Area-based policy arrangements in Flanders

The politics of space and place: renewing territorial governance?

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© Filip DE RYNCK & Joris VOETS

Prof. Dr. Filip De Rynck is professor in public administration at the Hogeschool Gent and the University of Antwerp, Belgium (filip.derynck@hogent.be)

Joris Voets is researcher at the Hogeschool Gent (joris.voets@hogent.be)
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INTRODUCTION

This paper has four parts. The first part sketches the outlines of the governmental and political framework in which territorial governance is to be analysed in Flanders. The second part discusses the rise, at least rhetorically, of innovative policy arrangements in Flanders and the way in which we try to analyse these arrangements. The third part examines three cases, which are regarded as innovative in Flanders and which, if territorial governance is developing in Flanders, should provide us with empirical data to support this position. Finally, the fourth part assesses and illustrates the importance of contingent elements to understand territorial governance in Flanders and tries to contextualize the issue of democracy regarding such policy arrangements.

1 URBAN/REGIONAL POLICY ISSUES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN FLANDERS

1.1 GENERAL ISSUES AND CONTINGENCY

Exploration of literature results in four types of governmental issues which are characteristic for urban or metropolitan districts (Derksen, ten Heuvelhof, Cordia, van Duren & Hilgersom, 1990):
- Problems of scale (attaining the optimal scale for service-provision, catchment area);
- Regional steering problems (the need for supralocal decision-making to deal with interdependence between local authorities);
- Problems of distribution (spreading the advantages and disadvantages among the whole of the territory);
- Problems of tuning or gearing policies (local authorities often want to attain the same goals, independently).

The ways in which these problems are dealt with, differ from state to state, from territory to territory. Social, spatial and economical characteristics of urban/metropolitan districts, cultural factors (perceptions of policy problems, political culture) as well as structural characteristics play a role: the division of competences and the degree of centralisation/decentralisation, the history of governmental reforms, financial streams through taxes, the balance of power in interpersonal relations in urban/metropolitan districts and pressure from societal actors (e.g. trade unions & employers organisations) and the private sector in general. From these different points of view, issues of urban/regional patterns of cooperation are clearly contingent.

1.2 FLANDERS AND URBAN/REGIONAL POLICY ISSUES

In order to be able to interpret correctly the innovative nature of the arrangements in urban areas, it is necessary to sketch the outlines of the governmental and political framework in which the urban/metropolitan issue in Flanders is to be analysed.

Since 1970, a complex process of regionalisation and federalisation has developed and resulted in strong regions which have the core competences that are relevant for urban/metropolitan issues: housing, spatial planning, economic infrastructure, education, public welfare, labour market, etc. Nevertheless, the interference with the federal (Belgian) government remains strong: the federal level is still competent for local tax policy (e.g. income taxes, property taxes), social security (minimum income), legislation on renting, police, etc. At a secondary level, in concrete procedures, there are even more interferences between federal and regional competences (e.g. traffic regulation).

The Flemish government is now clearly present in the urban sub regions: it manages important infrastructure (water ways, roads), it is competent for all important matters and is the major financial source for urban projects. Due to the limited territorial scale, the dominant position of the Flemish government and the close political relations through political parties between the local and Flemish...
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level, the Flemish regional government is a powerful ‘local’ actor. This is a crucial element in order to understand urban/sub regional cooperation in Flanders.

Also, the governmental and political debate on urban districts in the Belgian and Flemish context has never been comparable to the debate in the Netherlands or Germany, simply because there has never been a serious political debate on new government types on that scale in Flanders (De Rynck, 1995). A number of factors explain the absence of such a debate.

The most important factor appears to be the strong centralisation of the political system. This centralisation was particularly strong in the field of spatial planning. In many countries, spatial planning is an important cause of conflicts on issues on distribution in urban areas. In Belgium and Flanders, a ‘clientelist’, neo-corporatist and centralistic policy has been pursued for a very long time. In this policy, local authorities and interest groups of an urban area were given a generous share of areas for housing and industrial zones, independently from one another. The latter has to be interpreted together with the very liberal policy in which the government almost did not steer: spatial planning was limited to enabling private projects (e.g. real estate projects). In that context, it is a lengthy process before anyone starts to think in terms of urban/metropolitan problems. Since the late eighties, the urban issue has emerged on the Flemish political agenda: views and opinions have started to shift, partly because the existing system experiences an increasing pressure, e.g. the rise of the extreme right, housing of poor quality in the cities, concentrations of poverty and immigrants, traffic gets silted up, a growing stress on the environment because of fragmented infrastructure, etc.

Since 1997, Flanders has a Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (SSPF) which defines objectives and recognizes urban policy as a central issue (‘Flanders: open and urban’). This is the first time ever that the Flemish political system works with well defined policy objectives on the urban level. At the same time, competences are reformed in the direction of increased decentralisation and subsidiarity. So, the search for innovative governmental arrangements has to be set against the scene of a struggling system change, e.g. in spatial planning (Allaert & Houthaeve, 1996).

Another factor is that, after lengthy debate, the number of local authorities was reduced significantly on 1/1/1977 in a large operation of amalgamation. In the case of Ghent, the amalgamation resulted in a population increase from approx. 140,000 to 250,000 inhabitants. The redefinition of the scales of the local authorities was a political operation, in which the ‘rationale’ of the (new and old) borders was mostly defined in terms of local political ratios and the influence of local politicians at the central level. This was a very radical operation and the political, financial and administrative aftermath is still tangible. As a result, political parties are not very keen on setting up any kind of new governmental operation of such a scale.

Together with the growing recognition of the problems in urban areas and the fact that cities are squeezed in territories that are too small, this implies almost automatically the search for potential solutions in more process oriented arrangements. The latter is also a policy style that fits our strong political culture of arranging very well. The crucial question is whether these arrangements are innovative: innovative regarding structure, ways of working and the nature of the involvement of actors in public-public and public-private partnerships, in comparison to policy-making which developed in different periods of time. In other words, we will assess the innovative character of cooperative arrangements by comparing them to arrangements in previous periods of time in Flanders.

Finally, to enable the reader to compare the Flemish case with other countries, we focus on two important institutional features of the governmental system in Flanders related to urban problems: intermunicipal cooperation and the role of the provinces as a governmental tier.

As in other countries, the voluntary intermunicipal cooperation has ‘natural’ structural boundaries regarding issues of distribution and problems of steering. In Flanders, intermunicipal cooperation between cities and smaller local authorities has always been very limited. Also for the problem of getting a better match between the ‘catchment area’ and the management of sub regional urban
services, the instrument hardly works at all. In Flanders, the Flemish government compensates these costs of the ‘centre cities’ through a Municipal Fund and an Urban Fund\(^1\). The instrument of the forced or obligated intermunicipal cooperation is a taboo because it is regarded as incompatible with the constitutional autonomy of the local authorities. Recently, the possibilities for intermunicipal cooperation were extended and made more flexible, but this has had hardly any effect at all on the cooperation in urban areas until now\(^2\).

Furthermore, the provincial directly elected government as an intermediate tier between the Flemish and local governments, has hardly any financial means or formal competences to become an important steering principal in urban areas. The distance between cities and provinces is small, hence the competition between them is strong. Recently, the provincial authorities have gained important competences, e.g. in spatial planning in rural areas and with some impact on the cities (e.g. housing areas), but their competences on urban areas are almost non-existing. Also, a so-called ‘core task debate’ has been launched in Flanders, in which the provincial authorities claim that they are the most suitable tier to direct area-based issues\(^3\). This debate resulted in an agreement between representatives of the three tiers but it did not lead to a serious rearrangement of competences. Currently, the real debate has moved to the policy fields.

### 2 NEW ARRANGEMENTS FOR AREA-BASED POLICY PROCESSES?

Our research is to be situated in the theoretical debate on governance concerning ‘network like’ policy arrangements, on policy as the interactive outcome of processes featuring governments and societal actors. Also, from the literature on New Public Management, concepts like decentralisation, flexibility, made-to-measure, directing, process management, inclusiveness, completeness, coordination, etc. come to the fore. Furthermore, reference to these concepts are increasingly found in policy documents in Flanders.

In the Flemish practice, there are numerous examples for study and research relating to these concepts. All examples (hence potential cases) share the same core elements: certain policy problems are region-bound or area-based, these problems demand cooperation between public and private actors, policy needs to be made-to-measure in order to come to an effective approach and to build up support for this policy. Some examples to illustrate that it is not an abstract issue:

“…to put the Flemish Ecological Network into practice, we will need to negotiate with all the actors concerned, for each area, at the local level, about the way the global approach has to be carried out. To achieve this, we need to negotiate in a made-to-measure fashion…” (a Flemish civil servant in the Flemish radio news, November 2003).

The Master plan Antwerp aims at an integrated approach to improve the mobility of the sub region of Antwerp by 2010 (involving 1.5 billion Euros of infrastructural investments). The plan sets out an impressive range of projects, which all demand intergovernmental cooperation and the involvement of private actors. A number of commissions are currently working on these projects.

In the Ghent canal area the so-called ‘ROM-project’ is working on a strategic development plan for an important economic sub region that at the same time is facing serious problems in the environmental and social sphere. All public actors (local, provincial and Flemish governments) are involved, as well as a range of societal and private actors.

The Decree on Integrated Water Management wants to come to an integrated water system in each basin. The Decree formalises the functioning of the so-called ‘Basin Committees’. The Decree on Nature Preservation also provides a final model for the eight ‘Regional Landscapes’ as sustainable cooperation patterns for nature and recreational development.

The Flemish government plans to merge the ‘Sub regional Employment Committees’ and the ‘Sub regional Platforms’ to come to a more integrated sub regional economic development. The provincial authorities signed a contract with the Flemish government to draw up rural development programmes in the light of European support.
A policy agreement, signed as part of the so-called ‘core task debate’, explicitly refers to area-based policy-making as a basic methodology.

To assess whether or not we are also shifting towards ‘governance’ concerning complex societal problems in urban contexts, the choice for such sub regional arrangements is justified. It concerns different sub regional scales that do not coincide with one government. Different governmental layers are always present in these arrangements (local, provincial, regional authorities). It concerns complex problems or issues (economic development, water management, environmental management, mobility, etc.) which cannot be dealt with by one government by itself and consequently should result in debate with societal actors in the different sub regions. To sum up: if there is any shift towards governance and complex processes to be noted in Flanders, they should be happening in these sub regional contexts.

Therefore, we define ‘interorganisational area-based cooperation’ as follows (working definition): ‘Temporary and permanent patterns of cooperation, formal or informal in nature, in which, based on a problem analysis concerning a certain area (=area-based), all relevant actors, public and private, which can contribute to problem solving in that area, are involved and are able to influence the policy-making and –implementation’ (De Rynck & Voets, 2003a).

How can we characterise the relations between local and central governments in these kinds of arrangements (decentralised, partners, equal or hierarchic?). Do they evolve in a network like fashion? Are these arrangements resulting in more and better tuning between policy cycles of different governments (intrinsic and operational)? Are these actors negotiating as equal partners, each partner influencing the policy-making process? Does any public-private cooperation come to the fore and do societal actors influence the policy-making process? Which institutional factors (types of management, forced cooperation, procedures, financing, etc.) influence the nature of the interactions and the policy
process? Do civil servants and/or politicians take up the directing role, the role of process manager? What about democratic control from the perspective of representative democracy? Do these arrangements call for a new understanding of democratic accountability to make it applicable to these processes? Figure 1 tries to put some of these elements together.

In literature, analyses are often dealing with ‘horizontal relationships’ in arrangements between public and private actors of the same level (local or central). The impact of intergovernmental arrangements and of the interactions between those governments is often left out of the picture. This is comprehensible to the extent that the distance between governmental layers is great and there is much local autonomy in many countries; but in Flanders, with a high density of governments and strongly interwoven relations (governmental, political, financial) between central and local governments, this would be an unacceptable constriction on the research perspective. (De Rynck & Vallet, 2001). We feel that linking intergovernmental and public-private relations is necessary and we apply this on cases of area-based policy arrangements in urban contexts (see also figure 2).

Figure 2: Three lines of approach: intergovernmental, public-private and area-based

The examples of sub regional policy arrangements mentioned before and the cases discussed in part three are illustrative for our analysis of the extent to which patterns of ‘governance’ in interorganisational relations in Flanders are developing. If we would base our analysis on policy documents, the development is clearly present: rhetorically, there is a lot of talk about partnerships, negotiation between governmental tiers, policy that is made-to-measure and the necessity to come to public-private cooperation. From practical experience and based on other empirical studies in Flanders, we know that the reality of those interactions is much more complex (e.g. Albrechts et. al., 1999; IdeaConsult, 2002). Using the case study method and some of the questions mentioned earlier, we hope to reconstruct the governmental reality more correctly.

We already know that there are a number of formal institutions in the field. Sometimes, they are imposed top-down and uniform (Sub regional Employment Committees, Basin Committees, …) and sometimes they develop spontaneously and bottom-up (e.g. ROM-project: part three). Not all the sub regional arrangements have a fixed formal-legal framework: some are ad hoc and project-based (plans for land design, Master plan Mobility Antwerp). Certain institutions are set up to develop policy designs and plans (Sub regional platforms, harbour authorities, etc.), some types are geared more at implementation, within frameworks of the Flemish government or with the need to be approved by the latter (Basin structures for integrated water management, delineation of urban sub regions, etc.). Other arrangements are aimed at tuning of actors in the implementation of central policies (so-called ‘Edufora’ in the field of education, etc.). Each institution has different characteristics: the rules of the game (and the degree of autonomy to draw them up), the degree in which the cooperation and membership is
forced or voluntary, the nature of the financing of the institution, their time tables, the concrete instruments they can use for their process, etc.

So, each analysis of interorganisational relations is contingent, in the sense that they are bound by specific features or characteristics of countries but also differing between (sub) regions and between problems. We can define some hypotheses or questions concerning the typical contingent factors of Flanders: will the nature of party political relations play an important role in the sub regional and urban arrangements in Flanders, will the influence of local governments really relate to their limited financial resources, will the compartmentalisation of the Flemish administration hinder the integration which could develop bottom-up, do we see the Flemish civil servants function with a large or a limited autonomy in such systems, are these sub regional arrangements in fact not steered centrally and hierarchically and is there more ‘deconcentration’ in stead of decentralisation, is there any made-to-measure-policy in the sense that certain rules are interpreted differently according the outcome of negotiations?

At the local level, the intuitional feeling of an ‘up-scaling’ of the local has been present for a long time. This feeling has become stronger in the last years. Local governments are experiencing more and more policy making in sub regional arrangements. This trend is also noticeable in the neighbouring countries. In this sense, active local governments are the ones that build capacity to be active on different scales and that position themselves in those sub regional arrangements.

In this regard, the strong urge for change which exists in governments in Flanders, (noticeably the Flemish government) is important. After all, in recent years, many important governmental reforms have been launched: sectors are being or were reformed, new structures were set up, new instruments were introduced, etc. (High Council for Domestic Affairs, 2000). It seems evident that these changes have (had) an important impact on the sub regional arrangements (nature of cooperation between local actors, competition between Flemish services, etc.). Are we able, starting from our bottom-up analysis, to assess what impact central reforms have (had) on existing processes (uncertainty, guarding positions, etc.)? For instance, it is possible that these reforms do not present the stability that is necessary to wind up policy processes, that these reforms are disabling the local actors to come to long-term agreements, hence resulting in a loss of trust in partnerships. Taking a more positive stance: the increasing responsibility of the civil servants might increase the autonomy in local negotiations.

To formulate a potentially arousing hypothesis: we could presume that the content of plans and policy is in fact shaped only in area-based arrangements, because they are confronted (only then) with tangible societal opposition or potential support. At that time it might become clear that sub regional arrangements are the real policy forums and not only concerned with the implementation of policy made by the Flemish government, as the dominant view or perception often states.

Ultimately, this could lead to a debate on the ways in which the Flemish government could become more open and supportive, a facilitator if you will, of these kinds of arrangements. The Flemish government then becomes more of a ‘constitutor’ of policy arrangements (cfr. the debate on ‘metagovernance’) and less of a decision maker on how the executors of Flemish plans and policies should function. This in turn could have consequences on the autonomisation of its services in those sub regional arrangements.

3 THREE INNOVATIVE ARRANGEMENTS IN THE SUB REGION OF GHENT

Our ‘bottom-up’ analysis, starting with the exploration of urban sub regional policy arrangements in a Flemish urban sub region (Ghent), reveals a set of patterns of cooperation (on the sub regional level or with sub regional ambitions) in that sub region. These patterns differ in their public/private nature and the tier(s) of government concerned. Often, these different patterns are not isolated from one another:
they are interrelated and are all dealing with some (and sometimes the same) aspects of urban sub regional problems.

Table 1: Three patterns of urban/sub regional cooperation in Ghent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sub regional platform of Ghent</th>
<th>Delineation process of the urban sub region of Ghent</th>
<th>ROM-project Ghent Canal Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis</td>
<td>Decision of the Flemish government</td>
<td>Decree</td>
<td>Ad hoc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>Mix: top-down and bottom-up</td>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>Bottom-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main focus</td>
<td>Socio-economic (economic development)</td>
<td>Spatial planning (&amp; housing, mobility, green areas)</td>
<td>Spatial planning, environmental &amp; economic issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Strategic plan and projects in the socio-economic sphere</td>
<td>Delineation proposal of urban area and action programme</td>
<td>Strategic plan and projects, short term problem-solving and getting support in the fields of spatial planning, environmental and economic sphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject of Flemish legislation</td>
<td>Yes (Sets minimal conditions for official recognition and financial support)</td>
<td>Yes (defines core process architecture and products)</td>
<td>No (only indirectly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>Local (political) Provincial (political) Sub regional: representatives of ‘traditional’ interest groups (trade unions, employers organisations)</td>
<td>Local: Ghent + 7 neighbouring municipalities (political &amp; civil service) Provincial (civil service) Flemish (civil service: spatial planning) Consultants</td>
<td>Local (political, civil service, companies, citizen &amp; environmental groups) Provincial (political &amp; civil service) Flemish (civil service: different departments and agencies) Federal (railway company) Dutch (political &amp; civil service) Consultants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public-private partnership</td>
<td>Yes, corporatist</td>
<td>Yes, limited</td>
<td>Yes, open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance of process</td>
<td>50% Flemish (not by the competent department), 50% sub regional partners</td>
<td>100% Flemish</td>
<td>Mixed: European &amp; provincial funding, different budgets from different actors for different projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance of projects</td>
<td>50% Flemish, 50% sub regional partners</td>
<td>different budgets from different actors for different projects</td>
<td>Mixed: European &amp; provincial funding, different budgets from different actors for different projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Separate organisation( legal type: ‘not-for-profit association’)</td>
<td>No separate organisation</td>
<td>No separate organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>General assembly, board &amp; management – working groups</td>
<td>Project team, steering committee &amp; management – working groups</td>
<td>Steering committee, project office &amp; management – working groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>1-2 (coordinator &amp; secretariat, full time)</td>
<td>2 (Flemish civil servants, during the process, not full time)</td>
<td>2 (coordinator &amp; assistant, full time, since 2003) (before: team of civil servants, not full time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process manager</td>
<td>Isolated, one person</td>
<td>Flemish civil servant</td>
<td>Team of administrators and planners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>Regional charter &amp; ‘lever’-projects</td>
<td>Delineation proposal &amp; action programme</td>
<td>Strategic plan &amp; action programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External communication</td>
<td>Very limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Increasingly important over the years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of this set, we selected three patterns of cooperation which have at least one common feature: in our opinion, they are innovative in Flanders compared to earlier times. We have several reasons to select them:

- They are new, that means that they did not exist at the beginning of the ‘90s;
- They have, at least on a rhetoric level, some urban sub regional ambitions (and that is new in Flanders);
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The concepts of governance, networking, process management are a part of the culture of those institutions;
They involve persons or actors which try to manage the process professionally;
They bring together public and private actors: the administrative tiers of public administration, interest groups, companies, community groups,…
They fit into the intergovernmental ‘newspeak’ of interactive policy-making and new types of intergovernmental management.

First of all, we will analyse the so-called ‘sub regional platforms’ for socio-economic development: these platforms illustrate forms of public-public/public-private partnerships and modes of interaction between sub regions and Flanders (designing strategic plans, ‘levers’, co-financing of projects, …).

Secondly, we analyse the delineation process of the urban sub region of Ghent. This process is part of the Flemish spatial policy, is organised top-down and wants to delineate the urban sub region in order to enable the Flemish government to differentiate in its different policies between rural and urban sub regions, e.g. housing, economic development, mobility, etc. The process is embedded in a consultation procedure and has a project team with local and Flemish governments and an advisory board consisting of the project team and the interest and societal groups.

Thirdly, we will elaborate the so-called ‘ROM-programme’. This pattern developed bottom-up and presents the evolution of a programme (concerning spatial planning, economical and environmental issues) towards a permanent strategic sub regional planning process in the canal area in the sub region of Ghent. This process involves a network of actors (public and private, from different tiers) to tackle a complex sub regional policy problem (Van den Broeck, 2001).

3.1 SUB REGIONAL PLATFORM OF GHENT

The concept of sub regional platforms
The development of sub regional platforms was an important landmark in the development of public administration in Flanders. These platforms were primarily focussed on disfavoured sub regions and acting under impulse of the European policy, which was also focussed on such areas. Gradually, the Flemish government developed the insight that the European policy tools and instruments and methods of working should be used in the Flemish policy towards the sub regional socio-economic development for all areas. We refer to the use of strategic planning, monitoring, project-based initiatives, evaluation and co financing in the European structural funds programmes. In other words, the innovation was ‘imported’ from European policy: a mimesis of innovation from abroad.

The Flemish sub regional policy gradually shifted from the more rural areas towards the urban sub regions and cities. The fact that some sub regions (e.g. the Kempen) already developed such types of sub regional initiatives bottom-up, also inspired the Flemish government. So in the nineties, the Flemish government decided to put these ideas into practice by setting up a system of sub regional platforms for the whole territory (see map 1). The Flemish government implemented formal innovation – i.e. a framework for innovation - in a uniform and top-down way.

The main goal of the sub regional platforms was to set up a more structured interactive process, involving the Flemish government, local governments, the province and the important private actors of the sub region, to come to a strategy for the economic development of the area (‘made-to-measure’). These trajectories had to result in sub regional development plans and in formal ‘regional charters’ between the Flemish government and the sub regional platform, which were to be executed by the Flemish government or local actors. An important concept was that of co financing: co financing by local actors (especially the private or market actors) was a precondition for the Flemish government to accept the projects in her own budget.
The sub regional platform of Ghent

If we look at the case of Ghent, the Sub regional Platform of Ghent (SRPG) was officially recognized by the Flemish Government in 1995 and has recently been transformed into the so-called ‘Strategic Plan for the Sub region of Ghent’.

Local politicians, representatives of employers’ federations and trade unions, Flemish ministry, the Sub regional Employment Office and the Regional Development Corporation in the province of East-Flanders, make up this platform. The SRPG brings together all relevant sub regional actors to reflect strategically on the socio-economic development of the sub region of Ghent, so from an area-based perspective. This resulted in the signing of a so-called ‘Regional Charter’ between the SRPG and the Flemish Government in the spring of 2000 with eight main strategic targets (see box 1).

Box 1: Regional Charter between the SRPG and the Flemish Government: strategic targets

The Regional Charter between the SRPG and the Flemish Government states 8 so-called ‘levers’ (= strategic targets):

Lever 1: expanding a so-called ‘knowledge-area’
Lever 2: an improved opening up of the harbour: building a new lock and an ‘east-west-connection’
Lever 3: expanding channels to commercialise the agricultural sector, in particular for the sector of ornamental plant cultivation
Lever 4: setting up a cluster ‘distribution and logistics’
Lever 5: setting up a consultative structure on tourism and recreation
Lever 6: designing a sub regional/local employment policy
Lever 7: providing a structural support of the social economy
Lever 8: bringing about an improved connection between training and the business community

(Translated from: IdeaConsult, 2002)

These levers were operationalised in so-called ‘lever’-projects, i.e. projects that should contribute to the attainment of the lever concerned.

The decline of the SRPG

The initial élan of the SRPG slowed down quite rapidly. The organisation itself, the participation of a broad set of actors and the orientation towards strategy and projects surely was innovative. But a mix of internal and external factors explains why the process and the management of the network was less innovative than one could have expected.

The Flemish government imposed in his legal framework a uniform structure for all sub regions: the same type of organisation, the top-down imposed division of the seats in the board, even with instructions for the rotation of the presidency. This was an exponent of the traditional reflex of
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centralism and top-down control, but was also inspired by the explicit demand of the traditional trade unions and associations of employers: they made a copy of the tripartite organisation at central level, thereby assuring their own representation in all sub regional platforms in Flanders. In other words, traditional actors and arrangements took control over this innovative arrangement.

The SRPG itself was not entitled to implement projects, they had to rely for this on the regular administrations. The SRPG focused on the elaboration of a strategy, a very useful and interesting period of debate and ‘framing’ but the process stopped when the real test of cooperation had to start. The main reason for the discontentment with the SRPG applies to all the platforms: the lack of real power of the platforms, which additionally makes the development coalition rather unstable (Cabus, 2002).

The SRPG had to rely on a very small professional team of only one manager and a secretary, paid half by the Flemish government, half by the local partners. There was a clear mismatch between the capacity of the network and the importance of the strategic projects. The Flemish administration of sub regional economic development supported the sub regional platforms quite actively, but the main problems were that other Flemish administrations (spatial planning, infrastructure,...) were responsible for the implementation and the financing of the projects and that the administration itself was understaffed. Proposals for the creation of a new sub regional fund, administered by the administration for sub regional development, were never accepted. This brings us to the main problem: the lack of political engagement from the Flemish government itself. Shortly after the establishment of a new legal framework (1995) there was a political shift and the new Flemish government no longer paid any political attention to the sub regional platforms, although those platforms continued and continue to make proposals for charters, strategies and projects. The framework still was innovative, but the innovative spirit was gone. The main conclusion was that the Flemish government rapidly adopted and imported a new style of interactive policy making, but neglected to adapt its own administrative organisation to deal with sub regional plans, engaging the whole Flemish government. It was also quite clear that the most powerful departments of the Flemish administration refused to accept the sub regional platforms as their local counterpart. This is quite illustrative for the Flemish government: it happens frequently that innovative ideas are launched, a legal or institutional framework is set up, and that from thereon, events take their course, without much attention or support from the Flemish government.

Furthermore, the SRPG is faced with other and new patterns of cooperation, e.g. ‘Ghent, City at Work’, the ROM-programme, etc. which seem to be attracting more attention (and funding). In other words, this pattern is also weakened by the competition with other patterns in the area. In this sense, most actors appear to have lost interest because they do not feel that they have enough to win by participating actively in this pattern. In other words, this Flemish arrangement – implemented top down - was overtaken by bottom-up initiatives in the sub region of Ghent. Sub regional actors, members of the SRPG, felt they had more to gain in these other arrangements than in the sub regional platforms.

Finally, the SRPG is also hampered by the different scales in different patterns. While in some other patterns, (some) neighbouring local authorities of Ghent are involved, the SRPG is limited to the territory of the city of Ghent. The sub region of ‘Meetjesland’ has its own sub regional platform, which groups a number of municipalities in the north-west of the city of Ghent, including a number of municipalities which are part of the sub region of Ghent. In other words, the scale of the sub regional platform seems to be suboptimal (IdeaConsult, 2002).

In sum: in Ghent, the SRPG was an important incentive to bring partners together to reflect on the sub regional socio-economic development from an area-based perspective. This innovative initiative of the Flemish government did contribute to the urban/sub regional cooperation in the sub region of Gent, despite the Flemish government. The problems with this arrangement are related to the Flemish level (lack of support, bureaucratic approach, etc.) and local level (sub regional competition of other arrangements).
3.2 DELINEATION PROCESS OF THE URBAN SUB REGION OF GHENT

Spatial planning and urban/sub regional policy
Until recently, spatial planning was extremely ‘ground-oriented’: spatial planning consisted of regional ground plans at the Flemish level and general and particular ground plans at the local level. These plans legally fixed the nature of the grounds (agriculture, recreation, industry, commercial, etc.) involved. However, these plans were purely technical and lacked any vision. Furthermore, these plans were subject to so-called ‘clientelism’. ‘Clientelism’ is a Flemish expression and refers to the habit or tradition of politicians that use their power and influence in order to provide favours to citizens and companies (in exchange for different kinds of support). In this field, the plans were often changed according to the individual wishes of citizens and companies, far less according to the public interest. So, changes to these plans were very ad hoc (‘on demand’), no planning systems were used, especially not in urban areas, etc. That is why the field of spatial planning can be seen as an example of the dominant Flemish (political) culture in the seventies and eighties.

After difficult and lengthy debate, the so-called ‘Spatial Structure Plan Flanders’ (SSPF) was laid down as an integral legal framework for spatial planning in Flanders. Furthermore, for the first time, in that plan a distinction is being made between urban and rural areas and sub regions. This distinction is important, because a differentiated policy will be made for both types of sub regions. The rural areas will be subject to local and provincial policymaking, the urban areas or sub regions will be subject to local and Flemish policymaking. The SSPF is not only a framework, it also presents a set of instruments and operation procedures for spatial planning in a decree in 1999.

For the first time, local governments are forced to make up a plan which is not solely ground based, but a plan which is strategic in nature, with a long term perspective and in which subsidiarity is the central principle, focussed at intensive development (e.g. housing) primarily in the urban sub regions, to safeguard the rural areas and their open spaces and landscape. Another potential innovative aspect is the fact that Flemish government had the intention to leave sufficient autonomy to the local authorities involved in the delineation process to debate present and future options. But the delineation process of the urban sub regions does not end with the drawing of demarcation lines on a map. This line should be backed by a vision on the policy in those sub regions.. Next, this vision should be translated into a concrete action programme. To put the latter into practice, cooperation is necessary between the different partners on the local and supralocal level. In practice, the political opposition of the small local governments was fierce and in most areas the processes stopped, were delayed or suffered from a severe obstruction.

Delineation of the urban sub region of Ghent
In accordance with the process architecture set out by the Flemish government, the process in Ghent has two important ‘structures’: a project team consisting of civil servants of the Flemish, provincial and local governments and the consultant and a steering committee consisting of politicians and civil servants of the three governmental tiers involved and representatives of interest and societal groups. The project team is responsible for research, expertise and drawing up proposals, the steering committee reflect and discusses the work of the project team. (Houthaeve, 2000).

To support the delineation process for the urban sub region of Ghent, a bureau for communications and a bureau for spatial planning were hired. The process started in 1998. In the period June 1999-June 2000, the existing spatial structure and a number of themes (housing, industriousness and bordering elements) were studied closely. Then a break followed because of the municipal and provincial elections (fall 2000). The interim results were written down in a number of memorandums that among other things pointed out the need to involve two additional municipalities in the process.

Early 2001, a first draft of the desired spatial structure and a proposal of demarcation line was presented in a working paper. During 2001 this paper was thoroughly debated with all actors involved.
and finally led to the drawing up of an action programme in October 2001, which in turn was debated in late 2001. In the period April-June 2002, a broad information round aimed at all those concerned (municipal councils, citizens, …) was set up. Next, the proposal for delineation and action programme was modified to incorporate arguments put forward during the information round and this proposal was presented for advice to the different municipal councils involved. Currently, the final dossier is with the Flemish minister competent for spatial town and country planning. He has to decide upon the drafting of the so-called ‘Regional Implementation Plan’ that lays down the demarcation line and the action programme legally. However, this important step is not evident: some dossiers of other sub regions have been waiting for the minister to take a decision for approx. three years.

A mixed picture
The ambition of the delineation process was to bring together sub regional actors to reflect on the future development of the urban area and to enable the Flemish government to develop and implement an urban policy. The core process architecture and expected outputs were set out by the Flemish government but the delineation proposal and action programme were negotiated between the actors. The process resulted in a proposal for a partial delineation and an action programme, but there was no general consensus between the actors on all points. We found a number of reasons which help to explain why the innovative ambitions of the process were not reached in full.

One reason was the lack of trust between different actors in the process: some of the neighbouring municipalities feared that the process would result in an amalgamation with the city of Ghent. Another reason is the lack of interdependence between the actors. The pattern faced a conflict of interests of different actors: some actors perceived it as a win-loose-game, in which the city of Ghent perceived possible wins and the (majority of the) neighbours perceived potential losses. This also points to a situation-sensitive nature, in the sense that the process is influenced by the context of the sub region of Ghent. A third reason is the lack of means or incentives: some concrete projects but no financial support was linked to the process: it lacked engagements. A fourth reason is the role of the Flemish government: the Flemish civil servants that were acting as process managers were also part of the department that was hierarchically competent for the policy field (so they played two roles), but their department is not competent for housing, economic infrastructure, etc. Furthermore, the Flemish civil servants lacked political backing by the (staff of the) minister of spatial planning. This backing is important, because the local authorities involved kept on using the ‘traditional’ methods, i.e. lobbying for their dossiers directly at the level of the cabinet of the minister. (And more importantly, their lobbying was not in favour of the process.) Another reason is the absence of capacity in the smaller local governments: the city of Ghent has a strong department in this field, while the small neighbouring municipalities lack this capacity and support.

In sum, despite of the problems (conflict of interests, lack of incentives, etc.), the pattern brought together the city of Ghent and its neighbours to consult with one another on the strategic future of the sub region for the first time. The pattern did use a new approach which focused on the process itself, bringing together different actors (which often did not work together before). Furthermore, this pattern can be regarded as part of the evolution towards more interactive types of policy-making. The innovate potential however appears to be hampered by a number of local and central factors which we discussed earlier.

3.3 THE ROM-PROGRAMME IN THE CANAL AREA OF GHENT
This section elaborates in more detail on the evolution of a programme (concerning spatial planning and environment) - running for more than ten years now - that was initiated bottom-up towards a permanent strategic sub regional planning process (which e.g. results in a new organisation) in the canal area in the sub region of Ghent. This process involves a network of actors (e.g. city of Ghent, municipalities in the sub region of Ghent, the province of East-Flanders and Flemish departments as well as private actors like companies) to tackle a complex sub regional policy problem. This pattern developed bottom-up and is, in contrast to the concept of sub regional platforms, not structured or
institutionalised by the Flemish government. On the other hand, the Flemish government recently tried to use, even to impose (at least parts of) the methodology of ROM in other patterns of cooperation.

ROM: a brief introduction
In 1993, a number of leading figures in the province of East-Flanders took the initiative to try to find a solution for the problems in the canal area of Ghent. This initiative was titled the ‘ROM-project in the canal area of Ghent’, analogous to the ROM-project in ‘Zeeland Flanders’ in the Netherlands. The main goal of the initiative was to tune policies concerning the area surrounding the canal Ghent-Terneuzen with regards to environmental, spatial and economic issues. The canal area is situated on the territory of three local authorities: Ghent, Zelzate and Evergem. So it is an urban/sub regional problem, although from an administrative viewpoint only some local governments of the area are involved.

The project started in the framework of the European Region ‘Scheldemond’, a framework made up by the province of Zeeland (Dutch), West-Flanders and East-Flanders (both Flemish) to confer about issues concerning the river Scheldt. The existence of this framework presented a trump card for regional cross-border cooperation and to tune the different points of view in the entire region. Another advantage for the ROM-project, especially in the initial phase, was the ability to join in on the zest of the Zeeland project. In other words, processes, which were running in the area and which provided an idea of what the approach in the canal area of Ghent could be, also stimulated the development of the ROM-project in the canal area of Ghent.

The goal of the project was to develop a coherent view on the desired quality of the canal area along three lines of approach: (1) economic development, (2) spatial development and (3) environmental management. By integrating and tuning these three functions in the canal area of Ghent, the participants want to reconcile the economic activities which are accompanied by serious inconveniences (environmental pollution, heavy traffic, etc.) with the housing function and the environment in order to safeguard the livability and the environmental quality of the area but to safeguard the economic future of the canal area at the same time. To attain these goals, consideration and cooperation between different governments (Flemish, provincial and local) amongst one another and with the private sector (interest groups, unions, companies, etc.) is deemed necessary (Van Wesenbeeck, 2003).

From 1993 to 1996, the ROM-group worked on the development of a first strategic concept, a first ‘target view’ for the canal area of Ghent. After that, the concept was underpinned further and enhanced by a number of research and implementation projects such as research projects on quality of life in the residential nucleus, on environmental quality, on mobility in the area, etc. In the end, this resulted in a proposal of a ‘Strategic Plan’ in which the ROM-group stated a number of key decisions, which should result in a sustainable development of the sub region. This Strategic Plan also contains concrete proposals for action on short, medium long and long term. However, during the past ten years, the process has had tangible results as well, e.g. the setting up of a hotline for citizens’ complaints regarding environmental nuisance in the area, the expansion of a company, changing land destination from industrial to nature reserves (hundreds of acres), a legal instrument to buy and sell land, etc. So, in the ROM-process, there are tangible results throughout the process, to ensure that the actors stay involved and perceive win-opportunities (Albrechts & Van den Broeck, 2003).

In order to put the Plan into practice in the next decennia in an effective and efficient way, the steering committee - being the central structure of the programme - decided to set up more effective cooperation- and decision-making procedures. Therefore, a so-called ‘Sub Regional Network’ (SRN) was set up, which should act as a tuning and coordination platform in which next to the different governments also representatives of the business community, unions, environmental groups, public railways, Chamber of Commerce of East-Flanders, are present. Currently, over 50 different actors are involved. Within the SRN, there are also working groups.
Voted ‘best practice’

ROM is a pattern of cooperation which developed bottom-up and which involves different actors (public and private) from different tiers. It started as a relatively informal, interpersonal relational framework but is recently facing the challenges of institutionalisation and manageability: ROM is involving an increasing number of actors and is faced with the need for instruments to put the strategic options in the (draft) Strategic Plan into practice. On the other hand, it remains a relatively flexible arrangement for urban/sub regional cooperation concerning different policy fields and different stakeholders. It is clearly problem-driven, because it started from a specific but complex problem in the canal area (economic development versus livability of the canal area). It is situation-sensitive, in the sense that the actors involved and the issues that are dealt with, are always picked from the situation in the canal area. Other issues and actors, which are not (sufficiently) linked to the problems in the canal area, are left out of the process. The actors involved also experience the process as a win-win game: every actor perceives he or she is getting certain things out of the process (Albrechts & Van den Broeck, 2003).

It is also a negotiated process, because decisions are consensual and because the decisions have no legal status: each actor is only bound in moral terms by the decisions in the process. The process developed incrementally, because apart from the main goal (trying to deal with the problems in the area), the results where not clear on beforehand. But the core actors did decide on a trajectory for the process along different tracks: long-term vision, short term problem-solving and actions and a permanent involvement of key actors and the public in the process (see figure 3). Furthermore, every actor tries to steer the process into a direction which he/she desires: so this pattern is not steered by one actor. But only a small set of central actors (politicians as well as civil servants) keep ‘the big picture’ in mind and tries to steer the process (or to keep the process afloat).

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

The process is innovative, but faces continuing pressures: the involvement of the local population took a long time to develop and is now facing the critical test. Our research shows the importance of party politics and informal relations in this arrangement (De Rynck & Voets, 2003b). Especially these informal and party political relations seem to be important in getting results in Flemish urban/sub regional cooperation. Also, the cross-sections with other processes are important in understanding this pattern: actors meet in different settings, in different processes, on different policy matters, etc.

The main programme managers work for the province of East-Flanders. This doesn’t mean that the province as a political institution really is engaged and is formally acknowledged to care for the
process management. The provincial governor and some of the pro-active provincial administrators are the central network brokers, supported by a small but very much engaged team of external spatial planners. They are now a team for over ten years. Members of the core team switch to different positions (from local to central level, from public to private sector) in the network.

The relation with the Flemish government is totally different compared to the first case. The real dynamics are driven by bottom-up interactions and Flemish government is engaged on a project-base, each administration and minister separately, according to their competences.

In sum: the ROM-case is a best practice example out of a lot of similar attempts and projects to renew spatial planning systems in sub regions of Flanders: strategy, projects, cooperation, framing of the perceptions of dominant actors, etc. The local partnerships differ from the closed and very much centralised neo-corporatist networks dominating the spatial policy for decades. The local governments are much more active: they are obliged to make plans for their territory and they are professionally better equipped. The closed networks still exist but they no longer dominate and monopolize spatial planning.

3.4 CONCLUSION

The three cases tell different stories because these are different types of cooperation patterns. In our opinion, as we have pointed out, an important reason is contingency or the ‘politics of space’, as Healey calls it (Healey, 1997). However, despite their differences, we feel it is useful to put the three cases next to one another. Our analysis has also shown that the sub regional platforms are the least innovative, the delineation process takes a middle position and that ROM can be regarded as the most innovative case. Table 2 summarises the most important features on which we base our assessment.

In addition to the three cases, a number of concluding remarks on patterns of urban/sub regional cooperation can be made. First of all, apart from the complex institutional structure of Belgium, the distance between Flanders as a governmental layer on the one hand and the provinces and local governments on the other hand is almost non-existing. The lack of distance results in very close relations between these levels and the fact that the Flemish level cannot be denied in urban/sub regional arrangements. It seems that in the urban/sub regional cooperation patterns we discussed, these cannot be successful without (but are not necessarily successful with) the cooperation of the Flemish government. In addition, the Flemish government controls important financial resources, which appear to be crucial to (help) finance urban/sub regional cooperation and networks (Van Dooren, Verschueren, Voets & Wayenberg, 2003). In sum, Flanders is an important ‘local’ actor. This conclusion also relates to the debate on hierarchy, equality, etc.

Table 2: Some characteristics of the three patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sub regional platform of Ghent</th>
<th>Delineation process of the urban sub region of Ghent</th>
<th>ROM-project Ghent Canal Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Framing/perceptions</td>
<td>Minor attention</td>
<td>Major attention (failed)</td>
<td>Major attention (at least partial success)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of process</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-driven &amp; Situation-sensitive</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Limited (differs between actors)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiated</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (but parallel diverging strategies)</td>
<td>Yes (and parallel convergent strategies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilaterally</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incremental development</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual commitment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale &amp; complexity</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Win-loose</td>
<td>Win-win</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall innovative nature</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Secondly, the role of interest groups and political parties is often underexposed. Apart from the old ones (e.g. trade unions) new ones (e.g. environmental groups) are entering the arena. But, since the old ones remain present while new ones get involved, the arena becomes much more crowded, adding to the complexity of the patterns. And the political parties, although losing members and credibility, also remain active in these patterns. In other words, the strong party political networks, which intersect at each government level, have always existed in Flanders and remain crucial (De Rynck & Voets, 2003b). Together with the closeness between the different governmental levels, we feel this is another unique aspect of Flanders.

Thirdly, the Flemish government seems to have serious problems with innovative arrangements. The analysis of the sub regional platform and the delineation process shows that the Flemish level picks up innovative practices from abroad as well as from bottom-up initiatives. Then the Flemish government tries to implement the instrument, framework, model or process in a top down and bureaucratic way. It appears that Flanders ‘talks the talk’ when it comes to innovative arrangements and networking, but (still) responds and acts in a command-and-control fashion. Furthermore, the competences and departments are very fragmented in the Flemish government and the latter often does not support these arrangements sufficiently. So, although Flanders is an important ‘local’ actor, it is not necessarily a very ‘supportive’ actor. The capacity problem is also salient at the level of the local authorities which are part of urban sub regions (but which are not part of the city).

Finally, existing institutions or ‘old’ arrangements try to adapt these ‘new’ arrangements to their own interests/adapt themselves to become part of these arrangements. In other words, the innovative arrangements do not replace existing institutions, traditions, cultures, actors, etc. that easily: in the delineation process, local authorities used their ‘old’ networks, outside the process, to influence the outcomes according to their own interests (often conflicting with the process). In ROM, the actors also used their ‘old’ networks, but their strategies were mostly in accordance with the process.

In the ROM-case, 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’.

4 THE POLITICS OF PLACE: TOWARDS FLEXIBLE FORMS OF LOCAL DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY?

An important introductory remark, is that in this part, we apply elements from the network literature into the analysis. Our main argument is that we feel that these area-based policy arrangements are somehow ‘network like’, they seem to resemble networks in some degree. However, further research has to show whether or not our ‘first impressions’ are correct. So, in this part, the notion of networks has to be interpreted in a broad sense. Nonetheless, we feel that the network literature brings in elements that are relevant in assessing territorial governance in Flanders.

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

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., 1997).

“…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., 1997).

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 in urban areas.

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’ (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 regional 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…
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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. Neo-corporatist 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.
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.

**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.

**4.2 NETWORKS AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?**

**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.

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.

Table 3: Institutional trends in spatial planning in Flanders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'60-'70</th>
<th>⇒</th>
<th>'90-'00</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OLD GOVERNANCE – CORPORATIST NETWORKS (trade unions, employers, local leaders: tripartites)</td>
<td>⇒</td>
<td>NEW GOVERNANCE NETWORKS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASSIVE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT (lack of ambition and capacity)</td>
<td>⇒</td>
<td>MORE ACTIVE GOVERNMENT ROLE (more ambition and capacity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOLLOWED LOCAL REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY</td>
<td>⇒</td>
<td>REGIONALISATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENTRALISATION OF SPATIAL PLANNING</td>
<td></td>
<td>DECENTRALISATION OF SPATIAL PLANNING + NEW LOCAL REPRESENTATIVENESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRADITIONAL MONO-LEVEL GOVERNMENT PLANNING</td>
<td>⇒</td>
<td>INTERACTIVE MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNMENT IN NETWORKS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>INADEQUACY OF TRADITIONAL GOVERNMENT ORGANISATION</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 councilors, executive politicians and public officials. The latter (mandated by the executive politicians) play a more important (even political) role.

Role of politicians

How can we describe the role of politicians in collaborative planning and interactive decision-making processes? 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).

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 networks. The elected councils are also formally approving the decisions: they give their approval when formal decisions have to be made.

The role of political parties is very important to understand the networks. 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.

Table 4: 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>‘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>Primacy 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>

(Source: Hendriks, 2002)

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 4: 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)

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 (De Rynck & Voets, 2000c).

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 part 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 Municipal Fund of the Flemish government is one of the main sources of income for the Flemish local authorities and has an annual budget of 1.543 million Euro (2003). The Urban Fund offers financial support for the Flemish cities to pursue a sustainable urban policy and to improve the quality of their government. The Urban Fund has a budget of app. 100 million Euro each year and started on January, 1st 2003.
2 The decree on intermunicipal cooperation dd. 6/7/2001.
3 In the agreement between the Flemish, provincial and local governments in Flanders dd. 25/04/2003, area-based cooperation is defined as a core competence of the provinces.
5 The city of Ghent is the second largest city of Flanders: 225.000 inhabitants, annual budget 800 million Euro. The sub region of Ghent includes the neighbouring municipalities.
6 In the Belgian institutional context, the term ‘regional’ refers to the constitutional tier of the Regions. Therefore, we use the term ‘sub regional’ when we refer to the level between the local and the provincial level. In other words, ‘sub regional’ refers to the supralocal and sub provincial level.
7 For a general analysis of sub regional platforms in Flanders: Cabus, P. (2002). Governance in Flanders’ regional policy: Sub regional platforms as development coalitions.
8 Parts of Flanders were beneficiaries of the different European funds (structural, regional, social). Currently, the last areas are in the stage of phasing out.
9 ‘ROM’ stands for the Dutch words for ‘spatial planning’ and ‘environment’. In a later stage, the ‘e’ of ‘economy’ was added (ROM(e)-project), but we will continue to use the title ‘ROM-project’.
10 The provincial governor is a pivotal player in this process: he is a commissioner of the Flemish governor in the province on the one hand, but also chairman of the provincial executive. He is perceived as a neutral figure, acceptable to all parties in the process.
REFERENCES


