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The power to collaborate : How judicious use of power accelerates the strategic capacity of regions in the Netherlands

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

This research shows the conditions that support and encourage successful collaborative practices in competing regions. The research postulates that through strategic collaboration, synergetic potentials are better detected and exploited, leading to increased regional competitiveness. However, the research neither tests this supposition nor does it explore the affinity between collaboration and competitiveness. Instead, it focuses on the governance challenge resulting from that postulation. It evaluates the degree to which different collaborative practices meet the demanding standards expected from competing regions wishing to integrate aspects of strategic planning in their collaborative practices. The research analyzes and compares three regional collaborative associations (RCAs) operating in the Netherlands. The comparison reveals that circumspective and competent use of power promotes collective regional efforts to guide spatial economic development competitively.

Competitive strategic planning and the dilemma of regional governance

RCAs that strive to integrate principles of competitive strategic planning in their collaborative practice are required to demonstrate high strategic capacity. The literature regarding strategic planning distinguishes between three components which make up the strategic capacity of an RCA:

Reception – the capacity of the competing organization to generate knowledge through continuous incorporation of relevant stakeholders, along with their insights and desires.

Consolidation – the capacity to co-produce integrated strategies and select clear paths of action upon which a coherent series of projects are generated.

Realization – the capacity to hold on to strategic agreements and bring those towards implementation.

As the aim of the research is to reveal the conditions which enable high strategic capacity, the prime research question is: *Which institutional conditions enhance the strategic capacity of competing RCAs, and enable them to engage a wide circle of stakeholders, produce sharp and coherent spatial economic strategies and bring those towards realization?*

Past experience regarding regional governance in the Netherlands and abroad suggested that the search for enabling conditions will be long. Different attempts towards the end of the 20th century to introduce elected regional governments to centrally guide regional developments appeared difficult to bring into practice. Alternatives to legislative interventions and regional governments included bottom-up practices of voluntary collaboration. These, however, appeared often too weak to guide coordinated regional development. Nevertheless, legislators and policy makers in The

Netherlands did not appear discouraged by past failures. Experiments with regional governance persisted both through legislative intervention and through voluntary collaborative practice. National memoranda like 'Pieken in de Delta' (2004) and 'Ruimte' (2006) explicitly accentuated the importance of competitive regions for the national economy, laying out an imperative to decentralize policymaking to relevant regional actors. The persistent search for workable modes of collaborative regional practice lead to the first sub question of the research: *Are voluntary RCAs capable to integrate principles of competitive strategic planning in their collective efforts to produce spatial economic strategies for the regions?*

Next to the discouraging evidence of past experience, the suggestion that the strategic components contradict each other was another reason for doubts regarding voluntary collaborative practice to coordinate regional development coherently. The objective of increasing the involvement of stakeholders by regional strategic forming (increased *reception*) would lead to decreased capacity to co-produce coherent strategies (decreased *consolidation*) and bring them to full *realization*. The second sub question that emerges from the suggested paradox is: *Does the inclusion of many stakeholders reduce the RCA's capacity to produce clear and coherent spatial economic strategies and bring them towards implementation?*

The role of power in shaping collective action

Much of the criticism over spatial strategic planning regards its negligence to incorporate the influence of power in its analysis of compound processes while 'power' as an institution receives wide attention in sociological analyses of collective action. In the search for the institutional conditions which best stimulate regional collaboration and increase strategic capacity, this research focuses on three sources of power:

External distributive power: the power of external actor(s) operating from outside the RCA. These actors hold power that may form a common threat or form a shared opportunity for the subordinated regional actors. This may drive regional actors to join forces in an attempt to address the external powerful actor more effectively and influence its behavior in line with their shared interests.

Internal distributive power: the power of an individual or a coalition of actors which may enable them to transmit their preferences to other actors within the RCA and bring to act collaboratively in accordance with their interests.

Collective structured power: the collective power of collaborating actors acting as a group. This power is structured through repetitive collaborative practices and the hegemony produced by earlier successes which influence the environment in which the collaborating group operates.

Parallel to the three sources of power, the theoretical review also provided a typology of different forms in which the (distributive) power may be used (based primarily on Lukes 1974). Those included:

Power of resources: Actors impose their interests and preference on subordinated actors by the use of their superior resources.

Power of process: Actors use their preemptive power to exclude stakeholders (or issues which conflict with their own interests) from reaching the collective agenda.

Power of Meaning: Actors use their cooptive power to shape what other actors want. This entails attracting other members of the RCA to their own perceptions and bringing them to empathize with their preferences.

In order to better understand how power relations shape collective action in the competing regions and in order to investigate how regional strategic capacity may be enhanced by it, the third sub question of the research was: *How, and under which conditions, does the concentration of power enhance the strategic capacity of competing RCAs and enable them to engage a wide circle of stakeholders, produce sharp and coherent spatial-economic strategies and bring those towards realization?*

The research design

The research focused on three Dutch RCAs that strive to increase their regional competitiveness through collaboration. Based on their shared strategic output, the strategic capacity of each RCA was evaluated. The influence of power and the forms in which it was used within the three RCAs was revealed through a series of semi-structured interviews with politicians and practitioners. The initial features of the three cases differed from each other in those specific aspects considered crucial for strategic capacity, creating an expectation that the actual demonstrated strategic capacity would differ. Comparing the three RCAs would therefore shed light on the relations between voluntarism, level of inclusion and power relations, on the one hand, and the actual strategic capacity demonstrated by the collaborative associations on the other.

The analysis and comparison included the RCAs of BrabantStad, the City Region Arnhem-Nijmegen and Amsterdam Metropolitan Area:

BrabantStad: a voluntary RCA in a national urban network consisting of a limited number of actors collaborating in a polycentric region.

City Region Arnhem-Nijmegen: a non-voluntary RCA of a national WGR-plus area consisting of multiple actors collaborating in a duo-centric region.

Amsterdam Metropolitan Area: a voluntary RCA operating in an area for which integrated inter-ministerial programs were composed. This RCA consisted of multiple actors which collaborated in a monocentric region.

The primary findings

I. Differentiated regional strategic capacity

The three RCAs showed different strategic capacities during their collective attempts to coordinate their spatial economic developments. Surprisingly, the research found no direct relation between the character of the collaboration (compulsory or voluntary) and the strategic capacity achieved. Rather, the findings showed that voluntary RCAs

like the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area could achieve high strategic capacity that did not fall short of the strategic capacity of the non-voluntary RCA (City region Arnhem-Nijmegen). The case of BrabantStad, however, where lower strategic capacity was observed, demonstrated that high strategic capacity by voluntary RCAs is often situation-dependent. The comparison also cast doubt on the suggestion that a large number of stakeholders prevent an RCA from making clear choices and producing a coherent set of interrelated projects that correspond with general strategy. Actually, the three cases suggested the contrary. The RCA with most members (Amsterdam Metropolitan Area) demonstrated the highest strategic capacity while the RCA with the least members (BrabantStad) achieved the lowest.

The six members of BrabantStad did not engage other local governments or non-governmental actors in their collaborative activities. They failed to compose long-term regional strategy and did not demonstrate selectivity in defining interrelated strategic projects. BrabantStad did not coordinate any regional policies and carried out no shared projects. All its collective effort was limited to lobbying for its members' individual projects. When lobbying, BrabantStad was able to unite behind the projects it wished to promote, a fact that proved very affective. Many of the projects BrabantStad lobbied for, even without being linked to a coherent strategy, got realized or acknowledged by relevant ministries.

The city region Arnhem-Nijmegen and Amsterdam Metropolitan Area engaged more municipalities in their collaboration and even managed to involve representatives of the private sector and education centers in their collective effort. However, while the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area involved two provinces in the collaborative activities, the city region Arnhem-Nijmegen did not engage its province with its regional strategic forming process. Both RCAs developed integrated spatial economic strategies upon which a coherent series of interrelated projects was defined. Just like BrabantStad, both presented united and solid regional positions regarding strategic issues when lobbying the central government and its ministries. Both the city region Arnhem-Nijmegen and the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area expanded their collaboration beyond lobbying as they developed and coordinated their own spatial economic policies in their regions (housing distribution, definition of economic clusters, regulating regional office market etc). In both cases, however, it appeared that lobby-oriented projects that had to be realized by the ministries had better implementation perspectives compared to projects that had to be realized by the collaborating parties themselves.

II. Coherent stimulants of external actors enhance regional strategic capacity

The three RCAs were initiated as a reaction to a central governmental action. Perceived central governmental bias towards other regions brought the members of BrabantStad to initiate their RCA. Central governmental legislation formed and regulated the city region Arnhem-Nijmegen and the task given by the central government of building a sufficient number of houses in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area brought that region to initiate its first regional conference. The financial resources of the ministries and

their legislative power over lower governments triggered the regional collaboration in the investigated cases. However, the external initiating force of the central government did not evolve from explicit dictation. In all cases, the central government did not impose content-based development even though it had the resources to do just that. Instead, the resources of the central government were used in a way that they triggered the regional partners to organize themselves in a collaborative way. The constructive influence of the resources held by the ministries appeared even more crucial during the collaborative practice itself. The legislative and financial resources of the ministries granted them the power to challenge the RCAs and stimulate certain outcomes by defining conditions under which central governmental support to the regions was granted. The central governmental support was often dependent on the quality of the regional strategic output and on the RCAs' capacity to attract wide regional support to a selected number of projects. The ministries occasionally challenged the regions by coupling their support with the strategic competences of competitive strategic planning. The ministries often linked their support to proven regional capacity to involve non-governmental stakeholders in regional projects, the capacity to concentrate their collective efforts upon a selected number of interrelated strategic projects and the capacity to demonstrate regional commitment for the realization of these projects.

Still, not all RCAs reacted with the same level of strategic capacity to the resources the ministries held. The reason for the varied levels of strategic capacity produced by the three RCS is partly explained by the fact the ministries themselves did not always live up to the standards they expected from the regions. In BrabantStad, the ministries used their resources incoherently in relation to each other. As not all ministries considered BrabantStad an organic urban network for which integral strategy should be composed, they used their resources in contradictory ways according to regional perceptions. The result was a paralyzed RCA which faced contradictory external actors (e.g. the ministries of Economic Affairs and Spatial Planning) advocating for different outputs. Here, the external actors used their *power of resources* in an incoherent manner with a stalemate the result. With divided ministries, it was impossible to link central governmental support to high strategic capacity with a coherent regional strategy. BrabantStad, for its part, appeared able to adjust to the situation through the guidance of the collective effort on ad hoc lobby opportunities instead of the composition of integrated spatial economic coherent strategy.

The city region Arnhem-Nijmegen experienced contradicting signals from powerful external stakeholders as well, from different governmental tiers. The Gelderland province, in this case, did not use its resources in harmony with the resources available by the ministries and the city region's administration. This deviation of the province and its resources appeared unconstructive to the regional collaborative practice as it reduced RCA's ability to produce bold and coherent strategic output.

The Amsterdam Metropolitan Area demonstrated how a coherent position of the central government to the region can stimulate regional coordination and increase its strategic capacity. In this case, the juridical and financial resources of five ministries brought together under single central governmental program (coordinated by an

appointed minister) stimulated coherent development in an area that included the territory in which Amsterdam Metropolitan Area was active. The central government expected from the regional parties to submit a limited number of clear and interrelated strategic projects that would form the key to guide potential inter-ministerial contribution. The members of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area did not let this unique opportunity remain unaddressed. They coordinated their own regional strategic output in tight relation to the inter-ministerial program by uniting behind a limited number of interrelated projects they expected the central government to adopt.

III. Cooptive power of internal actor enhances regional strategic capacity

The North-Brabant Province enjoyed legislative and financial resources in BrabantStad that granted it a certain power over the municipalities. With its legislative and financial resources, the province initiated and facilitated the collaboration. However, the attempts of the province to compose a long-term strategy and increase regional cohesion in the RCA's policies alienated the municipal members of BrabantStad. The cities were reluctant to let other partners influence their own local development. The *power of resources* the province possessed appeared insufficient (or poorly used) to persuade the other municipalities to compose shared spatial economic strategies.

The polycentric character of BrabantStad and the exclusion of smaller cities from participation prevented power concentrations linked to place centrality from developing. The participating cities refused to acknowledge each other's relative advantages to a level that allowed any of them to pronounce differences and lead functional complementary development. In order to lobby external actors, members rigorously used their *power of process*. The exclusion of smaller municipalities helped BrabantStad's cities to tolerate each other's often competing ambitions. Using the 'power of process' and the exclusion of additional parties that would have probably pushed to lobby their own projects if they had the chance, allowed BrabantStad members to focus on their own urban projects. That exclusion, however, was frustrating for excluded municipalities who had no other choice but observe BrabantStad collaborative practice from the outside.

The 'power of resources' was also the power thoroughly used by the administration of the city region Arnhem-Nijmegen. The relative success of the city region Arnhem-Nijmegen in consolidating coherent strategic output was aided by the juridical and financial resources the city region possessed. These resources allowed this RCA to overcome the rivalry between its municipalities and especially between the two larger cities in this duo-centric region. With its official competences, the city region Arnhem-Nijmegen could produce regional strategies and coordinate local development in an area in which similar development out bottom up collaborative practice would probably not have evolved because of the dominating inter-municipal rivalry.

The 'power of process' had more implicit expression in the case of the city region Arnhem-Nijmegen compared to BrabantStad. There, the small and dynamic

administration of the city region led strategic processes with external parties (regional, private sector and ministries) in a manner that was occasionally conceived by the individual municipalities participating in the RCA as hard to trace and to control. As in BrabantStad, the use of preemptive power within the *process* avoided the emergence of issues and interests other than those of the dominant actors that gained control on the regional agenda. However, like BrabantStad, the use of preemptive power frustrated participating parties who failed to promote their own objectives within the RCA. Those frustrations did not always create immediate conflict but they did accumulate and occasionally hampered development once an active contribution of the excluded parties was needed for realization of projects.

Amsterdam Metropolitan Area demonstrated a differentiated form of power. Unlike BrabantStad and the City Region, this RCA had no single actor which held legislative resources that allowed it to guide spatial economic development in the designated area and could use its 'power of resources' for the whole region. The preemptive power associated with the 'power of process', however, was exercised by a powerful coalition of regional actors especially during consultations on disputable matters for which regional unity, or perceptions thereof, was required. In these circumstances, the dominating parties had the tendency to use intentional obfuscation of decisions regarding the disputable issues in order to soften explicit objection of the weaker opposing parties. The possibility to interpret abstract regional agreements functioned as a (temporarily) bypass procedure to grow over the objection of some RCA members and feign regional unity. Similar to the other cases, however, the use of preemptive 'power of process' appeared unconstructive when the cooperation of the objecting parties was needed for the realization of unpopular regional development.

Much more effective for the promotion of high strategic capacity in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area was the use of the cooptive *power of meaning*. The central position of the municipality of Amsterdam, its relative size and international allure, the knowledge and experience of its civil servants and the direct channels of communication it held with the central government, combined to grant it, almost by osmosis, a central position in the RCA. The cooptive and inspiring power of Amsterdam attracted other municipalities in the region wishing to profit from the association with the city of Amsterdam. Amsterdam used its power to bring the other parties to share its insights and priorities and, in so doing, to increase regional unity behind its own preferences and visions. The cooptive 'power of meaning', however, was conditioned by the continuous conviction of the RCA members that Amsterdam did not misuse its relative power to act arrogantly and paternalistically towards the other regional parties the way it had done in the past.

IV. Emerging collective power enhances regional strategic capacity

Collaboration carries an energizing potential that may bind actors together and reinforce their collective action. Repetitive patterns of successful collaborative practices structure the collective power which in turn, attracts more parties to join the

RCA and stimulates members to collaborate in additional fields or tackle new challenges. The collective power of the RCAs appeared to have a stimulating effect both on the collective capacity to internalize knowledge and the capacity to consolidate collective strategic output. Growing success and proven ability to shape the external environment increased interdependencies between the RCA members. The growing interdependencies increased adherence to the collective efforts and their output.

Traces of the constructive impact of emerging collective power derived from experienced success were observable in all three RCAs, though not to the same degree. BrabantStad produced less potent collective power compared to Arnhem-Nijmegen and Amsterdam Metropolitan Area. The five cities of BrabantStad did experience a level of success that allowed them to grow over their reluctance and cautiousness towards each other. However, the collaborative practice did not deliver a sufficient sense of success and achievement to convince and encourage the municipalities to trade some of their immediate local interests for the sake of long-term collective goals. In the city region Arnhem-Nijmegen, and to a larger extent in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area, the sense of collective success and its contribution to increased interdependence appeared to be stronger. Here, the appreciation of the collaboration and a strong sense of collective success contributed to all three dimensions of strategic capacity. The perceived success of the RCAs engaged external actors. Positive collaborative experience also brought the city region Arnhem-Nijmegen and the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area to try and reproduce successful collaborative practice in other related policy fields. That led to the expansion of the collective knowledge base and the internal coherency between projects and the likelihood of synergetic connectivity. The collective power in both RCAs enabled stakeholders to produce strategies, prioritize between options and promote actors' commitments to carry out collective decisions. The collective power bounded frustrated parties to the collaborative practice even when they experienced disappointments. The interdependency between the actors appeared to grow with the experienced success and the collective power. The appreciation for the experienced achievements and the future advantages expected to be yielded from the collaboration allowed incidental waiving from local interests in favor of regional ones.

Conclusions

The research results suggest that the conditions for fruitful regional collaboration and high strategic capacity are not dependent on specific administrative structures or certain hierarchical organizational forms. Supporting conditions that enhance regional strategic capacity lie within the nature of the interactions between the relevant stakeholders in the region. Those interactions reflect the distribution of power between actors and the creation of a communal power base. The power relations provide the pretext for collaboration and determine its strategic capacity. From the collaboration itself emerges new collective power which strengthens the collaborating group and stimulates robust collaborative practice. Regional collaborative associations which operate under conditions in which underlying power relations are used coherently

demonstrate high strategic capacity. Favorable composition of external, internal and collective power enable collaborating parties to initiate and stimulate desired development (power to generate) instead of using power as instrument of command and control to impose or avoid development (power over other actors).

An unequivocal and consistent external party stimulates regional actors to unite in order to attract the resources of the external party or indeed to protect against the potential threat the external party may represent. Concentration of power by an actor or a coalition within the collaborative association can stimulate the regional strategic capacity as well. In particular, the influence of an inspiring, non-paternalistic central actor appears constructive. A central actor that enjoys an acknowledged leading position within the collaboration and avoids conceited behavior appears even more effective (for transmitting the central actor's priorities to the group) than the juridical or financial or exclusionary resources such an actor may have. The collective power of the collaborative association as a consolidated unit emerges when first perceptions of positive progress are recorded by actors within and outside the collaborative association. The collective power stimulates the regional association to sustain and increase its collaborative practice. Power, and power differences, should therefore not be perceived as negative elements alienating to fruitful collaboration and successful strategic planning. On the contrary, when power and power differences are cautiously and coherently used, they prove to serve regional shared ambitions and promote collective goals effectively.

Shifting the governance debate from regulative hierarchies and administrative structures towards the promotion of collaborative practices shifts focus from the (re)distribution of power to the way power is used. Regional collaboration may be improved by studying and exercising the manner by which power is best used to promote desired regional development rather than by the continuous search for optimal distribution of competences and resources between governments and between public and private sectors. The responsibility for achieving high strategic capacity within the region lies with the powerful. In the current distributive patterns of power in the Netherlands, it is the duty of the central government to radiate a coherent message towards the regional stakeholders when negotiating with the regions over coordinated future development. It is the task of the regional leadership (city regions, provinces, central cities) to recruit potential stakeholders and grant them a sense of ownership over the collective regional goals and the expected collaborative outcomes. It is also the responsibility of the collaborating regional stakeholders to make success tangible and reproach the external and internal powerful actors when failing to act consistently and coherently with *their* power.

