



POLITICAL DESIGN AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: MULTIPLE CASE STUDY IN INTERMUNICIPAL CONSORTIA

DESIGN POLÍTICO E CONSTRUÇÃO SOCIAL: ESTUDO DE CASOS MÚLTIPLOS EM CONSÓRCIOS INTERMUNICIPAIS

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to understand the social construction of intermunicipal consortia based on the application of Law 11,107/2005, known as the Consortium Law, from the perspective of the actors involved. It consists of qualitative, descriptive research, of multiple case study type, using interviews, document analysis and asymmetric observation to collect data. The results indicate that the social construction of the consortia under analysis goes hand in hand with the evolution of the laws that govern them and reflects the strengthening of regional representation and municipal management.

Keywords: Horizontal Federative Cooperation. Intermunicipal Consortia. Political design. Social construction.

Resumo

O objetivo do presente artigo consiste em compreender a construção social de consórcios intermunicipais a partir da aplicação da Lei 11.107/2005, conhecida como Lei de Consórcios, sob a ótica dos atores envolvidos. Consiste em uma pesquisa qualitativa, descritiva, do tipo estudo de múltiplos casos, com o uso de entrevista, análise documental e observação assimétrica para a coleta dos dados. Os resultados apontam que a construção social dos consórcios em análise caminha juntamente com a evolução das leis que os regem e espelham o fortalecimento das representatividades regionais e das gestões municipais.

Palavras-chave: Cooperação Federativa Horizontal. Consórcios intermunicipais. Design político. Construção social.

Introdução

As a model of horizontal federative cooperation, intermunicipal consortia have gained prominence since Law 11,107 was enacted in 2005. This law, which is considered a milestone, established laws for contracting of intermunicipal consortia. This practice already existed in many states because of decentralization (Linhares, Messenberg & Ferreira, 2017) and the fragility of municipalities in terms of financial, administrative and political organization (Borba & Oliveira, 2020; Leal et al., 2019; Rocha, 2016)

Intermunicipal consortia have enabled municipalities to improve their management and address common problems, fostering dialogue and enhancing their capacity to serve the population more efficiently while saving resources (Batista et al., 2011), mainly from the economic perspective.

However, as these consortia contemplate cooperative arrangements, with a significant demand for coordination of collective actions. Intermunicipal consortia also serve as social instruments, models of social construction, which encompass the participation of different individuals with diverse realities and desires (Pierce et al., 2014). In the context of political practice, social actors play a crucial role in driving political changes through the mobilization of social groups (Mintrom, Salisbury & Luetjens, 2014).

Considering that the objective of a public policy is to address social problems through coordinated collective actions and subject to social control, intermunicipal consortia serves as networks of social constructions (Mintrom, Salisbury & Luetjens, 2014).

From this perspective, social constructions naturally intersect with political design, impacting the political agenda and legitimizing political choices, which are absorbed by the beneficiaries of public policies (Pierce et al., 2014).

Political design, in this context, refers to the content, practices and consequences of a public policy (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Therefore, the analysis of consortia from the perspective of political design is justified because it influences policy decisions (Schneider, Ingram & Deleon, 2014).

Political design, along with public policy content, guides the establishment of consortia and directs actions that produce intended or unintended outcomes for what Schneider and Ingram (1997) define as target populations, meaning the beneficiaries of public policy.

Analyzing social constructions aids in understanding the societal impacts of a public policy (Ingram, Schneider & Deleon, 2007), as well as its feedback-forward effects (Pierce et al., 2014). Schneider and Ingram (2019, p. 207) indicate that the social construction of target populations has a direct relationship with the concept of feedback, in that 'policy creates policy.'

Thus, studying social constructions within the scope of intermunicipal consortia deepens understanding of their dynamics, addressing a gap in research on political design (Schneider & Sidney, 2009). Studying social constructions within the scope of intermunicipal consortia helps us better understand their dynamics fills a *gap* in research on political design (Schneider & Sidney, 2009).

With this background, a question arises and is defined as the general objective of this article: how is the social construction of intermunicipal consortia characterized by the application of Law 11.107/05, from the perspective of the actors involved?

To address this question, the article proposed the following specific objectives: (1) describe the political design of the public policy under analysis; (2) characterize the consortia under study; (3) discuss the social constructions present in this context.

Theoretical foundation

An intermunicipal consortium constitutes a legal entity that establishes “federal cooperation relations”. These consortia can take on different legal forms, either as a public association with legal personality under public law and autonomous in nature, or as a legal entity under private law without economic purposes” (as defined by Decree nº 6,017, 2007, Art. 2).

The first reference to public consortia in Brazil dates back to 1933, with the introduction of professional-cooperative consortia through Decree No. 23,611 (Henrichs, 2020). In 1937, the Brazilian Constitution in its Article 29 recognized the possibility of “municipalities in the same region grouping together for the installation, operation and administration of common public services. The group, thus constituted, will be endowed with legal personality limited to its specific purposes” (Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil 1937, Art. 29).

However, the broader discussion about public consortia, particularly focusing on municipal management, gained prominence with the Federal Constitution of 1988 (Trevas, 2013). This constitutional framework incorporated municipalities as federated entities. Such action, according to Linhares, Messenberg and Ferreira (2017, p. 68), “contemplated a decentralized and cooperative federative model as an organizational form of the Brazilian State”. As a result, social relations transformed municipal autonomy increased in financial, administrative and political matters.

According to Linhares, Messenberg e Ferreira (2017, p. 68), a decentralized cooperative federation can foster innovation in Public Administration, the protagonism of civil society, as well as the promotion of greater equity in access to public services among citizens located in different jurisdictions.

It is worth noting that the exponential growth of this cooperative model, as anticipated in Article 23 of the Federal Constitution (whose current text was established by Constitutional Amendment Nº 53 of 2006), only materialized in the mid-1990s with Constitutional Amendment Nº 19 of 1998 (Linhares, Messenberg & Ferreira, 2017). With a view to well-being and development, such legal provisions facilitated the management of public services through intermunicipal consortia, allowing for “the total or partial transfer of charges, services, personnel and essential goods to ensure the continuity of the transferred services” (Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, 1998, Art. 241). Consequently, municipalities gained even greater autonomy in their management.

Only in 2005, Law No. 11,107, known as the Public Consortia Law, was enacted. This law a significant institutional milestone for public management in Brazil, particularly at the municipal level. It highlights the possibility of the Union, States, Municipalities and the Federal District contracting public consortia to achieve common objectives. Subsequently, in 2007, Decree No. 6,017 was published, providing the general rules for implementing Law No. 11,107/05.

Prior to the establishment of the aforementioned legal instrument, public consortia operated administratively, relying only on municipal adhesion. This approach, however, reflected significant fragility in commitment (Linhares, Messenberg & Ferreira, 2017).

Municipalities faced challenges to deal with legal and institutional weaknesses (Trevas, 2013). In addition, managing resources and adopting long-term strategies proved difficult. Fortunately, a shift happened, which brought greater security and confidence for municipalities participating in these arrangements (Linhares, Messenberg & Ferreira, 2017).

Subsequently, as stated by Henrichs (2020), the increased role of the executive power, in terms of formulation and execution of public policies, previously attributed to the Union and the states, was transferred to the municipalities. However, as the author states, this transfer was not accompanied by a corresponding shift in the country's fiscal-financial panorama, which remained centralized in the Union

level. As a consequence, “obligations increased disproportionately to the operational and financial capacity of municipalities, especially smaller ones” (Henrichs, 2020, p. 12).

According to Trevas (2013), the establishment of a triple Federation increased the complexity of intergovernmental relations and imposed new challenges on public management. As a result, municipalities found themselves in a prominent position, and cooperative federalism gained importance. Various legislative changes and public policies- such as health regionalization, bidding law, the national solid waste plan and urban mobility regulation- contributed to the strengthening of consortia; these intermunicipal collaborations began to be recognized and valued by the states and the federal government (Trevas, 2013).

In this context, the Consortia Law emerged as a regulatory public policy. It imposed general rules for the establishment, formalization and management of consortia (Silva, n.d.) Schneider and Ingram (1997) refer to this process as political design. Political design encompasses the content, practices and consequences of a public policy.

For Schneider, Ingram and Deleon (2014, p. 95), observable elements of political design, in addition to benefits and burdens, include “the objectives to be achieved or the problems to be solved, the tools used to change behavior, the rules for inclusion or exclusion, the rationality that legitimizes the internal relationship of cause and effect [...] and the implementation structure”. Therefore, characterizing political design involves understanding these elements. Depending on the research question and the objectives, design can comprise different dimensions, including the incorporation of social constructions as a level of analysis, with particular emphasis on the social construction of knowledge (Schneider & Sidney, 2009).

According to Schneider and Sidney (2009):

The choice of design elements reflects political and social values, historical precedent, national trends in ideas about “good” policy, as well as a host of “local” knowledge that leads to enormous variability in policy designs across time and space. These choices produce policy experiences for those people who are directly affected, and the choices influence policy learning that stretches far into the future. (p. 105).

Understanding values, including social construction, logic, and underlying assumptions, becomes integral to analyzing political design (Schneider & Sidney, 2009). Given that reality is socially constructed and that a consortium comprises different social actors, it can be seen as a social instrument subject to social control (Pierce et al., 2014; Paula, 2005; Schneider, Ingram & Deleon, 2014). Therefore, understanding social construction consists of identifying the meaning that people attribute to reality, namely, the image they create of this reality (Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

Among the various approaches to public policy analysis, Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram’s Social Construction and Political Design Theory is prominent, offering insights into the political process (Tsubaki, 2019) by examining the relationship between social construction and political power. Ingram, Schneider and Deleon (2007) argue that political design influences both the political orientation and the participation of target populations, which are 'the groups chosen to receive benefits or burdens through the various elements of political design' (Ingram, Schneider & Deleon, 2007, p. 95), thereby referring to the beneficiaries of public policy.

The interplay between political power (weak or strong) and social construction (positive or negative) leads to the categorization of four distinct target population groups: (1) Advantaged: groups with strong political influence and positive social construction (e.g., the scientific community); (2) Contenders: groups with strong political influence but negative social construction (e.g., corrupt businesspersons); (3) Dependents: groups with weak political influence but positive social construction (e.g., children); and (4) Deviants: groups with weak political influence and negative social construction (e.g., criminals) (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

Additionally, beyond the identification and understanding of target populations, there is also the consideration of feed(back)-forward effects (Pierce et al., 2014). Consequently, certain groups may be viewed differently from various perspectives (Ingram, Schneider & Deleon, 2007), and target populations may alter their status over time (Pierce et al., 2014), with political design acting as a significant driver of such change (Sabatier, 2007).

According to Sabatier (2007, p. 109), a public policy can 'provide focus, resources, arenas, and prompt mobilization of social actors to enact changes in prevailing social constructions,' as well as bolster the social construction of intermediary groups. Thus, understanding the feed(back)-forward effects of political design entails examining the outcomes of public policy relative to intended goals, which may reinforce or modify the social construction of target populations (Pierce et al., 2014). Campbell (2011) posits that one of the challenges for policymakers is to consider the political consequences of design, fostering an environment conducive to additional policies that align with the initial direction.

Thus, as a cooperative arrangement, municipalities hold individual objectives but also seek to achieve shared interests (Borba & Oliveira, 2020). This renders consortium management and political choices essential to achieving the goals pursued by the consortium and governments.

Methodological procedures

This research proposal is characterized as a qualitative and descriptive study (Creswell, 2010). Its primary objective is to understand the political and social context of intermunicipal consortia.

In terms of research methodology, we have opted for a case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989), due to the depth of analysis required. To select the cases, we focused on multi-purpose intermunicipal consortia of legal nature governed by public law and located in the Center-West of the State of São Paulo (National Platform of Intermunicipal Public Consortia, n.d.). We reached out to all relevant consortia and obtained feedback from three of them, which form the basis of our study.

Considering it is a social construction analysis, for data collection, we preferably conducted interviews with the actors within organizational structure of each consortium. Our research subjects, therefore, were identified using the "snowball" method, starting with the consortium manager. Additionally, the following were consulted: technical and administrative support staff from the consortium and the city hall, municipal secretaries and representatives of support bodies. To complement our findings, we organized a focus group to address the practical realities found in the field, guided by insights from the managers of each consortium.

To ensure robustness to our interview data, we triangulated our data and included the analysis of relevant documents and bibliographies, as well as asymmetric *on site* observations (including visits to consortium headquarters and governance meetings, when permitted).

In total, three intermunicipal consortia were analyzed out of the 24 multi-purpose consortia of legal nature governed by public law and located in the Center-West of the state of São Paulo. The research involved 17 interviews, including 15 individual interviews and two conducted as a focus group (at the consortium's discretion). These interviews spanned about 15 hours. Besides the interviews, 15 official documents (statutes, regulations and protocols of intention), as well as published bidding notices and competitions, institutional websites, transparency portal and other websites (such as ongoing projects and partners) indicated by the consortia were also analyzed. Table 1 outlines the categories and theoretical basis that guided the interview process.

Table 1
Categories, constitutive and operational definitions

ANALYSIS CATEGORY	CONSTITUTIVE DEFINITION	OPERATIONAL DEFINITION
Political Design	Content, practices and consequences of a public policy (Schneider & Ingram, 1997).	Description of the observable elements of political design: objectives/problems, benefits/burdens, tools/rules/rationalities and implementation structure (Ingram, Schneider & Deleon, 2014).
Social construction	Meaning that people give reality, the image they create of this reality (Schneider & Ingram, 1997).	Perception of interviewees regarding the reality of consortia in political design (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Perception of target populations in relation to political power (Schneider & Ingram, 1993), feed(back)-forward effects (Pierce et al., 2014), elaboration of political design and perception of changes (Sabatier, 2007).

Finally, after defining the constructs, selecting the cases, entering the field, based on the definitions of subjects, instruments and collection protocols, data collection allowed the observation of similarities and differences between the cases. Additionally, we analyzed the proposed research model in light of the field’s reality (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Presentation and analysis of results

This research included the participation of three intermunicipal consortia. Table 2 presents the *stakeholders* interviewed from each of them.

Table 2
Subjects interviewed

Consortium 1	Consortium 2	Consortium 3
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Executive manager of the consortium 2. Municipal Social Assistance Secretary 3. Municipal Culture and Tourism Secretary 4. Consortium accounting assistant 5. Consortium partner 6. Consortium project coordinator 7. Purchasing coordinator and consortium auctioneer 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Executive manager of the consortium 2. Focus group (administrative team) 3. Focus group (managers – secretariats – larger municipalities) 4. Focus group (managers – secretariats – smaller municipalities) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Executive manager of the consortium 2. Consortium technical chamber manager 3. Consortium administrative support 4. Representative of a consortium partner institution 5. Municipal education secretary 6. Municipal education secretary

The **first consortium**, established in 1985, comprises 42 municipalities. These municipalities, while maintaining their autonomy, collaborate through the consortium to develop joint actions that contribute to the socioeconomic development of their region. Guided by the motto “alone the problem is yours, together it is ours” the consortium operates from its headquarters, where 12 employees handle a range of responsibilities - from executive management to technical support. Beyond the headquarters, the consortium’s operations involve over 100 employees, as reported by one of the interviewees. The main objectives of the consortium include: representing municipalities before other entities; managing the consortium’s activities; promoting and accelerating socioeconomic development in the region; facilitating articulated forms of regional development planning; producing information, studies and exchanging experiences between consortium members.

The **second consortium** was established in 2005, but it only became public entity in 2013. Currently, this consortium comprises 21 municipalities and enjoys greater recognition at both state and federal levels. It operates with 50 employees, both directly and indirectly. It also manages a support center in the headquarters’ city. The objectives of the consortium include: representing the consortium members before other entities; implementing cooperation initiatives between entities; promoting regional development; cooperating technically and financially with the state and federal governments; defining and monitoring the regional agenda; articulating partnerships; establishing communication with state departments and ministries; managing financial resources and projects/cooperations; maintaining fundraising activities; making socioeconomic information available; guaranteeing the quality of services; exercising the powers of the consortium members, when applicable; and carrying out bids.

The **third consortium** emerged in 1999 initially in an association format. In 2010, it transformed into a public consortium with the current participation of 18 municipalities. Its objectives encompass: associated management of public services in association; providing services in the execution of works and supply of goods to the administration of members; representing the municipalities; managing the consortium’s activities; sharing equipment and instruments; exercising powers of the federation entities, when applicable; carrying out actions and providing health services; promoting regional development planning; producing information, studies and exchanging experiences between entities; promoting the rational use of resources and preserving the environment; managing water resources; managing and protecting common heritage; planning and managing social security services and resources.

The regulatory public policy under analysis consists of Law 11,107/05, which serves as the reference legislation for contracting public consortia, along with Decree N° 6,017/07, which outlines the general rules for implementing the law.

Characterizing the **political design**, we focus on the objectives, benefits, burdens, rules and implementation structure of this public policy.

In terms of *objectives*, as stated in Law No.11,107 (2005), public consortia aim to “establish federative cooperation relationships”. In our case study, we specifically refer to intermunicipal consortia. The objectives of the consortium are determined by the consortium members themselves, provided that they adhere to constitutional limits. The Decree N° 6, 107 (2007), Article 3, points out as basic objectives: associated management of public services, provision of services, sharing or common use of instruments and equipment, production of information or technical studies, institution/operation government schools or similar, promotion of the rational use of natural resources and protection of the environment, exercise of functions in the water resources management system, support and promotion of the exchange of experiences and information between consortium members, management and protection of assets urban planning, landscaping or common tourism, management of social security services and resources for employees of the Federation entities that make up the consortium, provision of technical assistance, extension, training, research and urban, rural and agrarian development, urban development actions and policies , local and regional socio-economic; and exercise of powers belonging to Federation entities.

When considering the *benefits of intermunicipal consortia*, it becomes evident that the Union, states, the Federal District and municipalities aim to align their common interests. These cooperative arrangements address the challenges of public management. In the case of municipalities - the focus of this research - the most significant benefit lies in regional development. Through consortia, municipalities can establish coordinated actions that address diverse areas of public policies.

The participation of municipalities in consortia brings advantages mainly in terms of economies of scale, technical training and synergistic effect. In other words, through consortia, municipalities are able to tackle multifaceted challenges of public policies collectively and according to the region in which they operate. For instance, according to interviewee 1 from Consortium 1, these collaborative efforts help fill gaps in municipal services, such as the lack of trained personnel in secretariats. It is also a form of incentive for managers, technicians and employees, as it also involves them in the activities and there is appreciation of their work. In a complementary way, managers now have the opportunity to become more involved in macro programs, which involve more tactical and strategic decision-making.

Interviewee 2 from Consortium 1 considers the consortium a fundamental alternative for establishing public policies and regional programs. “... *she also needs this strengthening, right? of of from ... [partner] right? [...] to create robustness in what you are saying*” (Interviewee 2 – Consortium 1). Furthermore, the consortium highlights the relevance in exchanging experiences among managers and municipalities, which provides a platform for addressing municipal demands collectively. For interviewee 2, “*you can no longer talk about public management without consortia. It’s not possible*” (Interviewee 2 – Consortium 1), especially for smaller municipalities. Interviewee 6 (also from Consortium 1) adds that the union of municipalities via public consortia strengthens their political influence.

However, participation in consortia comes with financial responsibilities. The primary instrument is the generic expense sharing contract. Both revenues and expenses within the public consortium adhere to financial law standards aimed at public entities, including Complementary Law No. 101 of May 4, 2000, which establishes Public Finance standards focused on fiscal management responsibility. The arrangement is subject to inspection by the Court of Auditors. In the case of specific programs, consortium members have autonomy regarding participation. If they choose to participate, expenses are shared. Additionally, all consortium members contribute a monthly maintenance payment.

In Consortium 2, the council deliberates on the value, which the consortium executive confirms. The municipality then pays for the services it “uses”. However, the portfolio contract is a shared expense paid by all members. To guarantee consortium sustainability, as stated by the executive secretary of this consortium, projections account for future expenses and investments.

In terms of *rules*, consortia operate under a statute that defines their organization and operation. They also adhere to the rules of Public Law with regard to biddings, contract signing, financial reporting and personnel hiring. The consortium’s initial constitution involves signing a protocol of intentions among the interested Federation entities.

Regarding *implementation structure*, intermunicipal consortia operates with a clear hierarchy. The superior body is the assembly, typically composed of mayors representing the member municipalities. The executor responsible for day-to-day operations is the technical-administrative team based at the consortium’s headquarters. In order to optimize work distribution and leverage specialized expertise, consortia often establish technical chambers aligned with specific areas of action. Considering the consortia under analysis, the areas of interest are health, education and environment. Within these technical chambers, municipal secretaries take direct action, based on their respective domains. Additionally, some consortia create sub-chambers, as seen in Consortium 1, tailoring their focus to the unique demands of each area.

Across all analyzed consortia, ideas are thoroughly discussed, and those broad municipal support are

advanced. Notably, some consortia such as Consortium 3, model their implementation structure after established reference consortia - typically older and better structured entities.

To gain deeper insight into the political design of the regulatory public policy under scrutiny and its practical application in the studied intermunicipal consortia, a comparative table (Table 3), provides an overview of the cases and their alignment with political design.

Table 3
Comparison of the cases studied

Consortium	Consortium 1	Consortium 2	Consortium 3
Description	Founded in 1985 (2005 as a consortium) Legal entity under public law Multipurpose 42 municipalities	Founded in 2005 (2013 as a consortium) Legal entity under public law Multipurpose 21 municipalities	Founded in 1999 (2010 as a consortium) Legal entity under public law Multipurpose 18 municipalities
Goals	Increase the region's capacity to solve common problems	Seek to carry out actions of common interest, representing consortium members and acting in a cooperative manner	Meet the common interest of consortium members regarding the implementation of public policies
Structure	General Assembly President and Vice-president Secretary Treasurer Fiscal Council Technical Chambers Executive Board.	General Assembly Advisory board Executive secretariat Technical Chambers	Higher management (general assembly, fiscal council, board of directors, presidency and vice-presidency, secretariat and treasury) Management and advice (sectoral chambers and executive board) Programmatic execution (sectoral departments).
Benefits	Economies of scale Purchasing Training Support for municipal management Valuation (involvement of employees) Regional public policies Exchange of experiences	Economies of scale Purchasing Technical training Subsidy for planning municipal public policies Synergistic effect	Economies of scale Purchasing Training
Charges	Apportionment of costs	Apportionment of costs	Apportionment of costs
Rules and regulations	Protocol of intent Statute Internal regulations Specific rules Inspected by the Court of Auditors	Protocol of intent Statute Internal regulations Specific rules Inspected by the Court of Auditors	Protocol of intent Statute Internal regulations Specific rules Inspected by the Court of Auditors
Implementation structure	Division of activities Autonomy of municipalities regarding participation	Division of activities Autonomy of municipalities regarding participation	Mirror in another consortium Division of activities Autonomy of municipalities regarding participation

In short, the first consortium focuses on resolving regional challenges towards greater socioeconomic development. It has a well-defined organizational structure, as well as rules and regulations, contributing to the clear and objective establishment of activities. Among the main benefits of the consortium are:

economies of scale, access to information, contribution to municipal management and exchange of experiences. Regarding challenges, changes in management, participation of certain municipalities and publicity of the consortium stand out.

The second consortium is characterized by the search for common interests, through cooperative actions. The structure consists of rules and regulations, as well as a clear division of activities. Among the benefits, economies of scale and technical and managerial training stand out. Regarding challenges, the lack of planning, management changes and the engagement of some municipalities are present.

Finally, the third consortium is characterized by the alignment of interests of the consortium members in proposing public policies; like the others, it is governed by rules and regulations, with the actions from different work fronts. The main benefits are the economies of scale and training; and the challenges are the size of the technical team, which brings work overload, limited participation of some municipalities and managers, political ideologies, changes in management and independent and integrated action of technical chambers.

Regarding the **social construction** of consortia, it is essential to begin by understanding the historical context that shapes the scenario in question. Specifically, this involves recognizing the decentralization of the State and the newfound status of municipalities as federated entities. These municipalities now bear the responsibility of managing areas of public policy that were previously exclusively under the responsibility of the States and the Union.

Interviewee 2 from Consortium 1 views the consortium as a fundamental alternative for establishing public policies and regional programs. *“... she also needs this strengthening, right? of of from ... [partner] right? [...]to create robustness in what you are saying”* (Interviewee 2 – Consortium 1). Furthermore, the consortium plays a pivotal role in exchanging experiences among managers and municipalities, in order to address municipal demands effectively. For interviewee 2, *“you can no longer talk about public management without consortia. It's not possible”* (Interviewee 2 – Consortium 1), especially for smaller municipalities. Interviewee 6 undercovers the political strength provided by the union of municipalities via public consortia. In summary, public consortia emerge as an alternative for municipalities to collaboratively address their demands, pooling resource to meet both municipal and regional needs, highlighting what Schneider and Sidney (2009) call the social construction of knowledge.

Based on the fact that the practice of public consortia is part of a public policy context, defining municipalities as target populations, in line with the Theory of Social Construction and Target Populations by Schneider and Ingram (1993), note, even before the recognition of municipalities as federated entities, their characterization as dependent on public policy was carried out. However, since the Federal Constitution of 1988 and, more specifically, Law No. 11,107 of 2005, the role of municipalities, especially smaller ones, has been strengthened, so that they begin to gain greater political influence, becoming known as favored.

In the context of public consortia, their practice is intricately tied to broader public policy considerations, stemming from the Federal Constitution of 1988 and, more specifically, Law n° 11,107 of 2005. Within this framework, the role of municipalities, especially smaller ones, has gained prominence, granting them increased political influence. Interviewee 6 from Consortium 1 highlights a critical transformation resulting from smaller municipalities' participation in the consortium. Previously, when faced with notices to improve municipal education, larger municipalities consistently prevailed. However, the consortium altered this dynamic. Smaller municipalities now gave the opportunity to benefit from educational initiatives and partnerships.

Since the enactment of the Federal Constitution of 1988, the participation of municipalities, in terms of guaranteeing the common good and implementing public policies, has been increasing. While this trend brings advantages in terms of autonomy and greater effectiveness in addressing local needs, it also

imposes new responsibilities on municipal management. Interviewee 2 from Consortium 3 emphasizes the importance of viewing the consortium as a collective effort, *“this work we have to do with the mayor to understand that the consortium is for everyone. It's for regional things, not for individual things, not for the municipality. It's no use!”* (Interviewee 2 – Consortium 3).

Interviewee 1 from Consortium 1 underscores that legal personality alone does not drive transformation. Instead, a well-structured consortium – one that integrates, provides security (trust) and operates transparently – is essential. Similarly, interviewee 4 also from Consortium 1, the solidity of the consortium lies in the seamless integration of municipalities, and the shared purpose recognized by mayors.

Interviewee 2 (Consortium 1) also appoints the importance of relationships with other consortia, as a way of understanding different realities and seeking best practices so that the actions of the chamber in which he participates can be strengthened. Partnerships, therefore, consist of a fundamental piece for the development of public consortia, often arising from relationships established with public managers, either by the executive management of the consortium itself or, from studies and research on consortia. This fact reflects the importance of *networking* for the social construction of the consortium, as well as the synergistic effect provided by cooperative work. The municipal managers' own belief in the strength of the consortium is an important factor, as stated by interviewee 1 from Consortium 2: *“So when I tell you that the council itself doesn't see the power of an arrangement, it's more or less in that sense... When you increase a set of preferences, the governor will receive twenty mayors [...] It's a heavy weight”*.

As a complement, interviewee 4 from Consortium 1 states that experienced people in the public sector makes all the difference in terms of understanding the reality of public management as a whole and, more specifically, the consortium itself. *“There were administrations here [...] that were more entrepreneurial, more innovative and others that were less so”* (Interviewee 4 – Consortium 1). *“There are entrepreneurial mayors and there are mayors who are passing through”* (Interviewee 3 – Consortium 1). Thus, it is noteworthy that not everyone who works in the consortium's activities (headquarters), as well as in programs/projects, knows the reality of the consortium itself, since they either work in more technical functions or serving the population. However, the involvement of technicians in the consortium's actions, when it occurs, makes all the difference, giving greater autonomy and enabling their participation in decision-making processes.

As interviewee 2 from Consortium 1 states, the primary issue in public consortia lies in focusing on public policy to address the different problems within each area of covered by the arrangement. However, several obstacles persist. Firstly, the interconnection between municipalities remains a challenge. Secondly, there are “opportunistic” party policies that often diverge from the reality of the municipality. Thirdly, difficulties arise regarding support and information acquisition, as state and federal governments may be disconnected from the municipality's actual situation or unaware of specific programs/projects. Lastly, management practices present additional challenges.

According to interviewee 1 from Consortium 2, municipal managers often initially endorse ideas but then struggle with execution. Additionally, there is the lack of qualified technical support, resulting inadequate guidance for many municipalities. This deficiency leads to unresolved issues and, in some cases, exacerbates existing problems. The participant emphasizes the relevance of technical training for public managers. Experience in the field or formal training alone is insufficient; managers must also possess strong management skills, particularly in areas such as budgeting.

The social construction of the consortium evolves over time, mirroring changes in social relationships and reflecting the values of the group. Consortium management significantly influences this process. The consortium's executive secretariat plays a fundamental role in this context, serving as the central hub, facilitating communication between mayors and the consortium. Over the years, the role of the consortium in the integration and involvement of the group has also evolved. In response to this scenario, actions have been established with the purpose of optimizing the monitoring of municipal management,

strengthening interpersonal relationships and streamlining the processes of work. In the context, partnerships emerge as preponderant elements, requiring a careful analysis of whether an action aligns with the interests of the consortium or constitutes an "obligation" of the partner in terms of performance. In summary, consortium management remains essential for achieving desired results.

In addition, despite the legislation governing the institution, composition and structure of consortia, local and regional specificities must be noted, in addition to historical elements and social and political values present in each arrangement, according to their demands. This scenario reflects different realities, with different actions, projects and structures (Schneider & Sidney, 2009).

The coexistence of larger and smaller municipalities in the same consortium reflects these different realities in the same arrangement, that is, favored municipalities (high political power and positive social construction), dependent municipalities (with low political power and positive social construction), contenders (with high political power and negative social construction) and deviants (with low political power and negative social construction). The research carried out provides evidence of the presence of these four profiles of target populations in the context of the consortia under analysis.

What can be highlighted, in the meantime, are the different profiles of municipalities, therefore, diverse in terms of political influence. In this case, it is possible that, even with the regulation and strengthening of public consortia in the country, there are still municipalities that are configured as dependent, and those that have practices that lead to negative social construction, corroborating the argument of Ingram, Schneider and Deleon (2007) regarding the effects of the analysis of the social construction of target populations in the context of political design.

In the same line, in view of the analysis of the feed(back)-forward effects mentioned by Pierce et al. (2014), there are different perceptions in relation to the target populations of the consortia under analysis, in the same way that one perceives the change in their conditions over time, influenced by social constructions and political designs (Ingram, Schneider & Deleon, 2007; Sabatier, 2007).

The analysis carried out here thus visualizes a social construction of public consortia in recent years, marked by the strengthening of regional representation and strengthening of municipal management, as proposed in the historical line of emergence of intermunicipal consortia. As noted in the study, in some realities, such strengthening leads to greater prominence of the actions of municipalities in relation to, even, the state and federal governments, a fact that raises the discussion about the proportionality of the obligations of municipalities versus their financial and operational capacity, raised by Henrichs (2020). While the rules and regulations imposed by this type of arrangement may contribute to the maintenance of opportunistic behaviors among municipal profiles (with the new bidding law playing a role), it is essential to recognize that municipalities still maintain their autonomy in terms management.

The coexistence of larger and smaller municipalities within the same consortium reflects different realities. When public consortia establish partnerships, they maintain the social fabric of the participating municipalities. This effect is particularly pronounced in the most active municipalities. However, it is essential to recognize the different profiles of these municipalities especially in terms of political influence. Despite efforts to regulate and strengthen public consortia nationwide, some municipalities may still have limited political sway. Additionally, certain practices within municipalities can lead to a negative social perception.

Despite these factors, there remain important challenges to address. Notably, management changes during electoral periods pose a hurdle, and many municipalities lack awareness of the arrangement's significance and its potential on regional development.

As highlighted by interviewee 3 from Consortium 1, management changes have consistently posed challenges in terms of secretariat management. Thus, she viewed the consortium as an opportunity to

“*create roots*” – establish a strong foundation – by developing projects that address government transitions and brings tangible benefits to local and regional development, particularly in the realms of culture and tourism. For the interviewee, collaborating with technicians plays a crucial role in maintaining the consortium and fostering integration among municipalities. When faced with a change in management, employees communicate and introduce the new secretary to the consortium manager. As interviewee 3 from Consortium 1 says: “[...] *when they are elected, before the new ones take office, we hold a meeting with everyone who won*”. Furthermore, in order to mitigate the negative impact, in addition to the managers, a career employee from the city hall participates in the technical chambers, actively monitoring the activities and participating in joint meetings.

According to those interviewed, the involvement of municipal management presents a significant challenge, as many municipal leaders grapple with time constraints while addressing immediate local issues. Consequently, there is a lack of interest among some mayors regarding the benefits that a consortium can offer to their management. It is crucial to highlight pivotal role of municipal secretaries, who participate in technical chambers and directly engage with consortium activities. Across all consortia, these professionals play an extremely important role in achieving desired outcomes and aligning interests.

Another critical issue involves the municipal managers' own perception of the consortium's strength, as stated by Interviewee 1 from Consortium 2: “*So when I tell you that the council itself doesn't see the power of an arrangement, it's more or less in that sense. When you increase a set of preferences, the governor will receive twenty mayors [...] It's a heavy burden*”.

External influences, such as the new Bidding Law, introduce new challenges. According to Interviewee 1 from Consortium 2, municipalities will adjust smoothly, while others will face significant difficulties. Overall, her perception is that this adjustment process will be arduous, and many mayors have yet to fully grasp the gravity of the situation. Additionally, political forces play a complementary role, exerting influence on consortium management. Focus group 2 (Consortium 2), highlights this impact, particularly in terms of planning and executing routines, which can disrupt the flow of processes.

Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that all the three consortia analyzed have achieved their intended objectives. However, further progress could be made by addressing certain aspects. Specifically, a better understanding of the consortia's potential for regional development and increased involvement of city halls (at all levels) in the implemented actions would enhance overall outcomes. Campbell's (2011) statement regarding political choices that feed additional policies in the same direction, in part, is present in the historical analysis of policies that encompass intermunicipal consortia, however, challenges are still present and need to be considered by public policy makers involved in this context.

Conclusion

The present study aims to explore the political design of intermunicipal consortia from the perspective of social construction. Against the backdrop of decentralization of the State, which grants greater autonomy and responsibilities to municipalities in addressing demands and executing public policies, public consortia have emerged. These consortia aim to contribute to regional development through cooperative actions.

Among the primary benefits of intermunicipal consortia lies the concept of economies of scale, achieved through joint bidding. This collaborative approach allows participating municipalities to exchange valuable experiences and fosters opportunities for managerial and technical training. Additionally, the synergistic effect comes into play as municipalities pool resources in their pursuit of state and federal funding. However, challenges persist. The turnover of municipal management every four years disrupts project continuity and impedes evolution. Slow processes may be characteristic in this context. Another challenge that stands out is the understanding of city halls regarding the potential of public consortia in terms of meeting their demands. On one hand, greater municipal autonomy and

responsibility are observed; however, on the other hand, limitations in operational and financial capacity are evident at the municipal level.

The social construction of consortia, therefore, goes hand in hand with the evolution of laws, and their description is a mirror of the laws that govern them, although marked by regional specificities, which can be seen when observing the projects of each arrangement, as well as the actions of the executive secretariats and thematic chambers. The reality analyzed, in this way, allows the understanding of the feed(back)-forward effects, reflecting different profiles of municipalities (target populations) in relation to the social construction, as well as changes since the institution of the law, that is, smaller municipalities that were previously considered dependent and that, with participation in the consortium, become stronger, changing to favored, and larger municipalities that further strengthen their positive social construction based on the consortium.

Finally, it is worth noting that the political design has significantly influenced decision-making and political choices, as well as the social construction of consortia over the years. In this sense, understanding social construction in terms of this relationship helps to better understand how social relationships are present and constructed, as well as the way in which the group's efforts are directed towards a common objective. This aspect further raises the importance of collaborative governance in the context of cooperative arrangements, such as intermunicipal consortia, as well as strengthening discussions on political choice and design.

However, the study does have limitations. It focused on analyzing three consortia out of a larger universe of 24. Additionally, accessing all consortium participants, particularly political authorities posed challenges due to scheduling constraints. Despite these limitations, we made effort to address these issues within the research questions and through the analysis of documents.

As a suggestion for future studies, expanding the study to other realities and types of cooperative arrangements, analyzing the municipalities that are part of the consortia in terms of their classification as target populations, as well as the feed(back)-forward effects present, longitudinal studies, with a view to understanding the political processes present in the context of intermunicipal consortia, and finally, quantitative studies that can bring statistically generalizable results and that encompass other levels of analysis.

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