollmann 2006), constituted a sphere of societal actors and organisations.

## *2.2. Rise of the advanced welfare state in West European countries*

In the West European countries, with the emergence of the advanced Welfare State which climaxed in the early 1970s the provision of public and personal social services came to be largely assumed by the public sector. The quasi-monopoly of the public/municipal sector in service provision was rooted in the political and ideological belief that the delivery of the expanded services was best ensured by assigning their operation to the politically accountable public/municipal sector and its qualified public/municipal personnel. Organisationally, the services were characteristically delivered by *Weberian*-type quasi-monolithic administration. Accordingly, on the local level the services were rendered by the local administration and its personnel itself (*in house*) or by hived-off municipal companies (e.g. the multi-utility *Stadtwerke* in Germany) which remained organisationally integrated in the local core administration.

In the U.K., in 1946, under the incoming socialist Labour Party, the energy sector was nationalised, that is, transferred from largely municipal into state ownership and operation. Similarly in France, in 1947, energy provision was nationalised by creating a State-owned energy company (*Electricité de France*, EdF). By contrast, as for post-war West Germany's bourgeois conservative federal government nationalisation was a far cry, the energy sector continued to be dominated by largely private sector regional energy companies while the municipal companies kept playing an albeit limited role in local energy provision. In the water sector in most countries, such as Germany and Italy, service provision continued to be in the hands of the municipalities and their companies. However, in the U.K., the Labour Government extended its nationalization drive to the water sector as well. A peculiar deviation from the municipal dominance in water provision has traditionally occurred in France. Dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of the country's very small municipalities have chosen to outsource water provision to private water companies in what has been labelled "French style privatisation" (Citroni 2010).

With the rise of the advanced welfare state in most countries, the provision of personal social services (such as children care and elder care) has been assigned to the local authorities – thus practically substituting and absorbing the earlier engagement of societal actors and the “social community” (Wollmann 2006). Typically, in the U.K., the provision of social services “emerged as the largest of the activities of local authority social services departments” (Bönker et al., 2010) which were critically identified as municipal empires (Norton, 1994). Similarly in Sweden rendering social service provision was deemed a key task of local government (Montin, 2016). In France, in the decentralization reform of 1982, the responsibility for social service provision was transferred (as it were, de-municipalised or nationalized) from the municipalities to the departments. In assigning the provision of personal social services to the public sector in some countries (such as in France and Sweden) the non-profit societal organisations were explicitly excluded on political and ideological grounds (for the “hidden contract” in Sweden, see Wijkström 2000).

By contrast, in Germany, the personal social services have been traditionally provided primarily by non-public non-profit (NGO-type) welfare organisations (Bönker et al., 2010). This is rooted in the so called subsidiarity principle which traces back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century social doctrine of the Catholic Church and was explicitly recognised by federal legislation in 1961. However, due to their close cooperative (and financial) ties with the local authorities these NGO-type welfare organisations have adopted a quasi-public/municipal role. In Italy, in a similar subsidiarity tradition, the personal social services have been rendered by non-public non-profit organisations; on the top of it, domiciliary care for needy persons provided in and by the families themselves still plays an important part (Bönker et al., 2010).

### *2.3. Development in Central Eastern European (CEE) countries after 1945*

In the CEE countries, following the Communist take-over in 1945, under the centralist Socialist State, the public utilities as well as the personal services were carried out by State and its subnational/municipal units while personal social services, such as kindergartens, homes for the elderly etc., were also provided by State industrial enterprises. A conspicuous exception was Yugoslavia where a decentralized self-management system with comprehensive local public and social services was put in place (Kopric et al. 2016).

### *2.4. Since the 1980s: Market-liberalisation and privatisation of service provision*

In WE countries neo-liberal policy-driven market liberalisation and New Public Management imperatives was targeted at dismantling the previous public sector dominance in public and social services delivery and its Weberian organisational format. The strategic aim was to be achieved by horizontally de-composing and pluralising its hitherto quasi-monolithic operational structure by transferring service delivery to external organisations of varied ownership. With regard to public utilities, this was to be effected either by selling the respective assets, whole-sale or partial, to private sector investors and companies, or by outsourcing service provision to organisations and enterprises. The outsourcing of service provision was either accomplished by corporatisation, that is, by establishing organisations which, while remaining in public/municipal ownership, are given operational and financial quasi-autonomy, often in the private law form of limited companies (Wollmann 2016a; Grossi and Reichard 2016). Or outsourcing was implemented commissioning (contracting out) service provision to private sector companies in what has also been termed “functional privatization” (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014).

By the same token, the provision of personal social services was, by way of market competition, increasingly outsourced to private sector providers. Since the early 1980s, the neoliberal policy shift got its initial powerful political and ideological thrust in the UK after 1979 under Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government and from there it spread to other European countries. Moreover, following the adoption of the Single European Act of 1986, the EU embarked on a market liberalisation drive with the aim of creating a single European market by 1992.

Since the 1980s, the UK has gone furthest in implementing neoliberal doctrines, among others, by privatising the previously nationalised energy and water sectors. In response to EU directives on market liberalisation, both France and Italy transformed their state-owned energy companies into private law listed stock companies as a step towards selling shares to private investors (Allemand et al., 2016; Wollmann et al., 2010). In Germany, the EU-induced federal legislation of 1998 on market liberalization had a conspicuously paradoxical effect. While it further strengthened the already existing oligopolistic and competition-adverse market dominance of four energy giants, it exposed the traditional municipal energy companies to the enhanced competition by the Big Four (energy companies) to the point of putting their “demise” at risk (Wollmann et al., 2010: 177).

In the field of water provision, different trajectories evolved. In the U.K., the neo-liberal privatizing drive was extended to the water sector. In France, the private sector water companies, in the wake of the century-old practice of municipalities to outsource water provision to private companies, significantly enlarged their market share in water provision as the Big Three (Veolia, SUEZ and SAUR) become nationally and internationally dominant players (Citroni, 2010; Lieberherr et al., 2016). While in Germany the water services continued to be provided mostly by municipal companies (Citoni 2010), private sector water companies, particularly the French big players (Veolia and Suez), made further inroads into the country's water market by acquiring minority shares in municipal companies (Citroni 2010, Bönker et al. 2016, Lieberherr et al. 2016),

In summarizing these and similar developments, private sector companies have expanded their role in the provision of public services either via fully fledged asset privatization or by acquiring minority (if not majority) shares in municipal companies (Grossi and Reichard, 2016; Hall, 2012; Wollmann, 2016c). At the same time, the municipalities have increasingly turned to corporatize local public service provision by establishing municipal companies which were often given the legal status of private law limited companies or stock companies (Grossi et al., 2010; Grossi and Reichard, 2016). This legal form of private law companies enabled private sector companies and investors to partner up with municipal companies and to form mixed companies. This growing number of corporatized companies which, as it were, orbit the local core administration, have expanded and added to the network of actors that unfold some centrifugal dynamics and enhance the challenge to local government and its political mandate to bring to bear the common interest of the local community.

The neo-liberal turn-around has triggered far-reaching shifts in the provision of personal social services as well. This is exemplified, once again, by the U.K. where, under the impact of market liberalisation driven by 1980s legislation on compulsory competitive tendering (CCT), terminated the quasi-monopoly held by the local authorities in social service provision and set off the expansion of private sector providers (Bönker et al., 2010; Munday, 2000). Another striking example is Germany where the quasi-monopoly which the non-public non-profit organisations traditionally held in social service provision has been terminated by the federal legislation of 1994 which has opened the service market to all providers and set off a fast rise of private sector providers (Bönker et al., 2010; Bönker et al., 2016).

By contrast, Sweden presents a mixed picture. On the one hand, it did not follow the internationally rampant trend of privatising the provision of personal social services, as the municipalities and their companies continued to render the lion's share of services, while non-public providers came to render some 20 per cent of personal social services. On the other hand, market liberalization did have a distinct impact on modes of local level delivery since quasi-market mechanisms, such as purchaser-provider split and competitive tendering have come to be applied (Montin, 2016).

## *2.5. CEE countries: Public and social services provision in the wake of transformation*

After 1990, following the collapse of the Communist regimes, the entire politico-administrative structure underwent a complete institutional transformation which was largely guided by the traditional European politico-administrative model in place in WE countries, including the role of decentralized local government. At the same time, the NPW-inspired public sector modernisation which ran rampant in WE countries conceptually leveraged the secular organisational transformation in CEE countries.

Hence, in the reorganisation of the public utilities in CEE countries, similar steps have been pursued as in their WE counterparts. Following the large-scale transfer of public service-related State assets to the local ownership the local authorities have, as a rule, at first corporatized them in what in CEE countries is called "budgetary institutions". Subsequently, the latter have often been turned into private law companies (such as limited companies or stock companies) which facilitated investors becoming shareholders in mixed (public/municipal-private) companies (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Mikula and Walaszek, 2016).

The transfer of the provision of personal social services from State to local government levels was seen a crucial element in secular transformation as well. However, in stark contrast to the equivalent development in WE countries, no major moves have occurred, in this period, to get non-public non-profit actors involved; a reason for this can arguably be seen in the fact that under the Communist regime any self-standing societal actors had been stifled and that this institutional and cultural legacy still looms large.

## *2.6. Since the late 1990s, down-turn of NPM and financial crisis*



The development since the late 1990s has been marked by world-wide financial crisis triggered by the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy of 2008, which has discredited the neo-liberal and NPM promises and entailed fiscal austerity policy measures. Under these auspices, the institutional development of the provision of public and social services has taken to remarkably varied trajectories.

On the one side, the privatization and corporatization of service providers has continued as the search for more flexibility and economic efficiency of service delivery has even been stepped up. In WE countries asset privatisation of services has recently been extended as private sector investors and companies, not least international big players, have continued to acquire shares of MOE's or to engage themselves in PPPs. For instance, in Germany and Austria, shares of some 40 percent of all MOE's are held by private investors (Grossi and Reichard, 2016). Moreover, in South European countries, the recent budgetary (sovereign debt) crisis has prompted further asset privatisation (Ferran and Puey, 2016; Tsekos and Triantafyllopoulou, 2016). In CEE countries, too, asset privatisation of service facilities continues to take place which can also be interpreted and explained as a catching up process in the still unfinished and ongoing secular transformation of these countries (Wollmann 2016).

However, in some countries and some service sectors, the municipalities have turned to re-municipalise, that is, to re-insource or re-purchase, previously out-sourced or privatised service provision. This development has been promoted particularly by two factors. For one, the local level policy-makers have become disenchanted with the neo-liberal mantra that outsourcing and privatising service provision to the private sector would entail better services at lower costs. At the same time, they have re-discovered the financial gain that the local authorities may reap for their local budgets by operating the services themselves, provided their companies succeed, by acquiring the appropriate entrepreneurial skills, to cope with and outpace private sector competition. Second, in line with a widely shared politico-cultural value change in favour of the public sector, local citizens and consumers have come to prefer service provision by the public/municipal sector; this has been evidenced in numerous surveys and local referenda which opted for remunicipalising local services or for retaining them in municipal hands (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014.)

In an international comparative perspective, a striking example of re-municipalisation is the energy sector in Germany. After having, during the 1980s, lost ground to the Big Four energy giants the local energy companies have, in the meantime, (re)gained operational and entrepreneurial clout and won back market share (Bönker et al., 2016; Wollmann et al., 2010). Even in France, where the still largely state-owned energy company EDF continues to hold a quasi-monopoly, the municipal companies have recently made moderate advances, particularly in the renewable energy field (Allemand et al., 2016).

A similar trend towards remunicipalisation can be observed in the water sector (Bönker et al., 2016; Lieberherr et al., 2016; Wollmann, 2014). Hungary represents a peculiar case of remunicipalisation or even re-nationalisation. After the ultra-conservatives came to power under Viktor Orbán in 2010, large cities such as Budapest and subsequently the national government, started to re-purchase assets and shares of previously privatised companies. The Orbán government defended this public sector-friendly approach on the ground that the private companies abused their dominance by overcharging for services (Horvath 2016).

Although these similar findings plausibly suggest that a durable trend is in the making, it should be cautioned that systematic evidence is still not available. It should be added, however, that changes in EU and national policies (for instance in the renewable energy policy turnaround, *Energiewende*) and the observable widespread politico-cultural preference for public or municipal service provision are arguably prone to pave the ground for further remunicipalisation.

Since the late 1990s, the provision of personal services has been increasingly impacted by fiscal austerity measures that have ushered in strikingly diverse and bifurcated trajectories. On the one hand, the marketization of personal social service provision has continued. This is exemplified by Germany where after the service market was liberalized by the legislation of 1994 the market share of private sector providers in residential care has risen to 40 percent by 2011 (Bönker et al., 2016). By contrast, in CEE countries, personal social services keep being rendered predominantly by public/municipal sector personnel which arguably points at a persistent institutional and cultural legacy of the previous Socialist State which was largely devoid of non-public providers (Nemec and Soukopová, 2016).

On the other hand, societal actors have conspicuously re-entered the local service arena from two directions. For one, in order to cut public spending neo-liberal policy initiatives aimed, top-down, at shifting the operational and financial burden of personal social services provision back to the needy themselves and to their families and peers by appealing to and committing societal actors to take over.. Exemplar was the so-called Big Society policy in the U.K. (Buser, 2013; McEldowney, 2016). It was promulgated, in 2010, by the newly elected coalition government headed by David Cameron. It was meant to trim the public spending by mobilising the engagement in the local communities and invoking societal actors, such as co-ops, charities and social enterprises (Buser 2013). However, since the mid-2010s the Big Government approach has been largely abandoned as a strategy of government policy (Civil Exchange 2015).

On a similar top down policy track, Italy's government has embarked on fiscal austerity measures that induce needy persons' resort to family and societal aid, including the reliance on grey care by migrants (Citroni et al., 2016) who are clandestinely employed for domiciliary care (Bönker et al., 2010). Another version of such top down strategy can be seen in the policy initiative of the EU in 2011 to fund the creation and operation of social enterprises that hinge on a hybrid concept of combining a social purpose with entrepreneurial activity. In Greece, for instance, social enterprises have recently been founded in a wide spectrum of services mostly in the social sector (childcare and care for the elderly) (Tsekos and Triantafyllopoulou, 2016).

Contrarily, a bottom-up path to the provision of personal social services and care has recently been opened by societal initiatives to combat to fiscal austerity-inspired cutbacks of social spending and to remedy ensuing socio-economic distress. Cooperatives and other forms of collective societal solidarity and self-help have come to life which, in part, has revived and linked up with earlier historical traces (Bauer and Markmann, 2016; Bönker et al., 2016; Mikula and Walaszek, 2016). By the same token, societal groups and social movements have sprung up to provide help for themselves and for others (Warner and Clifton, 2013). In Greece, sundry voluntary groups have emerged, at first in big cities - for example the *Atenistas* in Athens – and subsequently all over the country (Tsekos and Triantafyllopoulou, 2016). In a historical perspective, the rise of such bottom-up initiatives and actions might be interpreted as the re-emergence and revival of the social community (Wollmann 2006) and of societal actors that re-assume, as it were, pre-welfare state responsibilities.

### **3. Waves of local government reforms**

Regarding the operational capacity of the public sector in the provision of public and social services, the recent development appears somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the public sector has been enfeebled under the impact of neo-liberal market liberalisation and privatisation to the point of being, as it was caustically put, “hollowed out” (Rhodes 1996). On the other, political and structural reforms of the local governments have been initiated in European countries that arguably have politically and operationally (re-) strengthened the local authorities to play a relevant role in the local arena.

First, a general trend can be observed in European countries directed at improving the territorial base of the municipal as well as other subnational government level. For one, after, back in the 1960s and 1970s, large-scale territorial reforms were carried out in Nordic European countries, such as the U.K., Sweden and in some German Länder (federal regions/States), another wave of territorial reforms has set off since the 1990s in an increasing number of other European countries with the aim to enhance the operational capacity of the local authorities.. Moreover, in countries in which small-size municipalities have been retained, the traditional forms of inter-municipal cooperation have been reformed in order to strengthen their operational capacity to conduct joint service provision (Wollmann et al., 2010). Similarly, recent moves to create metropolitan local entities targeted at achieving territorial consolidation in and around the largest cities and their hinterland (such as the métropoles in France and the città metropolitane in Italy).

Second, in many countries, the territorial reforms have served as preparatory steps to transfer further public functions, by way of decentralisation or de-concentration, from upper government to lower government, foremost local government levels (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014, Marcou and Wollmann, 2008).

Third, since the 1990s, throughout European countries, local government reforms have been initiated which aim at strengthening the capacity of politico-administrative leadership to cope with the ever more complex tasks of local government. These reforms pertain both to countries with the government by committee tradition (such as the U.K. and Sweden) as well as those with the mayoral (maire) tradition. Regarding the latter the most conspicuous and consequential strategy has been the introduction of the directly elected (executive) mayor

who, by combining political and administrative clout with direct democratic legitimacy, is in the position to exercise strong local level leadership (Wollmann 2009, 2014).

Fourth, NPM-inspired administrative reforms that have, since 1980s, been carried out throughout the European countries (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011, Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014) have strengthened the administrative capacity of the local authorities. This pertains particularly to reform strategies which succeeded in combining merits of the traditional Weberian public administration with those of NPM-typical managerialism in what has been labelled a Neo-Weberian (state) model (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

### *3.1. From public/municipal sector dominance to a regime of multiple single-purpose service providers*

Under the auspices of the advanced welfare state which climaxed in the early 1970, the delivery of public and social services was marked by the quasi-monopolist dominance of a multi-functional public sector that was operated in a vertically integrated Weberian organisational form and was predominantly conducted by public/municipal personnel. This operational mode was rooted in the ideological belief that the public sector and its personnel are motivationally and professionally best equipped to act in the best interest of the citizens. The service provision was guided and controlled by elected local government which was politically mandated to advocate and ensure that the common interest be heeded.

Since the 1980s under the impact of the neo-liberal market liberalisation drive the public sector centred form of service provision has been dismantled and has given way to a horizontal decomposition and pluralisation of service delivery by single-purpose (public, quasi-public, private, mixed or non-profit) providers. Consequently, elected local governments have been faced with expanding local level networks of single-purpose providers whose centrifugal dynamics challenges and puts at risk the political mandate of the local authorities to advocate and bring to bear the common interest.

Since the mid-late 1990s, the network of service providers has further expanded and multiplied. In the public service sector corporatization, outsourcing and privatisation of service provision has been continued and even accelerated in the wake of fiscal austerity measures that aim at increasing cost efficiency or at cutting costs. Further privatisation has

been high on the political agenda especially in the public debt-stricken South European countries under pressure to generate additional revenue.

The sector of personal services has seen a conspicuous expansion of providers as well on two scores. For one, the market liberalisation of the provision of personal social services continued which further increased the number of single-purpose, primarily private/commercial providers. Second, societal actors have made their re-appearance that since the rise of the advanced welfare state had been typically sidelined or even explicitly excluded from social service provision.

Social actors have emerged on two tracks. Top-down, national governments, in pursuing fiscal austerity policies, have appealed to or even explicitly committed societal actors, self-help groups, social enterprises and the like in order to induce them to provide personal social services, care and help to the needy. Bottom-up, societal actors, social movements and self-help groups have sprung up to provide social services and care for themselves or others in need. Thus, societal actors, somewhat reminiscent of the pre-welfare state social community, have entered the local service arena. Thus, as “one side of the coin”, the network of single purpose service providers has further expanded and multiplied.

### *3.2. Strengthening of local government and comeback of the municipal sector*

However, the “other side of the coin” is that local government and the municipal sector have in recent years experienced a comeback. Thus, another major trend which has gained momentum since the mid-1990s signals a comeback of local government and its municipal sector on two scores. For one, in some countries and some service sectors (particularly energy and water), re-municipalisation decisions and measures have been taken place which indicate the willingness and readiness of the local authorities and actors to resume direct influence and control over the delivery of relevant services, thus halting and scaling back the previous privatization and outsourcing drive.

Second, thanks to the recent political and structural local government reforms, the local authorities have re-gained political and operational clout to act as influential players at the local level and in the local arena. In order to influence and coordinate (Wollmann, 2003a) the activities of local level actor networks the local authorities dispose of a repertoire of resources such as persuasion, negotiating, bargaining and incentives (Kaufmann and Majone, 1986;

Wollmann, 2003a). Thus, the capacity of local governments has been enhanced to act, amidst the local level actor networks, as “key networker” (*reticulist*, Friend et al. 1974, Rhodes 1996). This applies particularly to the directly elected mayor who as a democratically elected and administratively strong local leader can plausibly have a noticeable influence vis-à-vis and amidst local level actor networks.

To sum up: while, at first sight, the two recent main currents (further expansion of single-purpose actor/provider networks, on the one hand, and strengthening of local government, on the other) seem to be opposing and counter-acting each other, they can, at a closer look, be seen as mutually complementary. While service provision by single-purpose providers and by the competition between them appear prone to enhance the economic efficiency of the rendered services, the augmented political and administrative clout of local government, not least through its key networker potential, is likely to ensure that the common interest be adequately heeded.

#### **4. Any lessons to be drawn for the Asia Pacific region?**

In turning, at last, to the question whether any lessons might be drawn by the countries of the Asia-Pacific region from the European experience, the article addresses the issue of (transnational) policy learning and policy learning as a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions may be transmitted from one time/place to another (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 2000, Malik and Cunningham 2014, seminal Rose 1993). In the conceptual and methodological discussion on transnational policy learning, a key challenge is seen in avoiding “systemic failure” (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996) which is caused by from paying insufficient attention to differences between the economic, social, political and ideological contexts in the two countries, systems and spaces under consideration.

When it comes to lesson drawing, the conceptual challenge and the risk of “systemic failure” appears even more momentous than in the plain trans-national dimension within one region as we deal with two global regions the countries of which differ greatly on many scores. Hence, the attempt at lesson drawing has, from the outset, to be cautioned by the need to reckon with the ensuing inter-regional and inter-national differences in contextualities and specificities in time and space.

##### *4.1. The differences between the European and the Asia-Pacific region*

In order to call to mind the glaring geographic, demographic, ethnic, socio-economic etc. differences that exist between the European and the Asia Pacific regions it should, at this point, suffice to call up just two dimensions. For one, some data on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita shall be used as indicator of the different socio-economic situation and development in the two regions and their countries. Leaving aside the high income OCED countries, such as Japan with a GDP per capita of 38,994 US\$, the Asia Pacific countries range between middle-income ones (such as Malaysia with 9,502 US\$ and also China with 8,123 US\$) and low-income ones (such as India with 1,769 US\$ and Bangladesh with 1,358 US\$). By contrast, in EU member countries, the GDP per capita spreads from the group of OECD countries (such as Germany with 41,936 US\$) to Romania which (with 9,474 US\$) ranks lowest among EU countries, but still higher than most Asia-Pacific countries (all data for 2016 from [worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD](http://worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD)).

Second, reference shall be made to the rich information on the provision of public and social services which has been initiated and published by the international organisation *United Cities and Local Governments* (UCLG) in their global report on *Basic Services for All in an Urbanized World* (UCLG 2014). The so called GOLD III contains chapters on all EU member countries (Bauby and Similie 2014) as well as on the Asia-Pacific region in a selection of 17 countries which ranges between Japan and Nepal (Laquian, 2014), including a comparative chapter (Satterthwaite 2014). In skipping further details, the conspicuous discrepancy between the two regions shall be exemplified by the data on the access that households have to drinking water. In Asia-Pacific countries, “between 1990 and 2010, the number of urban dwellers without access to water piped to their premises grew by nearly 300 million” (Satterthwaite, 2014), whereas in European countries households are almost entirely connected with public water supply - with the exception of rural areas e.g. in Romania (Bauby and Similie 2014). By the same token, in the Asia-Pacific region, “the low- and middle-income countries still pose a tremendous challenge to the ability of governments to deliver local basic service. Almost one third of urban dwellers live in slums, an indication of the depth of inequalities in the context of rapid economic growth (Laquian, 2014).

In view of this huge manifold gap and discrepancy between the European and the Asia Pacific regions it seems, at first sight, highly risky and problematic to venture some “lesson drawing”. However, at a closer look, some significant commonalities can be observed that pertain to crucial underlying problems in service delivery and to attempts to institutionally,



organisationally and instrumentally react to and cope with them. Hence, it arguably appears warranted to identify and propose some fields and examples which can be, with due caution, deemed to lend themselves for meaningful “policy learning” and “policy transfer”.

#### *4.2. Role of local government in public and social service provision*

After, in European countries, in the wake of neo-liberal marketization and privatisation, the role of the local authorities in the provision of public and social services was significantly reduced. Local government and the municipal sector have in the meantime seen a remarkable comeback. This has been fostered by territorial, political and administrative reforms in most European countries (Kersting et al., 2009; Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Wollmann and Marcou, 2008). Moreover, local authorities have come to reappraise the service delivery by their own personnel and/or companies as an opportunity to generate revenue of their own and to regain control over the quality and price of the services.

By contrast, in most in most Asia-Pacific countries “central governments play a dominant role in providing local basic services”(Laquian 2014). Hence, in most Asia-Pacific countries, reform measures are plausibly needed “to enable local governments... to operate and manage public utilities that deliver basic services. The governance and managerial capabilities of local officials should be developed through institution-building, and educational and training programmes focused on management of local basic services” (Laquian, 2014). Moreover it seems mandatory “make preventing and tackling corruption in basic services a priority” (UCLG 2014, p. 225). The crucial role which in European countries the local authorities have come to play in the delivery of public and social services can arguably be deemed to serve as an example and incentive for Asia-Pacific countries to initiate and effectuate akin local government reforms in their countries. The European experience might also encourage local level actors and citizens to claim and take on enlarged responsibilities in providing social services and aid.

#### *4.3. Service delivery by public sector or private sector providers?*

In European countries during the 1980s, under the impact of market liberalization, the earlier predominance of the public/municipal sector in service provision was dismantled and gave way to private providers by way of privatisation and outsourcing/contracting out. However, in the meantime the underlying assumption that private sector provision would usher in better quality at lower costs has been called in question. Practical experience suggest

that services rendered by public/municipal sector providers are equal (or even superior) to private sector providers. In the case of private sector provision, it is deemed as important that the local authorities “maintain a degree of in house knowledge and expertise” to control the performance of outside providers (Bauby and Similie 2014, p. 110). A mix of public/municipal sector and private sector providers has been positively assessed as eliciting and promoting competition.

Asia-Pacific countries might gather from European experience that neither neo-liberal wholesale privatization nor entire municipalisation appears to be viable strategies of re-organising public and social services. Instead, a mix of public and private providers should be put in place to ensure competition. At any rate the capacity and competence of the local authorities should be built up to monitor and oversee the performance by external providers.

#### *4.4. Corporatisation of delivering services*

In European countries, the local authorities have often chosen to corporatize the delivery of public services by establishing organisations and companies which, while remaining in municipal ownership, are given organizational and operational quasi-autonomy (Grossi and Reichard 2016). The purpose of this organizational form is to achieve more operational flexibility. In adopting a “hybrid” orientation (see Montin 2016) such corporatized municipal may be disposed to achieve economic and entrepreneurial efficiency, while being rooted in the local political context and thus responsive to the common good of the local community. In Asia-Pacific countries, corporatisation could also serve as a promising organisational model when and after, in the course of upcoming decentralization, relevant responsibilities and resources are assigned to the local authorities enabling them to play a leading role in service provision.

#### *4.5. Public/private mix of service providers*

In European countries, since the 1980, mixed (public/municipal and private) companies in service provision have expanded as private investors became stakeholders in public/municipal companies (Bauby and Similie 2014). Such mixed companies and PPPs typically combine private sector resources and skills with public sector potential. However, recently the attractiveness of PPPs has declined. In Asia-Pacific countries, too, PPPs and mixed companies have come to provide services. However, so far “the hopes in the 1990’s that private sector participation and concession schemes would bring new investment and

extend access to basic services, particularly in low-income countries, have rarely been fulfilled” (Satterthwaite 2014: 211).

#### *4.6. Involvement of societal and third sector-type organizations and actors*

In European countries, on the heels of fiscal austerity policies and of ensuing cuts of social spending the societal and third sector-type organisations and actors (Salamon and Sokolowski, 2016, Enjolras et al.2016) have re-emerged evidenced by the growing number of cooperatives, social enterprises, self-help initiatives and akin groups providing social services and aid. Historically speaking they are reminiscent of the earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century pre-welfare state involvement of the “social community”. Notwithstanding the potential that these third sector-type organisations and actors can unleash by mobilizing financial resources (such as donations, membership fees etc.), personnel resources (volunteers) and also organisational, operational etc. skills, their lasting engagement noticeably depends on the availability of complementary public/municipal funding and contributions (Henriksen et al., 2016).

In many Asia-Pacific countries, too, “since the 1950’s civil society organizations have been set up....especially where the urban poor have struggled to get affordable housing and access to basic services...Small private enterprises in both the formal and informal sectors have an important role in basic service provision, especially where the quality and extent of provision by official service providers is lacking. In low and most middle-income countries, they provide a high proportion of the urban population with basic services. There are also cooperatives and community groups organizing, managing and financing the installation of basic services. Much of this happens in informal settlements”(Laquian 2014 p 39). While the involvement of societal actors in provision of personal social services and aid has been crucial in Asia Pacific countries it appears mandatory in the light of the European experience that their lasting engagement is ensured and possibly expanded by endowing them complementary public/municipal funding as well as moral and organisational support.

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