

The changing role of government in the context of a developing regional network society

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Introduction to the issue addressed

Public administration in the Netherlands was enriched recently with a new governance model of alliance building and do--democracy. Within that framework, the public good is no longer seen as the exclusive concern of government agencies.

Individual citizens, communities, local entrepreneurs, educational institutes, and non-governmental organizations, but also the local public authorities, may take the initiative and share responsibilities for improving the quality of their social and physical environment. Such initiatives are an important indicator of a vibrant community. Using the available, local resources of creativity and innovative power will not only further enhance this vibrancy. It also offers opportunities for a much more green and inclusive growth: a more sustainable regional development.^[1] This new model is thus much more profound than more traditional types of civic participation in which government initiatives and public policies are taken as the point of departure.

Even though the experiments with the application of this model – the energetic society– are large in numbers, they can still only be considered niche-players compared to mainstream providers of public services and public administration. However, these bottom-up initiatives by citizens or professionals certainly generate a lot of excitement and interest. It is expected they have - or should be having - far-reaching consequences for the role of public administrations at the local and regional level and for the way these organizations operate.

The regional network De Brabantse Kempen (DBK) and Het Groene Woud (HGW) are both well established examples of public-private partnership cooperation at the sub-provincial level in Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands. Their intention is to facilitate the initiation and development of rural alliances and support bottom up civic initiatives within their respective local communities. The overall objective for the partner organizations of the DBK and HGW regional networks is to join forces to achieve a vibrant rural community and a quality of life that will be resilient into the future.^[2]

^[1] *In Dutch: De Energieke Samenleving (Maarten Hajer, 2011, Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving: <http://www.picnicnetwork.org/maarten-hajer-1>).*

^[2] *Being part of the Rural Alliances project has been very helpful in focusing the mission of the DBK and HGW regional networks. Taking part has been a joint effort of DBK, HGW and the province of Noord-Brabant. Applying together for EU funding is an interesting example of the type of public and private cooperation addressed by this paper.*

From a slightly different perspective, the DBK and HGW regional networks can be seen as excellent examples of public administration interventions that are deployed in line with the new governance model of alliance building and do-democracy. Participating in regional networks allows municipal and provincial governments to facilitate such civic initiatives and encourage sustainable regional development. Regional network collaboration can thus even be seen as an instrument for some of the most important and urgent policy targets presently formulated by public authorities. However, at the same time it can be observed that the public authorities – represented by the local and provincial level – taking part in these public-private partnerships are not yet very comfortable in playing this new role and in combining it with more traditional codes of practice. The civil servants involved often feel insecure about what is expected of them as members of the public-private partnership and about how to connect to the sector-oriented, mainstream activities of their municipal and provincial organizations. On the one hand they would like to better facilitate such civic initiatives and encourage regional development projects. On the other hand they feel the lack of adequate instruments for doing so and often experience substantial difficulties in connecting their 'regional and local intelligence' with the daily work of fellow policy offers. In general, government activities are bound by rules and regulations, are constrained by procedures, checklists, policies, and financing mechanisms like subsidies, that no longer seem to fit the specific requirements of these local and regional initiatives involved in rural alliances. In contrast with this, facilitating civic initiatives requires room for experimentation and should allow for innovative crossovers and serendipity.

The central issue explored by this policy paper is, therefore, how to better define and implement the role of public authorities within the framework of rural alliances. What kind of support is needed and how could the government – or the other partners of the regional network for that matter – provide this support?

Additional background information

Presently, the welfare state is rapidly being replaced by a participative society. Meanwhile, the focus appears to be shifting from the nation states to cities and regions. At the same time the network character of our modern society is becoming more and more manifest too. According to the Council for Social Development in the Netherlands the network society differs in its essence from the society we once knew and are still taking for granted.^[3] Our modern society is no longer defined by the existence of government institutes, by civic centres or other kinds of societal nodes, but by the traffic or lack of traffic between such nodes. It is the traffic that determines where a node will become manifest or grow into a hub, not the other way around. There is no longer a specific centre of power, no cockpit from which societal traffic is being controlled and regulated. Formal institutions have become less important for joining forces with other people. The social media are taking over where once unions, political parties and church communities provided the necessary structures.

Public authorities will only be able to operate successfully in the 21st century if they take the daily life of citizens as point of departure. At the same time they should, however, be willing to demarcate clearly their own position and point of view and not try to be the ultimate 'friend' or 'partner' of groups of citizens. The government is not just one of many publicly operating bodies – they are the public authorities, rule governed, democratically controlled, and necessarily bureaucratic, the seat of power, justice and punishment, unique and bounded by the tasks specifically assigned to them. A devilish paradox that does not make it easy to redefine what

^[3] *Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling (RMO), 2013, Swingen met Lokale Kracht: Overheden en de Netwerksamenleving.*

Additional background information (continued)

public authorities should do vis-à-vis the emergent, energetic society. They have a track record, furthermore, which indicates we are in for an uphill battle. Regular subsidies or financial support by the government, for instance, tends to take over the initiative, leads to reification and institutionalisation and thus enlarges the distance to the citizens concerned. Will public authorities be up to this challenge of delivering the necessary continuity and a fundamental change in behaviour at the same time?

The region of Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands has been experimenting for a number of years and in a number of ways with a new type of network governance. BrabantStad, for instance, is the urban network of the five large cities Tilburg, 's-Hertogenbosch, Helmond, Eindhoven and Breda, and the province of Noord-Brabant.^[4] Together they have been working for more than ten years successfully to represent the interests of this internationally competitive and sustainable urban network, both towards the European Union in Brussels and towards the Dutch national government in The Hague. During the same period, another network governance structure has developed in the rural areas of Noord-Brabant. It was originally driven as part of the Noord-Brabant rural development policy by the need to balance the interest of nature and agriculture. Now, these regional networks have a much stronger and growing commitment within local communities for promoting vibrancy and inclusive growth. In specific cases they are also framed as provincial instruments to address a particular planning challenge.

Interest in the issue

Two specific audiences can be identified that may have an interest in the issues addressed in this policy paper.

1. The INTERREG project (4b North West Europe) Rural Alliances has brought together a number of actors from a variety of regions in North West Europe. They share a common interest in facilitating the initiation and development of alliances between local civic communities and local businesses. It can be observed that the partners of the Rural Alliances network are quite different types of entities. These differences in identity and character may account, for instance, for differences in perspective, in public support, or even in results achieved, but have not yet been addressed explicitly. The two partners from Noord-Brabant provide a clear example of public-private network organizations. What can the other partners learn from them? And vice versa?
2. In Noord-Brabant public-private network organizations, such as DBK and HGW, are still a fairly recent phenomenon. Their relevance for bottom-up civic initiatives as well as their instrumental value for public policies cannot be taken for granted. By bringing together public and private stakeholders with a regional interest in a network-partnership the contributing parent organizations have paved the way by investing in these regional partnerships.^[5] Are they happy about the results and about the way these network organizations are facilitating civic rural alliances? What are their opinions about the role of local and provincial governments as members of these regional rural networks?

^[4] See for instance OECD, 2013, *Rural-Urban Partnerships: An Integrated Approach to Economic Development* (<http://www.oecd.org/economy/rural-urban-partnerships-an-integrated-approach-to-economic-development.htm>)

^[5] In Dutch, and the Noord-Brabant context: *streeknetwerken*.

Existing policies and frameworks

The Provincial Council of Noord-Brabant adopted a new strategy document in November 2011 in which a new way of operating was lined out on the basis of four principles:^[6]

- **Principle 1:** the overall objective is to strengthen the cohesion between economy, ecology, quality of life and public health in order to strike a better balance between them.
- **Principle 2:** participation and involvement of citizens and entrepreneurs needs to become the departure point for new policies and government actions. In order to get better results, appreciated by more stakeholders, the use of regulations and subsidies needs to become more modest and in a supporting capacity only.
- **Principle 3:** the government's role should be foremost to direct the quality of the process, and to guard the framework conditions and the desired line of development;
- **Principle 4:** social added value can be reached by providing scope and perspective, customized to the local situation, for initiatives taken by individuals and businesses.

Policy options

The Rural Alliances project demonstrates that intermediary organizations (the Rural Alliance partners) can play a facilitating role in raising the number and quality of rural alliances.

- From the perspective of regional governance structures – taking the example of Noord-Brabant – it is important to consider also the need to establish the relationship between initiatives and alliances and make them part of a developing regional network – the regional fabric.
- It is important to share knowledge and experiences from different European regions about what instruments and guidelines could be useful to public authorities participating in public-private network organizations. Within the Rural Alliances project the Policy Advisory Panel is asked to take a more active role directing the process of sharing and its outcomes.
- Financial support for alliance building should not only come from subsidies or other kinds of public funding. It is important to encourage private investment: local people contributing time and money to make a success of their enterprise. More important, the revenues of these investments provide a source of income for the local community, and should be looked for.
- Look for the room to experiment that rules and regulations will usually allow for. It is important to help initiatives of rural alliances to find and make use of the room that is available if you know where to look for it.
- It is important to realize that the dominant and intrinsic, vertical logic of public authorities and government structures does not match up in principle with the horizontal governance of social networks. Dealing with the government will, therefore, be a constant battleground. Do not try to avoid this confrontation or to solve the discrepancies, but learn to live with it together. This is not an easy task and time consuming, which should be allowed for – years rather than months.
- It is important for public authorities to appoint officers that can broker between the horizontal and the vertical world. The province of Noord-Brabant has appointed a number of Alliances Brokers.^[7] It is hard to overestimate their importance in realizing the local effect and impact of provincial policies. In view of this it is important to stipulate the difficulties they meet in establishing operational contacts with other parts of the provincial organisation.

^[6] In Dutch: "Het nieuwe koersdocument Transitie Stad en Platteland."

^[7] In Dutch: Alliantiemakelaars.

Policy options (continued)

- Initiators of alliances and civic action know that information is often a much more valuable resource than money. Government bodies that have less money to spend on subsidies should realize this and better organize internal processes of information and knowledge sharing (integrated, rather than sector-oriented).

Recommendation

Read our Rural Alliances governance handbook! It is important the governance handbook on how to initiate and lead effectively and efficiently in social change and desirable outcomes will be addressing some of the questions raised in this policy paper.

The DBK and HGW regional networks are planning a regional conference – Oisterwijk revisited – in the beginning of 2015 to present some of the interesting results of Rural Alliances and to address questions regarding the role of government and regional public-private networks, in view of four principles adopted by the Provincial Council in 2011.

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