

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Policy-making, policy-taking, and policy-shaping: Local government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged nations states across the world. They have implemented lockdown and social distancing and with the development of vaccines have gone to great lengths to build herd immunity for their populations. As place managers, local government has played a variety of roles supporting central government edicts related to social distancing and supporting local businesses impacted by lockdowns. The research reported here comparing the role local government has played in Australia, Canada, Italy, and New Zealand shows that they have at different times and for different issues been policy takers from central government, policy shapers, and policy makers adapting national strategies. Local government plays an important complementary role with central governments in both unitary and federal systems of government. The paper contributes to the literature on multi-level governance, place-based decision-making, and disaster and emergency management by offering a framework for analysing municipal roles in crises management both in

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their relationship with higher layers of government and in their acting as locally placed organisations.

#### KEYWORDS

Australia, Canada, COVID-19, disaster and emergency management, Italy, multi-level governance, New Zealand, place-based decision making, policy-making

#### Points for practitioners

- Cross-national study: Australia, Canada, Italy, and New Zealand.
- Examination of local government responses to COVID-19 pandemic as policy makers, takers, or shapers.
- Comparison of federal and unitary states.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in modern times. While influenza persists and annual vaccinations are commonplace, no other virus has had such a global impact since the Spanish flu ravaged the world over 100 years ago. Our purpose in this paper is to identify and compare the different roles local government/municipalities (hereinafter referred to as municipalities) have played in state responses to the same crisis by examining municipalities in four countries—Australia, Canada, Italy, and New Zealand—and to outline a framework for analysing the role municipalities can play in responding to a pandemic. We locate our study in the broader context of academic and policy debates concerning multi-level governance (MLG), place-based decision-making (PBDM), and disaster and emergency management (DEM) (Prasad et al., 2009; Quirk, 2019).

Debates concerning the optimal role for local government are by now well established and relevant to all countries (Kössler & Kress 2021). In the context of a global pandemic, they have come into even sharper focus and raise important questions about the significance of place, local resilience, and the degree to which municipalities should be regarded as policy takers, policy makers (Leuprecht & Lazar, 2007), or something in between. The pandemic, and state responses to it, provides an ideal opportunity to examine these issues with a specific focus on local government and the role it has been able to play during a crisis that has necessitated nationally and regionally coordinated responses. We believe the paper is original in that it offers a framework for analysing municipal roles in crises management both in their relationship with higher layers of government and in their acting as locally placed organisations. The framework can be used for replicating the analysis in other states and other contexts.

Our study is confined to the first year of the pandemic (2020), a time when governments were still coming to terms with the magnitude of the pandemic but before the virulent Delta or Omicron variants became prevalent and before vaccinations became widely available. Both developments have reframed how governments balance increased morbidity with reduced mortality rates.

We begin with a review of the literature and debates that help set the conceptual stage for the cases studies upon which the paper is based.

## 2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Originally used to describe the process of 'scaling up' powers from national states to the level of the European Union (Leuprecht & Lazar 2007) Brown (2007) (drawing on Marks & Hooghe 2004) defines MLG as 'the condition of power and authority that is shared in institutional relationships in which the scope of public policy and the mechanisms of public policymaking extend by necessity beyond the jurisdiction of a single government' (p. 97). The literature on MLG emphasises sensitivity to scale. For example, in their comparative research into MLG, Leuprecht and Lazar (2007) set out to investigate the assumption that urban policy, especially in larger cities, is increasingly being managed through new forms of governance that entail multiple levels of government and non-governmental actors. These relationships are thought to be 'less hierarchical, less formal and perhaps more egalitarian than traditional forms of governance' (p. 1). To better reflect the less hierarchical nature of MLG, it is sometimes referred to as 'networked governance' (notably in the United States), while Leuprecht and Lazar (2007) prefer the term 'spheres of governance'.

These spheres of governance were previously categorised by Hooghe and Marks (2003) into two types. The first consists of general-purpose jurisdictions with non-intersecting membership, a limited number of jurisdictions within a systemwide architecture. These are the normative features of a national system of government. The second type consists of those task-specific jurisdictions with intersecting or overlapping membership with no limit to the number of jurisdictional levels based on a flexible design strategy to meet the needs of contemporary or developing issues (Hooghe & Marks 2003). As Sancton (2004) argues, the governance of cities is necessarily multi-level and cities are far too important for municipal purposes alone.

Despite these perceived benefits, Lazar and Leuprecht's 16 case studies in eight countries found little evidence of the trend toward this kind of devolution implied by MLG. Rather, they repeatedly observed hierarchical power relationships. It is the interaction of these power relationships and the role local governments played in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of MLG that are the focus of this paper. How do local governments working with provincial and national governments in four different western liberal democracies play their part in responding to the pandemic?

Local governments, 'instruments' of central governments, are policy takers, not policy makers, with respect to national programs that significantly affect their jurisdictions. Their role in MLG is generally to deliver services or administer programs whose character has been determined by national or even international processes over which they have little control. Thus, we end up postulating a gap between the normative argument for multi-level and networked governance and the observed reality (Leuprecht & Lazar 2007, p. 2).

In addition to the MLG literature, a growing body of research emphasises the importance of 'place' (the geography, politics, demographic and social context of communities) within policy-making (Beer et al., 2021). The various analyses of the role of municipalities, the importance of 'place', and the failures of previous approaches to policy-making have led to the development of new frameworks of policy development. Reduced to the simplest definition, a place-based approach recognises that place matters in the design and implementation of public policy, and that policy initiatives that work for one place (e.g. a particular municipality) may not work for all places. This approach to policy-making requires policy makers to consider local place, collaborate

with community stakeholders, and utilise local knowledge when they design and implement public policy.

While scholars have defined the place-based approach to policy-making in various ways (Beer et al., 2021), some similarities within the various conceptualisations can be considered the foundations of a place-based approach to policy-making. Bradford (2004, 2005) presents four key elements of a place-based framework for policy-making in cities: tapping into local knowledge; balancing a mix of economic and social policies which combine place-based programs with broad income security and services such as health and education; governing through collaboration with civil society and each other; and recognising the emerging roles of municipal governments (p. 3).

Another conceptualisation of the place-based approach has been presented by Leo (2006) who conceptualised deep federalism from an MLG perspective which emphasises the role of all three levels of government. Leo’s deep federalism model requires that the ‘provincial government take responsibility for securing participation in policy-making and implementation by municipal governments, community stakeholders or both’ (p. 502). Leo’s work is particularly relevant to our research as it poses the following question: How can we have policies that are truly national and yet fully recognise the very significant differences among regions and local communities?

Our research is consistent with the TPSN framework (*territory, place, scale, network*) initially proposed by Jessop et al. in 2008 to explore the geography of a crisis. The TPSN framework draws from the socio-spatial theory and combines geographical dimensions with crisis management. More recently, Brinks and Ibert (2020) applied the framework to the COVID-19 case. They suggest that the framework’s four elements are suitable for understanding how the COVID-19 crisis has developed and the different responses from countries and regions as ‘crises unfold in time and space’ (p. 285). The following table reports a few examples of the framework’s application to the COVID-19 crisis for each of the four spatial dimensions.

Space dimension	Examples from Corona crisis
Territory	Portrayal of outbreak according to territorial entities Activation of territorially-bound resources ‘First case’ inside or outside a territory
Place	Emergence of places of crisis such as supermarkets ‘Epicentre’ and ‘super-spreader’ locations
Scale	Assignment of responsibility Inter-national organisations such as the WHO
Network	Expert communities #Flattenthecurve

Source: Brinks and Ibert (2020).

As the pandemic was global, the response has been driven by national governments supported by regional, provincial/state governments, especially in federations where responsibility for health care rests primarily with subnational governments (e.g. Canada and Australia). The response in all countries has been heavily top-down with local governments seemingly limited to the role of policy takers as opposed to policy makers as regional and national edicts have mandated lockdowns, curfews, mask wearing, and numerous other measures in an effort to combat the spread of the virus and ensure a coordinated response across regions and the country as a whole.

While much of the contemporary emergency/crisis management literature, as well as most national emergency response protocols, is based on the resilience principle (Rodin, 2014) which suggests subsidiarity (local responses to local issues), a top-down response to the pandemic has, nevertheless, been widely adopted. Most disasters and emergencies are locally situated (e.g. floods, earthquakes, explosions, tornadoes) and consequently protocols usually place municipal authorities in charge of the incident until they are overwhelmed and request senior governments to intervene and/or take control of the situation (Cutter et al., 2008; Quirk, 2019). This staged or staggered emergency response makes sense given the localised nature of most incidents, but it is also seen as an important protocol in establishing a rapid and proportionate response to the situation avoiding the operational and accountability confusion that often accompanies multi-level responses. It is also seen as an important factor in developing local and community resilience, reducing the significant risks of creating over dependency and reliance on senior governments when faced with a crisis (Comfort et al., 1999; Goidel et al., 2019; Rodin, 2014).

Drawing on these frameworks, we investigate the way municipalities react to an emergency situation in an MLG framework, as we believe that the municipal response requires a place-based approach, in a larger multi-level setting. To do so, we focus on four countries, Australia, Canada, Italy, and New Zealand, and observe the way municipalities have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic. Several elements in common and differences exist among these countries, as they are all developed countries with similar socio-economic characteristics (OECD, 2010). The comparative public administration literature focuses less on local NPM reforms in Legalist countries (e.g. France, Italy, and Germany) than on countries belonging to the Anglo-Saxon tradition (Kuhlmann, 2010). Our study adds to the literature as it investigates how local governments in these different countries reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following the approach adopted by Martin and Spano (2015) in their comparative study of municipalities in Australia and Italy, the choice of the four countries for this comparative study was based on three factors: institutional arrangements, local government structure, and actions related to the adoption of NPM principles. The focus on municipalities reduces the four countries' differences in their political and administrative contexts. Place-based services are provided primarily by 'local' government in all countries given that they are closest to citizens and in charge of direct service delivery' (Kuhlmann, 2010, p. 1125).

Also, municipalities in all four countries face similar challenges, mainly related to a decrease in available funding accompanied by additional duties ('new functions, no new money') (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2020; Pocock et al., 2001). Even though Australia and New Zealand are more advanced regarding the implementation of NPM-based reforms, Italy has shown acceleration over the last two decades in this regard (Farneti & Guthrie, 2008; Mussari, 2005; Ongaro & Valotti, 2008). In Canada, the implementation of NPM-based reforms has slowed due to a renewed focus on network or collaborative governance, the potential for e-government, and what Aucoin (2012) refers to as new political governance (Pierre, 2010; Savoie, 2010).

### 3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is set out using an inductive methodology based on multiple qualitative methods (Yin, 1994) involving literature review and document analysis and uses case studies as a research strategy (Hartley, 2004). However, a more nuanced approach was required given the circumstances each member of the research team found themselves in. In all four countries, restrictions on mobility through various types of 'lockdowns' meant that the inductive approach alone would

restrict the ability of each researcher to actually experience the contemporaneous developments as governments responded to the pandemic in real time. Each member of the research team had to draw on their working knowledge of local government (a sphere of government in which they have all worked in over their academic careers) and their network of contacts to investigate the way in which local governments were responding in each nation state. Casula et al.'s (2021) suggestion of a 'deductive exploratory research' strategy encapsulates our real-time approach following up with local governments across our respective jurisdictions. Their 'working hypothesis' approach, which helped to guide the research in our restricted circumstances, was that local governments can and do play a role in responding to the COVID pandemic in ways which complement and add value to the policies and strategies set down by central government.

In order to do this, we reviewed national and provincial/state strategies prescribing different actions in response to the pandemic. We undertook observations of actual municipalities responses discovered via the media and from councils themselves. Each contributing author monitored municipal responses during the first year of the pandemic (2020) drawing on these examples to inform the framework set out in this paper. The deductive exploratory research approach helped to build a theoretical framework of the different types of strategies municipalities can use when responding to a global pandemic. To do this, local governments participate in an MLG framework where they negotiate central government policies, shaping them for local circumstances and making their own policies where their circumstances are not covered by central government policies.

## 4 | COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

Public management scholars commonly use comparative, case-oriented research and allow for significant discretion in selecting the cases (Barzelay, 2001). Comparative case study methodology is typically used to explain differences in policies at the national level including at the local level, with a few notable exceptions. Bianchi and Riverbank (2012) compared performance management in regional government in Sicily and North Carolina, and Martin and Spano (2015) compared performance management systems in local government at the municipal level in Italy and Australia.

By focusing on four countries, we hope to learn more about the role played by municipalities in different contexts. While fully recognising the unique institutional systems found in each country, we see this as a strength of the research as it allows us to compare two federal systems (Australia and Canada) with two unitary systems (Italy and New Zealand). Each country also experienced significant differences with respect to the spread of the virus. These differences provide us with an opportunity to identify divergencies, but also to find common themes and challenges in addition to examples of local innovation and adaptation.

We designed the comparative analysis considering a set of elements which are reported in Table 1, showing similarities and differences among the four countries.

### 4.1 | Australia

The Australian Federation comprises the Australian (national) Government, six state governments and two territories. Within each state and territory<sup>1</sup>, local government is the legal responsibility of these states and territories. As such, some 530 local authorities ranging from

TABLE 1 Similarities and difference among the four countries in the study

Judicial system	Australia Common-law	Canada Common-law <sup>a</sup>	Italy Civil law	New Zealand Common-law
Number of municipalities	530	5162	About 8000 municipalities, typically small	78
Municipalities' role and functions	Place-based infrastructure and human services	Infrastructure, public transportation, and the delivery of social services	Increased over the years, with diminution of resources	Social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of communities <sup>b</sup>
Institutional/organisational change	After mergers tendency to share services	Infrequent, when occurs is driven or forced by provincial government.	Mergers rarely an option, tendency to shared services	Infrequent, driven by central government desire to amalgamate councils
PA framework	Public management	Public management	Weberian (or new web.)	Neo-public management
Population (millions)	25.9	38.2	60.3	5.1
Covid cases in 2020 (/thousand population) <sup>c</sup>	1.1	15.0	35.6	0.4
Covid deaths in 2020 (/million population) <sup>c</sup>	36.6	402.3	1221.9	4.9

<sup>a</sup>This is true, with the exception of Quebec, which utilises a civil-law judicial system.

<sup>b</sup>Central government is responsible for public health, social welfare, education, police, and emergency services. It is important to note that local government's role is somewhat limited in practice by a lack of political entrepreneurship to explore the full scope of its power of general competence.

<sup>c</sup>Data: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>.

large capital cities to small, remote councils are controlled by their state or territory government. As policy takers, these diverse local governments have had to comply with state/territory and Australian Government rules of social isolation, social distancing, and mask wearing even though many places, especially small rural and remote communities, that did not have any cases of COVID-19 had to comply. This strategy resulted in most Australians avoiding infection from the virulent COVID-19 Delta strain. However, in this early stage of the pandemic, local businesses in COVID-19-free places, especially those relying on tourism, called on local leaders to find innovative local solutions to support these industries.

The incidence of COVID-19 was primarily in the capital cities and acquired from international travellers returning home during mandatory hotel quarantine. Hotel staff and security guards spread the virus in their families and local communities. Notwithstanding this source of infection, individual state health departments and police forces ensured containment. Australian Defence Force personnel also assisted in the management of interstate borders during the height of the crisis. In mid-2020, a second wave occurred in the state of Victoria. This resulted in continuing lockdown for their citizens and exclusion from interstate travel, as well as restrictions on visitation into that state. The Victorian second wave motivated other state governments to ensure this did not occur on their watch. Other state governments successful in containing the virus were returned at election with a stronger majority than before the virus (Bromfield & McConnell, 2020).

While the Australian government convened a 'National Cabinet' consisting of the Prime Minister and state premiers, interstate rivalry occurred around the economic impact of each states' actions to contain the virus without overly constraining their citizens. These impacts were greater in businesses reliant on face-to-face customer transactions.

Local governments as place makers had to respond to the COVID-19 lockdowns impacting local businesses reliant on face-to-face customer transactions. Working with their respective state departments of health, local governments quickly established protocols of hygiene and social distancing signage now commonplace in retail outlets throughout the nation. In capital cities, mask wearing on public transport was mandatory during outbreaks. Retail transactions were almost exclusively contactless through the use of credit cards.

Australian local governments are relatively well prepared to cope with disasters, typically bushfires or flooding. Every local council must have a dedicated disaster management strategy as well as an established set of protocols for ensuring control and coordination during an emergency. While a global pandemic was not high on their list of expected disasters, the institutional frameworks adapted well to responding to the pandemic. Importantly, councils also convened local groups to advise and work with them on the implementation of state and territory government requirements. This feature has been a hallmark of the local government response. Interestingly, councils which had community advisory groups for other issues, for example local affordable housing, worked with these community groups to ensure more vulnerable members of the community understood the requirements of the COVID-19 lockdown and were assisted in this situation. Thus, whilst local government must operate within a framework dictated by both Federal and state/territory governments, councils are able to utilise connectedness with their communities through their place-making role.

The disaster management structures in Australian local government enabled individual councils to anticipate the challenges arising from the actions of central governments in addressing the pandemic. The monitoring role under a pandemic was novel to Australian local government. The track and trace practice established by state and territory governments enabled them to identify when and where COVID-19 outbreaks were occurring and for councils to respond accordingly.



The response by local governments to implement COVID-19 strategies developed by Federal, and state governments working together was primarily successful. There were several occasions in capital cities where people congregated against the socialisation requirements. These infractions were dealt with by state police departments issuing heavy fines to offenders. In the light of this response, such infractions were reduced significantly.

Finally, did Australian local government councils learn from the implementation of COVID-19 strategies developed by Federal and state/territory governments? Given that the initial spread of the virus across Australia has been limited, we can conclude that the MLG response has been successful and local governments played a critical role in containing the virus.

## 4.2 | Canada

The Canadian nation is a federation of 10 provinces. The Canadian Constitution specifies the division of powers between the federal and provincial governments. Importantly, municipalities in Canada do not have constitutional standing. Rather, under the Canadian Constitution, municipalities are essentially 'creatures' of provincial governments (Fanelli, 2015). As such, the rights and responsibilities of Canadian municipalities vary greatly between provinces. Ontario's provincial-municipal structures are the most decentralised in Canada (Fanelli, 2015). Larger cities can also be granted additional 'special' powers through their status as charter cities afforded to them by their respective provincial governments. However, these powers can also be modified or removed, as happened in Toronto in 2018.

While Canadian municipalities lack constitutional standing, their influence and collective voice have grown as cities have become increasingly important as centres for economic growth, social inclusion, and climate change mitigation and adaptation (Côte & Fenn, 2014; Berridge, 2002). Municipalities are also increasingly responsible for social and 'soft' services as well, such as social assistance, community programs, and childcare (Eidelamn, Hachard, & Slack, 2020). As awareness of the importance of cities continues to grow, there is increased pressure on Canadian structures of MLG to adopt an approach to policy-making that extends greater consideration to the role, needs, and challenges of municipalities.

Some aspects of emergency response and management are shared by the national and provincial governments, but each province legislates any emergency management requirements for municipalities. For example, in Ontario, each municipality must develop and implement an emergency management program. The provincial government also has the power to declare a state of emergency that provides it with additional powers to intervene in the affairs of municipalities. The national government and each of Canada's provinces invoked their emergency powers in response to the pandemic and, in the process, usurped municipalities' powers.

Throughout 2020, Canada had a mixed record with its pandemic response. It experienced lower levels of infection than many other countries, but suffered from high death rates resulting from the situation in long-term care homes. It was also slow to close its borders and provinces opted for partial but frequent lockdowns.

Given municipalities' status as 'creatures of the province', their role during the pandemic has been determined by provincial policies. As policy takers, municipalities had to follow, implement, and enforce provincial-wide edicts including lockdowns of businesses and events, restrictions on movement, mask wearing, curfews, limits on social gatherings, and interprovincial travel bans (Migone, 2020). Although largely policy takers, municipalities still demonstrated local discretion, innovation, and autonomy in applying and enforcing provincial policies. For example, as 'street-

level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980), police and by-law officers were often criticised for enforcing rules and mandates inconsistently with some infringements received appearing draconian and excessive penalties while similar violations elsewhere went unpunished (Mykhalovsky et al., 2020).

With limited discretion, municipalities found other ways to adapt and adjust to the pandemic and exploited some policy areas through which they could respond to local needs and take on the role of policy maker. To help local businesses, many municipalities began to ease restrictions on parking and licensed patios so that customers could sit outside at restaurants, bars, and cafes where it was considered safer than congregating inside (Canadian Urban Institute, 2020). They also allowed small businesses to establish outdoor service stations where customers could collect takeaway food, drink, and other products without entering premises. Municipalities urged local landlords to reduce rents for small businesses affected by the pandemic and to avoid evictions where possible. The planning application process was expedited so that construction work could be undertaken without undue bureaucracy and delay. Many larger cities also experimented with pedestrian-first streets, to allow greater social distancing, and promoted the use of active transportation. Municipal websites were also used to connect businesses with community groups and to promote examples of useful 'match-making' tools and supply sharing platforms (Canadian Urban Institute, 2020).

With respect to finances, municipalities have depended on both the federal and provincial governments for transfers to cover significant loss of revenues over the pandemic's duration. This reliance is necessary because, unlike federal and provincial governments, municipalities are not permitted to run annual deficits (Bula et al., 2020). Although policy takers with respect to federal and provincial largesse, they lobby heavily for financial support through various regional and national networks including the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. Municipalities do have discretion in determining levels of local property taxes and user fees, though increasing these during a pandemic and a severe financial crisis remains controversial and politically unpopular.

Further, many sources of user fees for municipalities, such as recreational programs, were forced to close during the pandemic, drastically reducing this source of revenue. There were also opportunities to accelerate or postpone infrastructure projects and renewal programs depending on the need to stimulate the local economy or defer costs. Internally, municipalities have also been able to search for efficiencies and many have used the pandemic to save costs by moving more services online, closing municipal offices, and laying off staff. This has required municipal leaders to make difficult decisions about the relative importance of all services and the levels at which they need to be maintained during the crisis. For example, some municipally operated child care centres closed, with much controversy (Nielsen, 2020).

It seems likely that Canadian municipalities will continue to find opportunities to innovate and use the crisis to make cities more compact and liveable. In this respect, their role could be as much about place-making as it is policy-taking.

### 4.3 | Italy

Italy was one of the first countries after China to be hit by the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020. However, data show that the infection started to spread earlier, possibly in December 2019, if not prior (La Rosa et al., 2021), before being recognised as such. The delay in recognising the infection and the lack of previous experience exacerbated the impact of the crisis. One year after the start of the outbreak, Italy reported over 3.5 million people infected and over 130,000 deaths. The situation was varied across the country, with some regions having high rates of infection

and morbidity (e.g. Lombardy and Veneto), while other regions fared much better experiencing relatively low infection and morbidity rates.

From an administrative perspective, Italy has a four-tier administrative system, with a central government, regions, and municipalities (Cristofoli et al., 2011; Ermini & Santolini, 2010). There are also provinces, but they played a minor role in the pandemic. Despite a 'devolution' process begun in the 1990s that respects the vertical subsidiarity principle and gave municipalities responsibility for several functions and limits State competencies (Ongaro, 2011), the central government played a dominant role during the pandemic. The Italian Government set out stringent rules to fight the pandemic, and all regions and municipalities had to comply with them. Regions and, even more, municipalities have acted as policy takers rather than policy makers under both governments.

Regional governments must comply with the central government decisions. However, they have some autonomy and can apply further restrictions, for example, decided to limit access to their territory. In turn, the central government contested some regional decisions—the Sardinia Regional Government sought to introduce a health passport in 2020, a decision the central government successfully contested in the Regional Administrative court. In another case, the Italian Constitutional court rejected an act of the Valle d'Aosta parliament that sought to lessen some of the central government's measures. The court stated that 'It is up to the State, not the Regions, to determine the measures necessary to combat the pandemic' (Sentence n. 37 of 24 February 2021).

The role of municipalities is constrained by having to comply with both national and regional decisions. This obviously limits opportunities for local discretion and municipalities have had to position themselves 'politically' in the relationship between the state and citizens. There are four major areas where municipalities exploited opportunities to act: subsidies to businesses; social services; citizens communication; and local mobility and transport.

Despite the limited available resources, Italian municipalities sought to support local businesses by reducing local taxes and, to a limited extent, by giving them financial assistance. In the latter case, the primary source of funding was the central government, with limited resources coming from the municipal budget. Examples of this kind of intervention are the reduction or postponement of the property tax and the tax for public land occupation (when, for instance, businesses place their tables on the adjoining footpaths).

A report published by the Direzione Generale per la Lotta alla povertà e per la programmazione sociale, Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali (2020) presents an overview of 233 municipalities' responses during the pandemic. It shows a high diversity among the municipalities and found that initiatives were often realised in partnership with other public and non-profit organisations, often in collaboration with private businesses and individual citizens acting as volunteers. Some 8000 individuals were involved in different activities at the municipal level. The pandemic required municipalities to re-organise their services with extensive use of digital technologies and provide some services over the phone to reach a greater number of citizens. Municipalities also needed to change their internal processes to manage a higher than usual amount of money to support people in need and reduce as much as possible the time needed to distribute the money.

Some municipalities sought to communicate with their citizens on the main strategies to fight the pandemic. These strategies are diverse. Some municipalities made extensive use of social media<sup>2</sup>, something 80% of Italian citizens found useful. In particular, citizens highlighted the use of social media and online chat to communicate with public institutions and to receive information and services (Osservatorio nazionale comunicazione digitale, 2020).

Several initiatives sought to improve local mobility and transport. For example, several cities invested a significant amount of money in increasing cycle paths and electric micro-mobility to try to reduce the number of passengers in public buses.

What emerges from a municipal perspective in Italy is the attempt to engage in innovative initiatives despite the constraints imposed by the national and regional governments. It could be that the local drive to introduce change and innovation will remain after the pandemic, which could in turn contribute to a more engaged relationship between municipalities and their citizens.

#### 4.4 | New Zealand

New Zealand weathered the first year of the pandemic unscathed in terms of human cost. The country's physical isolation and its government's decision to close the country's borders to inbound visitors and impose compulsory quarantine for those who returned from overseas largely prevented COVID-19 from taking hold. A 6-week national lockdown in late March 2020 and three partial lockdowns of Auckland, the country's largest city, in response to limited community transmissions meant New Zealand experienced just 26 fatalities and some 2500 cases in a population of 5 million in 2020. Most parts of the country had no community infections. However, this isolation also collapsed the international tourism industry that had driven many regions' economies.

Throughout this process, the role of local government in New Zealand remained peripheral (Bromfield & McConnell, 2020). This marginalisation stems primarily from the structure of the country's local government system. New Zealand has a highly centralised system of government, with local government having no constitutional foundation. With a very narrow task span, local government lacks the functions or capabilities to take on many of the responsibilities required to respond to the pandemic. For example, decisions to close schools and manage public health services, local government responsibilities in many countries, were made by central government. New Zealand local councils also have a limited social service provision role. Councils, and indeed national government, had no credible strategy for coping with these local impacts of the pandemic and the lockdowns. Central government, lacking a local presence itself, was reliant on local government for delivering humanitarian services during the lockdown. However, given the limited role of local government, many councils in turn relied on civil society to provide many, if not all, forms of social services to vulnerable citizens such as the delivery of food parcels and budgeting advice.

Tellingly, all communication regarding the pandemic was driven by the centre. The Prime Minister led from the front and at the height of the pandemic held almost daily press conferences (Wilson, 2020). Local government, in contrast, was almost entirely absent in the media. Rather, local government's role following the initial lockdown has been almost non-existent. Life for many people after the national lockdown reverted to one not dissimilar to pre-lockdown, while providing welfare for those unfortunate to lose jobs or businesses remains a central government responsibility.

Scale is also important. The government early on decided to sustain the economy through fiscal expansion with a NZ\$12.1 billion COVID-19 economic package in mid-March 2020 and provision in the May 2020 Budget for NZ\$50 billion in emergency spending (Robertson, 2020). The COVID stimulatory package was notable for the large number of large-scale infrastructure projects to be funded by the government. Local government could participate but councils were limited by legislative restrictions on their permissible debt levels and the scale of the projects proposed.

Some councils responded opportunistically to the pandemic within their spheres of control. Councils were concerned with the potential reduction in revenue from the lockdown and its

aftermath, either from property taxes as businesses failed or in service charges and income from their own operations, such as municipal-owned and municipal-run airports. Auckland Council sought to exploit the pandemic to radically restructure its budget and the services it provided by advocating draconian cuts in expenditure, well beyond what might be justifiable by the pandemic. Many councils sought to access a substantial fund established by the Finance Minister to finance infrastructure projects led by local government. This allowed councils to transfer costs of capital expenditure to the central government. Mayors and councils were therefore able to present themselves as being opposed to increases in property taxes in times of general financial hardship, whilst at the same time not cutting back on expenditure (McNeill & Asquith, 2022).

At the same time, there is a distinct lack of trust between central and local government (Review into the Future for Local Government, 2021)—despite the assertions of Reid (2021) to the contrary. As a result, central government has sought to centralise control further, embarking on at least 13 different reforms that impact on local government. They include centralising the 22 district hospital boards that consist of both locally elected and appointed members. These boards have been responsible for managing public health aspects of the pandemic response, notably vaccine roll-outs.

In retrospect, local government was sidelined from the important decision-making processes. Given the restricted powers of councils, the role of councils in New Zealand in the pandemic has been very limited compared to other countries examined in this paper. Irrespective of how they try to portray their situation, local authorities in New Zealand are policy takers. Perhaps more importantly, due to the strong border management and rigorous management of breakthroughs imposed by the centre, neither New Zealand central or local government sectors were put in a position where the value of such centralisation was truly tested.

## 5 | ANALYSIS

Although the four national case studies examining municipal responses to the pandemic provide necessarily brief overviews, the findings and examples uncovered during our research have helped to identify some emerging themes and similarities despite different political and institutional settings. An overarching theme across the four countries is that national and provincial/state governments have adopted a centralised and predominantly top-down approach in order to enable coordination and coherence in the overall response to the crisis. As suggested in the introduction to the paper, this approach can be justified given the national and global scale and nature of the pandemic. As outlined in the case studies, municipalities in New Zealand are almost exclusively policy takers with little discretion and there were few examples of local innovation or initiatives with respect to the pandemic response. This may well reflect the lack of municipal powers and capacity in a centralised system of government, but it may also reflect the relatively negligible spread and impact of the virus there. New Zealand's success in containing the virus has meant that local measures, such as lockdowns and quarantines, have thus far not been required—as they were in Canada, Italy, and, to a lesser extent, Australia—thereby reducing the need for local enforcement, adaptation, and innovation.

In the three countries where local measures have been necessary (Canada, Italy, and Australia), we found examples where municipalities were able to use discretion when implementing and enforcing both national and provincial/state government-mandated policy measures including limiting social gatherings, travel restrictions, quarantines, curfews, and mask wearing. In

**TABLE 2** Proposed framework for analysing municipal roles

	<b>Mandatory Minimal discretion (top down)</b>	<b>Intermediary Iterative (top-down and bottom up)</b>	<b>Discretionary Maximum discretion, (bottom up)</b>
	<b>Municipal role</b>		
POLICY AREAS	Policy taker (enforcement)	Policy shaper (mediation)	Policy maker (innovation)
Local businesses			
Financial aid and relief			
Governance and administration			
Social well-being and health			
Communications			
Transportation and mobility			

Canada, Mayors, councillors, and local medical health officers (MHOs) were also tasked with making important decisions about school openings and closures, although in all cases senior-level governments retained the power to override local decisions where necessary. Municipalities in all four countries have also played a role in collecting and providing senior governments with information and data that would ultimately play a role in influencing the policies affecting them.

Examples such as these suggest that municipalities cannot simply be assumed to be exclusively policy takers because firstly, they vary by country, by region, and by municipality, and secondly, they can and do play an important role as policy shapers. By using this term, we argue there is a vital role that municipalities play as intermediaries between mandatory national and regional government policies and the way those policies are implemented, enabled, or adapted, to suit local needs and situations. This involves an iterative process between national or regional governments and municipalities with some input, and on occasion ‘push back’, from below into shaping the response and subsequent policy mandates. For example, this was evident in the Canadian case as municipalities pushed back on blanket regional policies that imposed the same lockdown measures on cities and towns that were relatively unaffected by the pandemic, to protect nearby ‘hot spots’ where case counts were high. While provincial governments were able to impose these blanket lockdowns, they also listened to local concerns and introduced more nuanced and targeted restrictions as the pandemic evolved.

There were also many examples where municipalities were able to take the role of policy maker and display local initiative and innovation. In capturing these examples, we also identified specific policy areas within which municipal governments could exercise discretion and find place-based solutions or adaptations to suit local needs. These can serve as useful categories to filter municipal programs and policies targeting the following key areas: local business; financial aid and relief; governance and administration; social well-being and health; communications; and transportation and mobility

When combined with the role of municipalities as policy takers, shapers, and makers, this enabled us to develop the framework shown in Table 2 (a populated version of this table is attached as Appendix A).

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Our aim with this research is to begin a discussion and research agenda to better understand, examine, and ultimately improve the role that municipalities play in the face of a global pandemic—avoiding the failures in post-disaster learning and adaptation similar to those made in Queensland, Australia (Drennan & Morrissey, 2019). The global nature of COVID-19 has necessitated a more top-down and centralised approach from national and provincial/state governments than is usually required or prescribed for localised emergencies such as floods and fires. Such an approach appears to contradict best practices emerging from the literature on MLG, PBDM, and DEM that each stress the importance of local decision-making and bottom-up processes as a means of promoting subsidiarity and building local resilience—a point amplified by Reid (2021) and clearly demonstrated in terms of disaster prevention by Reinhardt and Chatsiou (2019) and Rodin (2014).

However, faced with a truly global pandemic, the need for a coordinated national and regional response appears to have superseded local and place-based approaches in each of the four countries studied. For this reason, we were motivated to explore what role municipalities are playing during the current crisis and believe it is important given that much of the research into the handling of the pandemic will inevitably focus on the roles played by national and provincial/state-level governments. To this end, we have highlighted examples from Italy, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada in four case studies. Based on these findings, we were able to develop a tentative framework that could help to analyse and better understand the municipal role and provide a useful framework for future research. These cases demonstrate the ‘mutually constitutive and relationally intertwined dimensions of socio-spatial relations’ (Jessop et al., 2008).

In addition to their role as *policy takers*, our research suggests that municipalities can also play a significant role as *policy makers* during the pandemic but, as the case studies revealed, this is highly dependent on the national context and the pre-existing levels of local autonomy, powers, control, and trust, as discussed and debated in the MLG, PBDM, and DEM literatures. We would argue that the policy-making role—similar to the wider enabling council model advocated by Clarke and Stewart (1988)—is one to which local government must aspire to if it is to provide effective local voice and local choice, irrespective of the policy arena and circumstances. The nature of these networks is, however, variable, depending on local governments role of *policy taker*, *policy maker*, or *policy shaper*. This is consistent with Jessop et al.’s (2008) ‘mutually constitutive and relationally intertwined dimensions of socio-spatial relations’ set out in their TPSN framework.

Further research is required to verify the proposed framework’s applicability to different countries and contexts and see the extent to which our proposed tripartition (policy-taking, policy-making, and policy-shaping) is able to explain the wicked relationships among different layers of government in a place-based approach. Nevertheless, the extent to which municipalities display local innovation and policy-making initiative could also be contingent on the severity and impact of the pandemic on municipalities and local communities. This would be consistent with the fact that New Zealand, the country least affected by the pandemic, also generated the fewest examples of municipal innovation and adaptation.

We also identified a third role, *policy shapers*, whereby municipalities serve as intermediaries between senior-level governments and the local communities they represent. This involves an iterative two-way relationship that seeks to balance the need to enforce national and regional measures with local, place-based circumstances, conditions, and concerns. The research also highlights a wide range of policies that municipalities have used to engage with communities

trying to manage and adapt to the pandemic. To make sense of these, the framework establishes six broad categories that help to identify key policy areas through which municipalities have been able to play a role at the local level.

We questioned whether there may have been differences between unitary and federal government systems, assuming that the middle tier of federal government systems mediates national government powers. In fact, both unitary and federal systems showed a high degree of centralised decision-making—something which clearly indicates the primacy of the national government in times of national emergencies.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is most respectfully dedicated to our dear friend and colleague Chris Stoney from Carleton University. Chris initiated ‘The Bands’ collaboration before his untimely death in 2021. We would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive and helpful feedback.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>There is no local government system in the Australian Capital Territory. Local government place-based services are the responsibility of their Department of Urban Services.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.anci.it/i-comuni-al-tempo-dellemergenza-luso-di-telegram-per-una-comunicazione-piu-vicina-ai-cittadini/>

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**How to cite this article:** Stoney, C., Asquith, A., Kipper, K., McNeill, J., Martin, J., & Spano, A. (2023). Policy-making, policy-taking, and policy-shaping: Local government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Australian Journal of Public Administration, 82*, 440–461. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12585>

**APPENDIX A: FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING MUNICIPAL ROLES**

	<b>Mandatory</b>	<b>Intermediary</b>	<b>Discretionary</b>
	<b>Minimal discretion (top-down)</b>	<b>Iterative (top-down and bottom-up)</b>	<b>Maximum discretion (bottom-up)</b>
	<b>Municipal role</b>		
	<b>Policy taker (enforcement)</b>	<b>Policy shaper (mediation)</b>	<b>Policy maker (innovation)</b>
<b>Local businesses</b>	Inspect and enforce mandated rules and ensure local compliance (e.g. lockdowns, restrict indoor dining, numbers on premises, mask wearing)	Intermediary role between local business needs and national/regional policies	Licensing of patio extensions for bars and restaurants. Rent and property tax reductions on municipally owned properties; reduced small business local taxes while increasing large 'box store' taxes; helping small business (e.g. permitting take-away stations); coordinating offers of help from business and local communities; embracing 'match-making' tools (e.g. Uber Eats)
			Expedite planning permissions (e.g. swimming pools, office extensions, distribution warehouses)
			Establishing and hosting working groups to represent local business issues and concerns
<b>Financial aid and relief</b>	Levels of funding and relief programs from senior governments		Removal of on street parking restrictions and fines Non eviction policies and non-payment amnesties
			Determine local levels of taxation increases
			Find efficiencies and savings to reduce costs and growing deficits (e.g. layoffs/staffing freezes, pay restraint)
			Determine affordability of local services and spending (e.g. planned infrastructure projects)

(Continues)

	<b>Mandatory</b>	<b>Intermediary</b>	<b>Discretionary</b>
	<b>Minimal discretion (top-down)</b>	<b>Iterative (top-down and bottom-up)</b>	<b>Maximum discretion (bottom-up)</b>
	<b>Municipal role</b>		
<b>Policy areas</b>	<b>Policy taker (enforcement)</b>	<b>Policy shaper (mediation)</b>	<b>Policy maker (innovation)</b>
Governance and administration	Quarantine orders; mask wearing; limit gatherings, states of emergency (e.g. tier/code red, orange green); social bubble numbers	Local MOHs advice to Chief MOHs re-lockdowns, curfews, stay at home orders, etc.; local enforcement, issuing of fines/sanctions, etc.	Decisions to push ahead/suspend key municipal votes (e.g. municipal growth plans) Establish mode of engagement and participation with council staff and citizens Use of technology to allow online payments, license renewals, votes, and meetings.
Social well-being and health	Quarantine orders; mask wearing; limit gatherings, states of emergency (e.g. tier/code red, orange green); social bubble numbers	Local MOHs advice to Chief MOHs re-lockdowns, curfews, stay at home orders, etc.; local enforcement, issuing of fines/sanctions, etc.	Street pedestrianisation Identify and make available local testing and vaccination stations and resources
		Some municipalities (e.g. Peel, Toronto) order local businesses to close against provincial advice to stay open. Provide senior governments with risk and local vulnerability assessments (e.g. communities, long-term care homes, schools, etc.)	Decide on the opening hours for local testing and vaccination centres Galvanisation and mobilisation of volunteers (e.g. foodbanks, wellness checks) Rezoning, acquisition, and conversion of office buildings into 'affordable' housing units

(Continues)

	<b>Mandatory</b>	<b>Intermediary</b>	<b>Discretionary</b>
	<b>Minimal discretion (top-down)</b>	<b>Iterative (top-down and bottom-up)</b>	<b>Maximum discretion (bottom-up)</b>
	<b>Municipal role</b>	<b>Policy shaper (mediation)</b>	<b>Policy maker (innovation)</b>
	<b>Policy taker (enforcement)</b>		
Communications	The federal and provincial governments have led communications with regular and sometimes daily briefings updates, advisories, and warnings	Municipal MHOs and Mayors have issued public statements calling for local sensitivity to local conditions and caseloads by national and regional governments	Determine frequency and format of local briefings; degree of alignment/non-alignment with national/regional government messaging
Transportation and mobility	Levels of subsidies to cover loss of local transit revenues Enforce travel bans and stay at home orders	They have also provided feedback and advice on appropriate messaging, but influence is limited at the regional/national levels Pressure senior governments to subsidise costs of local transit.	Urging communities to 'support' local businesses whenever possible. Using municipal websites to provide detailed information about what is permitted under the current restrictions Determine levels of service and fare increases/freezes for use of public transit Close streets to vehicles to provide extra space for pedestrians, cyclists, and outdoor patios/street vendors Promote/license/enable micro-transit and ride-share options such as e-scooters and bicycles