Governance networks and area-based policy: the end or the new future of representative democracy?
The case of Ghent, Belgium

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................... 2

1 THE CASE: ROM-PROJECT GHENT ...................................................................................... 2
   A. THE ROM-CASE: A TUTORIAL ..................................................................................... 2
      Ten years of ROM........................................................................................................... 2
      Structures ....................................................................................................................... 4
   B. ROM AS AN EXAMPLE/EXONENT .............................................................................. 5
      A policy network that works? ....................................................................................... 5
      Collaborative planning and interactive decision-making ................................................ 7

2 THE POLITICS OF PLACE: CONTINGENCY AS A TOOL OF ANALYSIS ......................... 8
   A. IMPORTANCE OF CONTINGENCY ............................................................................... 8
   B. ROM-CASE: CONTINGENT ELEMENTS ....................................................................... 9
   C. CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................... 10

3 NETWORK AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY? .............................................................. 11
   A. THE INADEQUACY OF REPRESENTATIVE INSTITUTIONS ....................................... 11
      Area-based policy-making .......................................................................................... 11
      The provincial structure as a representative handicap .................................................. 11
   B. THREATENED REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY? ..................................................... 12
   C. ROLE OF POLITICIANS ............................................................................................... 12

CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................................... 14

NOTES ..................................................................................................................................... 14

REFERENCES ......................................................................................................................... 15

ANNEX: MAP OF THE GHENT CANAL AREA ........................................................................... 16
INTRODUCTION

We focus on the case of the ROM-project, a huge and vast programme of economic and spatial planning in an area of utmost importance for the city-region of Ghent: the Ghent harbour zone. Several local governments, one provincial government and the Flemish government are the backbone of the representative, directly elected democracy in that area. In this paper we deal with the ‘democratic question’: is such a project which is based on networking and interactive planning, a threat or a solution for the legitimacy of representative democracy? What do we consider, using this test case, to be a useful approach in handling the tension between new institutions of a network-type and the old institutions of representative democracy?

In the first chapter, the ROM-project is highlighted and characterized. The second chapter brings in the contingent features of this case of local governance. They are not only useful for contextualising the case but are essential for dealing with the question on democracy. It is our central hypothesis that the ‘democratic issue’ of networks needs a more contextualised and contingent case-analysis than is currently the case in contemporary literature. The third chapter deals with the debate on networks and representative democracy and, essentially, argues for the need of nuance in this debate.

1 THE CASE: ROM-PROJECT GHENT

The first section of this chapter offers a concise outline of the ROM-case (history, process, structures, actors). The second section analyses the ROM in more ‘technically’: ROM is an example, an exponent of what?

A. THE ROM-CASE: A TUTORIAL

To enable the reader to grasp the ROM-case, we discuss the previous history and the path of development, as well as the structures and the actors involved.

Ten years of ROM

The Flemish provinces of East-Flanders and West-Flanders and the Dutch province of Zeeland, interlinked by the Estuary of the River Scheldt, co-operate in the ‘Euregion Scheldemond’. In this co-operation, the province of East-Flanders learnt about a ROM-project in the canal area of Zealand. Simultaneously, different (incompatible and conflicting) strategies and plans in different fields were being developed aimed at developments in the Ghent canal area. The province of East-Flanders realized that cross-border issues had to be dealt with together with the proliferation of separate, conflicting initiatives that were resulting in a counter-productive stalemate. Furthermore, interest groups in the canal area were demanding that action should be taken to attune developments in the canal area to one another and presented a proposal to this effect as early as 1990. In general, the impossibility to achieve effective policy- and decision-making on the development and design of the area demanded a ‘strategic’ approach (Houthaeve, 1999). The availability of European funding also provided an important incentive for the province and the City of Ghent to embark upon the process.

In 1993, a number of prominent figures in the Province of East-Flanders took the lead in developing an area-based environmental, economic and spatial planning policy in Ghent’s canal area (see annex). There was a broad consensus of the importance of the province as a ‘tractor’-actor and of the human, intellectual and political capacities of the governor and his collaborators which play a central role in the network (Van den Broeck, 2001). Apparently, the absence of a city-regional platform or tier to deal with city-regional issues provided the province with an opportunity to adopt the role of developing the ROM-platform. The province as a governmental and political level was not competent for these matters, and therefore was perceived by all actors as a neutral and ‘virginal’, acceptable broker. The province was not competent in the policy fields concerned, that is why the different competent departments of the Flemish government were gradually brought into the process.
Governance networks and area-based policy: the end or the future of representative democracy?
The case of Ghent, Belgium

This process was called the ROM-project ‘Ghent Canal Area’: an integrating (not integrated!) ‘plan formulation’-process, supported by the actors concerned and constituting a platform for negotiation and consultation (see Figure 1) (Houthaeve, 1999). The ROM-project has three goals: the development of a coherent vision on the desired future situation of the canal area from three perspectives (economic, spatial and environmental management and development), a policy to create the necessary preconditions and a better harmonisation of the three policy fields (economy, spatial planning and environment) through targeted projects and measures (Houthaeve, 1999). To achieve these goals, consideration and co-operation between the various governments (Flemish, provincial and local) and the private sector (interest groups, unions, companies, etc.) is necessary.

Figure 1: Path of the ROM-process

In the initial stage, a working group consisting of civil servants from the province, the City of Ghent and a private consultant drew up a starting document in October 1993. This document was based on interviews with different actors and observers and on a study of the source material. The interviews provided an opportunity to get acquainted with the most important institutional actors and to gain insight in the different views and the more delicate points. This document served as the starting point for different rounds of discussion with the actors involved. From 1993 to 1996, the ROM-group worked on the development of a first strategic concept, a first ‘target view’ for the Ghent canal area. After that, the concept was further underpinned further and enhanced by research on implementation projects and by working groups on quality of life in the residential nucleus, on environmental quality, on mobility in the area, etc.
Governance networks and area-based policy: the end or the future of representative democracy?
The case of Ghent, Belgium

A major achievement of the ROM-project was the adaptation of the so-called Flemish Regional Spatial Plan in 1998 and 2001. The vision that was developed by the ROM-project at that time, could only be realised if the functions or ‘destinations’ of some areas of land were altered (e.g. from industry to housing and nature reserve). It was also an important mark that proved to the actors involved that this process could be successful.

In 2002, the process resulted in a proposal of a ‘Strategic Plan’ in which the ROM-group sets out its common vision and in which it agrees upon a number of key decisions in order to achieve sustainable development of the area. This Strategic Plan also contains concrete proposals for actions on the short, medium and long term. These proposals are divided into seven, consistent packages. For each action or project, one or more ‘tractor’-actor(s) are appointed which are responsible for the implementation of the project. In other words, the planned actions and projects are carried out by the actors themselves as much as possible.

Structures
The ‘ROM-project’ is now known as the ‘Ghent Canal Area Project’ (or GCAP) and has a number of cooperative structures to achieve the vision and implement the operations, which are laid down by the Strategic Plan, in an effective and efficient way. The project is a series of measures, actions and collaboration structures within the Ghent canal area aimed at the integrated development of the Ghent Seaport in its environment.

Figure 2: GCAN Organization Chart

The structures are the following:
1. The ‘Ghent Canal Area Network’ or GCAN (formerly called Sub-Regional Network or SRN): all actors involved in the PGCA (see figure X).
2. The ‘Sub-Regional Consultative Body for the Ghent Seaport Area’ or SRO-Ghent: the formal advisory body for the Flemish government for issues concerning the Ghent Seaport.
3. The ‘Steering-Group of the GCAN’: the forum on which policy positions are taken on all aspects concerning the development of the Ghent Canal Area.
4. The ‘Project Association for Additional Land Policy in the Ghent Canal Area’ or PROVAG: a branch of the Harbour Company of Ghent that has been set up as a temporary judicial structure (a
project association). This structure is an instrument for land policy (e.g. selling and purchasing land for relocation of housing, companies, etc.).

5. The ‘Project Office of the Ghent Canal Area’ or POGCA (formerly the Permanent Secretariat): this office is in charge of coordinating and steering the options of the Strategic Plan.

6. The ‘Terneuzen-Ghent Cross-border Consultation’ (formerly the Coordination Body cross-border tuning ROM-Ghent-GBKZ): the cross-border consultation is a platform for officials from the Ghent canal area and from Zeeland (The Netherlands).

The most important body is the GCAN (see Fig. 2) that is conceived as a harmonisation and co-ordination platform on which all relevant actors are present: the various governments as well as representatives of the business community, unions, interest groups, public transport, chamber of commerce, etc.

Box 1: Actors involved in the ROM-project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local governments Ghent, Evergem and Zelzate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>political: mayors, aldermen;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civil service: policy officials, town clerks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province of East-Flanders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>political: deputies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civil service: provincial department on Environment and Planning, the provincial governor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flemish government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>political:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civil service: different departments: Department of Waterways and Maritime Affairs, Department of Roads and Traffic, Department for Town and Country Planning, Housing and Monuments and Landscape, Department of Environmental, Nature-, Land- and Water management, Agency of Public Transportation, (...)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other actors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Companies in the canal area: Volvo, Sidmar, Honda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public agencies: Belgian Railways, Port Authority of Ghent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediaries: Chamber of Commerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study bureau: SME and S&amp;O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ROM-project is now ten years old and in that period of time, a number of actors have become involved in the process. Box 1 provides a more detailed list that illustrates the variety of the actors. In general, all actors concerned are present and the representatives of the different actors are mandated and credible. Furthermore, the ROM-project developed bottom-up ‘outside’ the existing frameworks, providing the actors with the ability to design their own framework and a common policy, thus increasing ownership. The previous elements contribute to the steering-group as a powerful body, able to take decisions and more importantly, to follow them through. It goes without saying that the fact that representatives are mandated and authoritative, contributes to the mutual trust in the network. If we take a closer look at the list of actors, the absence of individuals from the Flemish political level should be noted. This does not prevent the existence of informal (party) political relations between some actors and the Flemish government (see also chapter three).

**B. ROM AS AN EXAMPLE/EXPONENT**

In the previous section, we have elaborated on the general features of the ROM-project. This section will try to redefine the ROM-case in ‘technical’ terms. Is the ROM-project an example, an exponent of a policy network? Can we typify planning and policy-making in the ROM-case? We need this to handle our central question: there only is a democratic ‘problem’ if the networking can be considered as a ‘new institution’ with considerable impact on the policy making.

**A policy network that works?**

Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan define policy networks as “…(more or less) stable patterns of social relations between interdependent actors, which take shape around policy problems and/or policy...
programmes” (Kickert, Klijn & Koppenjan, 1999). Klijn analyses the network literature (see also Scharpf, 1978; Rhodes, 1981; Benson, 1982) and observes three important characteristics of networks: networks consist of a variety of actors, each with their own goals, networks exist because of interdependencies between actors and networks consist of relations of a more or less lasting nature between actors. (Klijn, 1999).

**Variety of actors and goals.** A wide range of actors is involved in the ROM-process (see Box 1) and they all have their own goals and strategies. An example: the local authorities (Ghent, Evergem and Zelzate) have their own interests: Evergem and Zelzate are concerned with the livability of some of the villages, while Ghent is concerned with the expansion of economic development in the canal area. In the canal area, not a single actor seems able to achieve its goals on their own, nor has enough power to determine the strategic actions of the other.

**Interdependency.** In the ROM-project, the actors perceive that they are interdependent: no single actor felt capable of solving his problems alone. An example: the companies in the canal area demanded new road infrastructure but needed the governments to realise this. Local governments needed the co-operation of the Flemish departments.

**Relation patterns between actors.** The ROM-project serves as the platform for the relation patterns between the different actors. “Literature on policy networks stresses the fact that more or less lasting relation patterns between actors develop which influence the interaction patterns taking place within networks” (Kickert et al., 1999): the ROM-project is now ten years old with a relatively stable number of actors who are actively involved from the beginning. There is now clearly a ROM-culture with own routines. This policy network has become a new institution.

It is an ‘open’ but ‘selective’ network: all actors concerned are part of the ROM-network, but some ‘critical’ actors were left out. The other actors were afraid to include interest groups which were regarded as ‘critical’ (too critical?) towards the process. As a result, there is a tense relation between the ROM-network and the local population and interest groups. This tense relation effected in more attention for information and communication by the ROM-network.

The ROM-case is also a ‘powerful’ network: the network is able to come to important decisions and to follow them through, also at the Flemish level. ROM started as a bottom-up initiative and managed to engage the Flemish government due to strong personal and party political relations between some local actors and important politicians at the Flemish level. The network is also powerful in the sense that executive politicians are present and participate actively in the process. The elected councils support the ROM-project and the participation of their executive politicians.

The ROM-case is an example of an ‘effective’ network, because it was able to solve a stale-mate situation caused by the separate and conflicting initiatives and interests in the area, enhancing the quality and the capacity for policy-making. The ROM-network created sufficient mutual trust among the actors involved to join in and to develop the process, for over ten years now. The informal character of the network had a dynamic effect on the process and kept it open. Decisions in the network were taken by consensus and actors engaged themselves to follow through these decisions. It is also effective since the actors are always represented by top officials (e.g. directors, department heads). In other words, the different actors consider the network to be important enough to send their top executives.

The informal and non-binding nature of the network is regarded as one of the factors of success: actors felt free in the process. But this strength is also its weakness: it is a fragile network, and the ROM-‘dynamic’ could end abruptly if some actors were to drop out. To reduce these risks, the ROM-network has recently set up a number of structures. ROM now is also a formally organised institution.
Collaborative planning and interactive decision-making

The ROM-project can be regarded as an example of innovative modern strategic planning, a case of so-called ‘collaborative’ planning (Houthaeve, 1999). Collaborative planning, according to Healey, is aimed at institutional capacity-building. “The activity of planning, as a conscious policy-driven effort to insert a strategic, long-term, interrelating viewpoint into governance processes, has the capacity to assist the task of relational capacity-building by its role in informing political communities about the range of stakeholders and about how they like to discuss issues; by its role in helping those involved work out what it means to build new collective ways of proceeding. Those involved as experts in such processes should have an ethical duty to attend to all stakeholders as the interactive process develops. The result is a process of collaborative planning.” (Healey, 1997)

Figure 3: Strategic planning: a continuous process along three (four) tracks

The planning approach used in the ROM-case, is illustrated in Figure 3. This approach was innovative because it does not aim to draw up another integral (but in fact sectoral) plan but instead, it brought together all the actors involved for a joint planning process on the future development of a specific area and it combines planning with the will of actors to implement projects.

This approach is ‘area-based’, because the process aims at the development of a broad vision on the development of a specific area, without sizing or reducing it to ‘classic’ administrative levels or sectoral policy fields as is usually the case. ‘Area-based’ is very important, because in Flanders, the distance between different governmental tiers is negligible: in issues on a city-region scale (e.g. our case), the different levels of government are ‘automatically’ concerned. In other words, all governmental tiers are (potentially) involved in such issues and as such adds another ‘layer’ of complexity to the complex issues concerning the canal area.

The ROM-process developed simultaneously along three tracks: long term vision, short term actions and building societal and political basis. A fourth track aims to involve the citizens. The last track has been neglected for a long time but the ROM-network is currently trying to remedy it.

In this type of planning, spatial planners themselves play a crucial role, even a ‘political’ role, not only as experts in their field by introducing and developing new planning strategies such as the one used in the ROM-case, but also as designer, as facilitator of the process. However, this ‘new’ innovative process is confronted with ‘old’ parallel planning processes and systems, sometimes induced by the
same governments (local and central) that are present in the ROM-network. Throughout the process, different actors were sometimes ‘tempted’ to develop their own ‘traditional’ processes and plans (e.g. chamber of commerce). So the ROM-network is not immune to the traditional old sectoral administrative and political culture which is still ‘alive and kicking’. That is important for the democratic question: on any moment any representative government can retire from the network and go for its own goals, without consideration for the effects on the programme. That means that the concerns and agenda’s of those representative governments always are present in the process, implicitly or explicitly.

2 THE POLITICS OF PLACE: CONTINGENCY AS A TOOL OF ANALYSIS

A. IMPORTANCE OF CONTINGENCY

In most literature on policy networks, statements concerning the relationship between networks and institutionalised representative democracy are of a rather general nature. The following quotations are illustrative examples containing ‘negative’ judgments as well as ‘positive’ arguments.

Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan summarize the common critical remarks: “Networks are condemned because, according to critics, they result in (1) neglect of common interests by governments… (2) the hindrance of policy innovations… (3) non-transparent policy processes… and (4) insufficient democratic legitimacy. Interaction between civil servants and representatives of private interest groups, other governmental layers and implementing organisations make it very hard for representative bodies to influence policy. It is not unlikely that they will be confronted with compromises that can no longer be altered. In short, networks produce ineffective, inefficient and insufficiently legitimised policies.” (adapted from Kickert et. al., 1999).

“…partnerships may be criticized as reflecting a broader democratic deficit in which non-elected bodies and self-selected representatives gain power at the expense of elected politicians (Skelcher 1998).” (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998).

On the other hand, proponents of networks argue that “(1) networks, interest groups and implementing organizations are involved in policy making, which brings in their expertise… (2) because of the participation of the above-mentioned organizations, the societal acceptance of the policy is furthered. Implementation and enforcement will therefore be less costly and easier to effect… (3) participation of many individuals, groups and organizations indicates that a great variety of interests and values are considered, which is favourable from a democratic point of view… and (4) networks make it possible for governments to address societal needs and problems despite restricted capabilities. They improve the problem solving capacity and therefore the effectiveness of government.” (adapted from Kickert et. al., 1999).

Or in the words of Lowndes and Skelcher: “…this developing politics of partnership may be seen as complementing formal democratic processes or, more radically, as empowering traditionally excluded social groups (Wheeler, 1996).” (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998).

Those general statements contradict and neglect the contingent features of networks. It is our feeling that it is impossible to make such general assessments about ‘the’ democratic quality of ‘the’ networks.

The problems related to the legitimacy and the democratic quality of networks are contingent. That contingency is related to places, time, the nature of policy problems, the institutional framework in which networks are embedded and the dynamics of the process of interactions (place and time as
variables in processes). The routines and the culture of local representative democracy itself are the result and the product of contingency: the history of government and policy-styles, the political cultures.

We join Healey on this point: “… modes of governance and their associated routines and styles are the product of local contingencies, of the cultural traditions of particular places and political communities, and of the dynamics of change which are reshaping these traditions … Learning to read the specific ‘politics of space’ is a critical skill. This involves contextualising specific practices in terms of both their local contingencies and broader structuring dynamics” (Healey, 1997).

What can we learn from a more contingent analysis in the debate, bringing in the ‘politics of space’ (canal area, Ghent, local level, Flemish region) looking for the structuring dynamics? The results of this paper and our research are limited: they are only valid for the democratic issues at the local level in Flanders, for problems of spatial and economic planning and in this particular period of change of the institutional design of the region and local government. Our conclusions on democratic quality are place-bound, time-bound, problem-bound and process-bound. Bringing in contingency means also introducing dynamics into the central issue: the balance between representative and interactive democracy could be in a constant change. Interactive democracy can become less interactive, representative democracy can become more representative…

B. ROM-CASE: CONTINGENT ELEMENTS

We bring the following elements into the analysis: (1) the local regime in Flanders, (2) the different role of government in different policy problems, (3) the institutional changes due to regionalisation and decentralisation, (4) local leadership and governance in the City of Ghent and (5) the changing role for spatial planners.

The local level in the Flemish context has its own ‘regime’ including democratic practices and routines. The Flemish tradition of representative democracy at local level has, for a long time, been dominated by centralisation and by party-political and corporatist arrangements in all important policy fields. Local councillors had a merely ‘clientelist’ attitude and the local council was marginalized by the local executive: powerful mayors and some powerful aldermen, all with their own personal networks in the political parties and at the central level. The strong tradition of neo-corporatism and pillarization of the Belgian and Flemish society, on all levels of government, was not compatible with an autonomous role of elected bodies and with autonomy of local governments in general.

The role of government is related to the nature of the policy problems. In spatial planning in the period 1950-1980, most local governments did not plan at all because spatial planning was the object of a centralist, corporatist and ‘clientelist’ policy-style (Lagrou, 1983). Most decisions were taken by the central government. In general, spatial planning (if any) in Belgium and Flanders was market-oriented: the government pursued the demands of the market (for housing projects, infrastructure, industrial sites). The institutional shift during the nineties in the policy field is remarkable compared to the absent government in recent history: spatial planning in general and planning as a new decentralised competence at local level creates a new public arena for representative democracy and new and more ambitious roles of government, at all levels of representative democracy. Local democracy in spatial planning: at last.

Local economic development has also been, for a long time, the prerogative for closed networks, ‘iron triangulated’ by trade unions, employers and individual politicians at central and local level. Neocorporatist tripartite and parallel institutions for economic planning have been set up in the sixties, composed by members of the dominant pressure groups, at local, provincial, Flemish and Belgian level (De Rynck, 1995). The directly elected councils ‘notarised’ their decisions and their most
important role was to preserve funds for those decisions on the annual budgets. There was a powerful parallel 'corporatist' democracy.

**Changes of the institutional system** at central and local level are also part of the ‘politics of space’.

The federalisation process in Belgium (which started in the seventies) resulted in regionalisation and transfer of important competences to the ‘new’ regions and triggered a new debate on planning and the role of government, on the system of spatial planning and on decentralisation and subsidiarity. This debate led, gradually and after lengthy discussions in society and parliament, towards a new institutional framework reinforcing the competences and the planning capacity of the local representative government. Local representative government comes to life: there is something to discuss and decide.

The field of spatial planning was clearly one of the most innovative policy fields in Flanders during the nineties, introducing new instruments, new practices and a new planning system as important impetus for local governments. The most interesting result was a significant variety of ‘types’ of local governments: a continuum with very pro-active and ambitious ones on the one side and re-active and passive ones, dreaming of the old days, at the other. Ghent can be considered as one of the most ambitious Flemish cities during the last ten years.

**New leadership and modernisation of governance in the City of Ghent** are also an important element of context. In the nineties, a new political generation came into power in the Ghent city council. In comparison to other cities (such as Antwerp), they demonstrated a much more open attitude towards civil society, public-private partnerships, towards the smaller local governments surrounding Ghent and towards strategic planning and implementation of programmes in general. The city’s administrative capacity for economic and spatial planning was significantly reinforced in that period with the inclusion of young, new and well-trained public officials. In general terms, the political leadership and managerial capacity of the City of Ghent were reinforced to a remarkable extent. The changes of the intergovernmental relations in the previous section (decentralisation, new competences) coincided with and reinforced the internal changes on the local level in Ghent.

**Changes in the professional attitudes of spatial planners.** Next to the institutional changes we just dealt with, a debate amongst spatial planners concerning the state of their art and their role in ‘collaborative’ planning was taking place (Houthaeve, 1996). They adopted the new trends in spatial planning, questioning the role of the spatial planner (Healey, 1997). They invented and encouraged the introduction of new planning figures at local level and they used those changes to adopt new roles as ‘brokers’ in the field of public actors and interest groups. The ROM-case presented an interesting test case for them and their discipline.

**C. CONCLUSION**

We focussed on important institutional path dependency for the present democratic discussion (traditional weakness of local government and of the council in particular, history of centralisation, clientelism and corporatism). Institutions always change slowly, so it is clear that the legacy of that recent history is still present. Nevertheless, new institutional patterns, activated by regionalisation and decentralisation, are changing the arena and the role of government, of local government in particular. To this contingent history and contingent changes of the local government and policy-making in the Flemish region, we added the institutional changes in Ghent: a new generation of political leadership, introducing a new managerial capacity in local government and creating a political culture more open to the environment and to other actors. Finally we discussed the changing role of spatial planners. They introduced new concepts of network-planning and supported the institutional changes of the planning system and planning practice in Flanders and at the local level.
3 NETWORK AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?

In this chapter, we will discuss the debate on network and representative democracy using elements from chapters one and two.

The ROM-project is an influential policy network of an interactive or collaborative kind. It is now (after ten years) a relatively autonomous and long-lasting policy-arrangement: it concentrates in its structures and interactions all the relevant problems of the area. ROM has become an ‘institution’ in both the structural and the cultural sense. But also the local representative democracy is in constant change. The old institutions are renewed, also structural (new competences, decentralisation) and cultural (new routines based on interactivity and strategic planning). We noticed that representative democracy at local level was dominated by corporatism and party-political arrangements. So it is fair to conclude at this point that new institutions (ROM) are replacing old networks (corporatist arrangements) in a new institutional framework for local representative democracy. The question ‘How to combine new networks and new representativeness?’ seems more suitable for the local ‘politics of space’ in the Flemish region.

A. THE INADEQUACY OF REPRESENTATIVE INSTITUTIONS

It is possible that networks undermine the representative democracy, not as a result of a deliberative strategy of pressure groups but mainly as a result of deficiencies of the framework of that democracy itself and despite interesting attempts to renew the institutions at each level of government. The main problems for Flanders seem to be the inadequate organisation of multi-level governance to handle area-based problems and the lack of legitimacy of the provinces.

Area-based policy-making

In most literature the democratic question of networking is related to one government: is there a tension between the local networking and the local representative democracy? In our case and in Flanders in general most area-based problems are of a multi-level governance type, due to the division of competences (you mostly need to engage all governments to handle a policy problem) and to the dense interactions between governmental layers. All levels of representative democracy are engaged but who is then accountable and representative for the whole programme and the set of projects in one area? The present structures of representative democracy are linked to scale and administrative borders while most problems demand new scales for an effective approach.

This inadequacy of traditional intergovernmental relations is officially recognised as a political problem by the Flemish government but for the moment there is a clear lack of new modes of co-operation to set up an area-based cooperative and managerial policy-style between the levels of government.

The provincial structure as a representative handicap

The province, as an intermediate level between local and Flemish government, plays an ambiguous role in the ROM-case. Some persons, linked to the province, were actively engaged and used their role as a broker between the actors (governor as a public official). But the province as a political structure with its own elected council, played no role at all.

The example of the ROM is intriguing because the province seems to have the right scale for city-regional area-based policy problems. Potentials for political control from the representative institution seems to be used in a sub-optimal way. This can be explained partly because of the marginalized position of the provincial council, which never played an important role. Another explanation is that the province lacks a natural sense of legitimacy and is not accepted to play a political role of any
importance, neither by the local government nor by the Flemish government, despite official rhetoric on the role of provinces as a democratic platform for public discussion on area-based programmes.

B. THREATENED REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?
Cases like ROM are more representative and they have more substantive democratic qualities (openness, publicity, information, bargaining, participation) than the old networks dominating local economic and spatial planning and marginalizing the local representative democracy. ROM offers more opportunities for representative democracy to play an important role in the processes: new opportunities for old problems.

The importance of political culture and of contingency can be illustrated by the fact that there is no Flemish sense of a ‘big’ democratic deficit, in sharp contrast with literature in the Netherlands where the local council traditionally plays a more prominent role in the policy processes than in Belgium/Flanders. That explains the diverging perceptions on the democratic question. Local and provincial councillors are used to the bargaining routines of executive politicians and pressure groups. They reduce their role to that of a passive audience, applauding (majority) or rejecting (opposition) proposals. They would be more surprised if anyone asked them to play a more active role in ROM-like programmes.

In the last decades, Flanders (as other Western democracies) has experienced a sharp decline of trust and the political parties are losing their support in society (Pierre, 2000; Dewachter, 1995; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). But there is also a decline of the legitimacy of the corporatist culture, influencing the support for vested pressure groups. The legitimacy of those traditions of policy making in general is declining at the central as well as at local level. This leads to an interesting paradox: representative democracy at local level gains importance in terms of formal competences and legal content due to decentralisation but meanwhile the core actors of representative democracy (political parties and politicians) are confronted with an eroding legitimacy in the civil society. Interactive policy-making (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; De Rynck, 2002) of the ROM-type could therefore be an essential condition and policy-style. The representative democracy has to adopt new styles and routines adapted to the new networking and new planning systems based on interactive negotiations. This is a new debate for local government in Flanders: finally they come to life as a representative body and now they discover that real life is outside government and that a government-oriented style has to be replaced by a governance-style. Now, this shift changes the relations between councillors, executive politicians and public officials. The latter (mandated by the executive politicians) play a more important (even political) role, as the ROM-case illustrates.

C. ROLE OF POLITICIANS
How can we describe the role of politicians in collaborative planning and interactive decision-making processes, using our experiences in the ROM-case? In most literature politicians are ‘absent’ from the interactive projects and play the most important role at the end of the process (yes or no to the proposed solutions). The ‘primacy of politics’-idea suggests that the networks and representative democracy keep their distance from each other. Klijn and Koppenjan state that “politicians do not participate in these processes” (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000).

In ROM, that absence is only the case for local councillors, but local executive politicians participated very actively in the process from the beginning and used their power to support the results of the ROM-network. The elected councils are also formally approving the ROM-decisions: they give their approval when formal decisions concerning ROM have to be made.
Governance networks and area-based policy: the end or the future of representative democracy?
The case of Ghent, Belgium

The role of political parties is very important to understand the ROM-process. The impact of party politics is often overlooked: literature deals with politicians, councils and executives, often neglecting the role of parties. Especially for regions like Flanders, with a strong tradition of powerful and well-organised parties interwoven between the local and central level, this would be a crucial mistake.

Based on our interviews, it goes without saying that party politics play a crucial role in the ROM-network. We quote one of the ROM-actors: “depending on the issue at stake, we used the green (=green party), blue (=liberal party) or red (=socialist party) line”. In addition, other closed and invisible networks (e.g. Freemasonry) are activated and used if and when necessary.

The role(s) of politicians in decision making is changing. But the appreciation of their role depends on the stance taken towards the role of politics in general. Hendriks finds two ‘streams’, and a ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ variant within those streams (see Table 1: Hendriks, 2002). Proponents of ‘powerful’ politics are in favour of the ‘classic’ (and ‘theoretical’) notion of representative democracy: politicians are elected and represent the public interest and take precedence. The ‘hard’ variant is popular with some (former) politicians and stands for a strong leadership and restoration and enforcement of the ‘primacy of politics’, while the ‘soft’ variant is more realistic and accepts interactive policy-making but wants politicians to be strong ‘democratic’ players in those networks. Proponents of the ‘modest’ role of politics are in favour of a secondary and facilitating role for politicians in decision-making: the ‘hard’ variant stands for politicians that only steer and intervene when and if necessary, but remain on the sidelines otherwise. The ‘soft’ variant is more managerial and is in favour of politics that limit themselves to network management: politics as a creator of preconditions and rules of game, as a convener of processes. (Hendriks, 2002)

Table 1: Politics in the network society: options and schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of politics</th>
<th>Powerful politics</th>
<th>Modest politics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary role in collective decision-making: politics takes precedence</td>
<td>Secondary role in collective decision-making: politics facilitates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘hard’ variant</td>
<td>Decisive politics</td>
<td>Marginal politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proponents: a lot of (former) politicians</td>
<td>Frissen, In’t Veld, Guéhenno, Burnheim, Dryzek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘soft’ variant</td>
<td>Prima cy of politics ‘revisited’</td>
<td>Political network management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teisman, Pröpper, Kalk, Bovens, Witteveen</td>
<td>Klijn, Koppenjan, Bekkers, Benou, De Jong, Mulder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Hendriks, 2002)

If we ‘match’ these streams and variants with the ROM-case, a mix of these roles can be found throughout the process. The role of politicians changes during the process, can differ depending on different stages or decision-making rounds of the process and depends on the subject at stake (Teisman, 2000). Our case-analysis points to the presence of firm politics, of political network management and of marginal politics. So we cannot use one stable or static ‘model-role’ for the whole process. We need instead to take different ‘snapshots’ in time for the different policy problems in the ROM-case and use these models to discuss the role(s) of politics and politicians in each snapshot. A more nuanced and complex but also richer view of politicians comes to life.

One thing is for sure: there is no such thing as networks and politicians: politicians at executive local level in Ghent and in Flanders in general play an important role in the network-process. And that is not a new phenomenon: the formats of and the participants in the networks may change, the executive politicians have to adopt new interactive styles and new roles, but they still are, as they already were, the spiders in the network-web.
CONCLUSION

This paper dealt with the ‘democratic question’ on the relationship between networks and representative democracy, starting from a particular case that is regarded (in Flanders) as a best practice, featuring a city-regional governance network in an area-based collaborative planning process.

In Flanders, the ‘democratic’ issue is not new: Flanders has a history of a centralist, corporatist and ‘clientelist’ policy-style in which closed and non-transparent networks, composed by members of dominant pressure groups and executive politicians, played an important role, at local, provincial, Flemish and Belgian level (De Rynck, 1995). The directly elected councils ‘notarised’ their decisions. But the inability of this system to deal with new and complex problems, results in governance networks such as the ROM-network, which is more representative and has more substantive democratic qualities (openness, publicity, information, bargaining, participation) than the old networks dominating local economic and spatial planning and marginalizing the local representative democracy. The executive politicians, which were dominant in the ‘traditional’ representative democracy, are also actively involved in the governance network.

Simultaneously, while the core actors of representative democracy (political parties and politicians) are confronted with an eroding legitimacy in the civil society, representative democracy at the local level is changing: it gains importance in terms of formal competences and legal content due to decentralisation. So the question is in fact: ‘How to combine new networks and new representativeness?’

This assessment cannot be made nor understood without context and contingency: the ‘politics of space’ have to be brought in. That is why our conclusions on democratic quality are place-bound, time-bound, problem-bound and process-bound. We feel that common or general assessments about the relationship between networks and (representative) democracy neglect the contingency and the dynamic context of the network and of the democracy system. In other words: our position is that the ‘democratic issue’ of networks needs a more contextualised and contingent case-analysis than is currently the case in contemporary literature. General assumptions or statements about the relationship between governance networks and representative democracy are to be ‘handled with care’.

NOTES

1 The declaration of intent signed in 1989 was formally sealed on 13 of December 1993 by the signing of an arrangement on inter-provincial co-operation. The Scheldemond Council estuary that was established on this occasion is responsible for coordinating cross-border co-operation and consultation. Also the European Commission recognised the phenomenon of cross-border co-operation and through the social-economic European Programme INTERREG the Commission made funds available for promoting this co-operation. (see www.euregioscheldemond.be)

2 ‘ROM’ is an abbreviation for ‘Ruimtelijke Ordening’ (= spatial planning) and ‘Milieu’ (= environment).

3 To illustrate the importance of the Ghent canal area: the annual transhipment of the Ghent Seaport was 24 million tons in 2000 (the Port of Antwerp in 2000 = 131 million tons); The Ghent Seaport provides jobs for approx. 27000 people. Approx. 65,000 people live in the canal area.

4 The governor and a civil servant of the provincial department on environment and planning.

5 This Flemish Regional Plan fixes the functions for which land is to be used (e.g. housing, forest, industry, etc.) for the entire territory of Flanders and in a very detailed manner (at parcel level).

6 (1) Development and optimalisation of industrial sites economic zones; (2) The livability of villages and neighbourhoods and the removal/relocation of unliveable groups of housing; (3) Infrastructure and mobility; (4) Scenic and ecologic structure and view; (5) Environmental qualities; (6) Recreation; (7) Actions creating desired preconditions;

7 Based on a note of the Project Office of the ROM-project (dd. 26/02/2003)

8 Established by art. 28 of the Harbour Decree and Decision of the Flemish Government of 12/1/2001

9 A ‘Deputy’ is a member of the executive body of the provincial government and is elected by the members of the directly-elected provincial council.

10 Important to note: the provincial governor is a Flemish civil servant, appointed for life, who acts on behalf of the Flemish government.
REFERENCES


Maidenhed: Open University Press.


ANNEX: MAP OF THE GHENT CANAL AREA

(Project Office GCA, 2003)