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To cite this article: F. M. van Straalen & P. A. Witte (2018) Entangled in scales: multilevel governance challenges for regional planning strategies, *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 5:1, 157-163, DOI: [10.1080/21681376.2018.1455533](https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2018.1455533)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2018.1455533>



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Published online: 31 May 2018.



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SHORT ARTICLE



Entangled in scales: multilevel governance challenges for regional planning strategies

F. M. van Straalen^b and P. A. Witte^a

ABSTRACT

The academic discourse considers the regional scale as an important planning level to provide for spatial objectives that transcend the boundaries of local authorities. Nonetheless, the problem-solving capacity of the regional planning level is still questioned by both academics and practitioners. This paper studies the tension between formal and informal regional governance and its practical challenges for two cases of Dutch provinces struggling with their position in regional governance networks. These cases entail pan-European development (Trans-European Transport Networks – TEN-T) and regional land development (Bloemendalerpolder). It was found that at the metropolitan scale, formal regional planning powers tend to overrule socially produced regional governance arrangements. Simultaneously, regional planning powers lack support of these socially produced arrangements for their interventions. At the same time, at the supra-regional scale, provinces are a logical stakeholder to fulfil a prominent role in regional governance, but often lack the institutional capacity to act as such. We therefore argue that regional planning authorities need to be granted the power and capacity to take up a more centripetal, intermediate role in governance arrangements. This would provide them more capacity to act in disentangling the difficult practical challenges of scalar problems that many regional governance arrangements currently face.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 March 2017; accepted 8 March 2018

KEYWORDS

Regionalisation; scalar problems; the Netherlands; fuzzy governance

JEL CODES

R52; R58

INTRODUCTION

The regional scale is seen as an important planning level to deliver spatial objectives transcending local authority boundaries (Janssen-Jansen & Hutton, 2011). Many European countries adopted the regional scale in their regulatory planning systems or experimented with regional spatial planning (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2000; Hooghe, Marks, & Schakel, 2010). Regional planning bridges the gap between (inter)national policy design and local policy implementation (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010; Cochrane, 2012). From an economic perspective, regional

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government intervention seeks to regulate deficiencies and correct market imperfections/externalities to serve the public interest (Buitelaar, 2007; Jacobs & Paulsen, 2009), such as regional (social) housing targets or regional redistribution of office space (van der Krabben, 2009). Yet, regional planning also seeks to deliver prosperity and social progress, promoting economic growth, advocating social justice and providing liveable environments (Albrechts, 2004; Alden, 2006; van Straalen, Janssen-Jansen, & van den Brink, 2014).

Nonetheless, the regional planning level's problem-solving capacity remains unclear (Macleod & Jones, 2007). Although apparently the appropriate scale to deliver regional spatial priorities, delivering these priorities does not necessarily coincide with the formal (regulatory) regional planning level, which consequently introduces variation in regional planning authorities' effectiveness (Hooghe et al., 2010). This may produce tensions between the formal regulatory scale of governance arrangements and the social production of informal planning practices at the regional scale (Macleod & Jones, 2007), in particular when different external pressures drive these two different subsystems apart, undermining their coherence.

Formal and informal regional arrangements blend into delivering spatial priorities, but the effectiveness of this blending remains understudied. This paper adds to debates around the tensions between legally specified and emergent regional arrangements, and their effectiveness to deliver prosperity, social progress and liveable environments. We differentiate two distinct kinds of formal–informal tensions, namely those emerging between formal and informal regional entities (such as supra-national planning agencies and regional planning authorities), and problems emerging in upscaling local planning issues to the regional planning level. In practice, both problems may occur simultaneously, increasing the overall fuzziness of 'the' regional planning level between supra-national, regional and local policy implementation. We ask the following research question: How are formal (regulatory) and informal (socially produced) regional planning scales produced and how do these scales contribute to fuzzy governance of hybrid formal–informal governance spaces?

REGIONAL GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

There are a number of meanings of scales and regional governance, ranging from 'old' and 'new' regionalism to political processes of devolution and institutional restructuring, to scale, space and place debates (Herod, 2011; Macleod & Jones, 2007). We define regional governance as a relational network of regional stakeholders, together implementing different planning priorities. We focus on the role of the formal regional planning authority within the network between market–civil society–government (Driessen, Dieperink, Laerhoven, Runhaar, & Vermeulen, 2012). This means that the formalized regional planning level is necessarily dependent on its capacity to cooperate with informal networks at the supra-national (i.e., metropolitan) level, fragmenting formal authority and their network relations.

Although the delivery of planning objectives is studied to determine the effectiveness of planning practices, most studies focus on local or national planning levels (e.g., Healey, 2007; Van Assche et al., 2012). Few studies systematically address regional governance arrangements and the (limited) effectiveness in terms of delivering planning objectives via these arrangements (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010; Janssen-Jansen & Hutton, 2011; Danson & Lloyd, 2012; van Straalen et al., 2014). Yet, several studies indicate that efficient land-use allocation requires formal planning authorities, as market solutions often fail due to lack of transparency in choices, power inequalities in informal settings and transaction costs (Danson & Lloyd, 2012; Needham, 2006; Webster & Lai, 2003). This drives formal regional governance arrangements experiencing different external pressures towards (in)formalization of their network relationships.

This implies that effective regional governance arrangements depend on power relations and the ability to build metropolitan capacity. If other non-regional stakeholders have stronger planning powers or undermine capacity-building, the regional planning level is unlikely to be effective,

with these informal planning arrangements hampering establishing formal regional planning authorities. Where regional planning levels are newly formalized, this may tear apart existing effective – informal – metropolitan planning levels. Nonetheless, gaps within formal arrangements also open up space for informal or ‘soft’ arrangements (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010).

Consequently, tensions emerge when formal planning authorities are unwilling or lack trust in informal arrangements to implement regional priorities due to formal planning authorities’ responsibility, accountability and legitimacy requirements (Van Straalen, Witte, & Buitelaar, 2017). Even where planning processes are intentionally designed to aid informal priority implementation, formal authorities often augment rules during the planning process to (forcefully) frame informal implementation (Moroni, 2015; Van Straalen et al., 2017), undermining these informal arrangements capacities to act effectively (Danson & Lloyd, 2012; Van Straalen et al., 2017). This suggests that the main drivers of tensions between formal and informal arrangements are caused by (1) lack of transparency in communication and cooperation, (2) (unequal) power relations, (3) formal rules and (4) formal authorities’ accountability and legitimacy requirements.

METHODOLOGY

To address the research question, we examined two large-scale case studies in the Netherlands that we combined to deliver an understanding of variations in formal and informal regional planning scales and how this variance affected effective regional governance arrangements. The first case study – Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T) – focused upon external (international) forces, whilst the second – Bloemendalerpolder – focused on (internal) informal forces.

The first study explored transnational corridor development that affected regional governance, bringing Dutch provinces into TEN-T European corridors with their own governance arrangements transcending existing geographical, political and institutional boundaries. This is driven by a desire amongst Dutch provinces to maximize the benefits their territories derive from these transnational transport investments (Witte, Van Oort, Wiegman, & Spit, 2013). The data for this study were derived from project studies on the Corridor 24 transportation network. The data set consisted of a survey of bottlenecks within the corridor amongst logistics experts, 13 in-depth interviews and nine regional workshops (Witte, 2014).

The second study entailed the implementation of planning priorities around city-regional and metropolitan land development. Provinces’ strategic planning roles were strengthened in 2008, and several provinces adopted a too-powerful role, overstepping their earlier more facilitating role (van Straalen et al., 2014). This created tensions within existing regional arrangements, with other stakeholders questioning the provinces’ willingness to cooperate in partnerships with local governments or private stakeholders or questioning the provincial authority and capabilities all together. At the same time, the strengthened role would allow the provinces to establish regional solutions in several areas (energy transition, office vacancies, retail and business markets), rather than permit a mishmash of local (often suboptimal) solutions. This study used data derived from land-policy documents, project plans and 28 open-ended interviews with different regional stakeholders and experts – focused on the role of the provinces in regional land policy (van Straalen et al., 2014).

FORMAL AND INFORMAL REGIONAL AUTHORITIES IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands is known for its traditionally relatively strong informal (city-regional) planning arrangements and formal (provincial) planning authority at the city-regional and formal regional level (the provinces). The provinces’ role in urban development accelerated in the early 2000s as they became drawn into the delivery of both urban and rural planning objectives (Kantor, 2006;

Korthals Altes, 2006). A new Spatial Planning Act in 2008 gave provinces new powers and introduced new planning instruments, yet many issues related to regional planning objectives remain determined at the informal city-regional planning arrangements rather than at the formal (provincial) planning level (Witte, 2014).

The TEN-T illustrate the external pressures facing Dutch regional planning authorities; the first wave was launched by the European Commission in the 1990s to stimulate six European priority axes redefined in 2011 into nine core network corridors. The TEN-T corridor policies provide a comprehensive transnational transport planning concept to resolve bottlenecks and foster regional economic development whilst countering transnational institutional fragmentation. In practice, many formal regional authorities have struggled to incorporate these corridors in their regional policies, mainly reflected in persistent institutional and political bottlenecks, sectoral and institutional fragmentation, legal barriers and conflicting rules and regulations. The TEN-T concept has not been universally embraced and diverging interests and political hindrances (e.g., a bad political climate at either the national or the local level) have hampered implementing innovative, international projects (Witte, 2014).

In the Dutch context, the provinces have found themselves caught between conflicting European and national interests and powers. Provinces (informally) sought to take a seat at the European decision-making tables dealing with the TEN-T corridors, and joined European Union (EU)-funded research projects, inter-city coalitions or even more formal institutional structures such as the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). The province of Gelderland actively engaged in the INTERREG project on Corridor 24 (Rotterdam–Genoa in Italy) and later joined in the Rhine–Alpine Corridor EGTC. There is much potential for provinces to play a prominent role in such regional governance issues that touch upon the supra-regional level, through their access to international networks along with their closer connections to local and regional stakeholders. But the provinces' formal influence has remained relatively limited because the decision-making power around transnational corridors lies with an international board constituted of national ministries of transportation or infrastructure development. In the Netherlands, the EU transnational corridor concept conflicted with the concept of 'urban networks' promulgated through the national planning White Paper in the earlier 2000s. The absence of national institutional support hindered the participation of Dutch regional authorities to pursue a supra-regional issue such as transnational corridor development.

METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

Bloemendalerpolder is a regional spatial development of 490 ha in the metropolitan west of the Netherlands (Figure 1), designated nationally as a potential location to relieve housing pressures in the metropolitan west by taking 4500 of the 15,000 urban residences. The Bloemendalerpolder key stakeholders organized their cooperation as a public–private consortium involving the province of North-Holland, the Weesp municipality, the national government and two private developer consortia. The municipality of Muiden chose not to participate in the public–private consortium because of the substantial housing numbers proposed for the municipality. The province of North-Holland used its newly gained planning powers (in 2008) to draw up a regional zoning plan for the development and enforce municipal cooperation in the project, immediately creating tension between the province and Muiden municipality.

Initially, the project appeared to start well, although the economic crisis undermined project implementation, with the private developers threatening to withdraw from the project in 2011 because of profitability concerns. With these developers owning 60% of the land in the project, the province was forced to renegotiate their deal, and their lack of internal resources for the project compelled them to reconsider their overall project role. Land ownership of both public and private stakeholders created mutual dependency. The province could not solve the dependency via the



Figure 1. (left) The 12 provinces of The Netherlands; and (right) the Bloemendalerpolder with the current agricultural land use (Kadaster, 2016).

use of regulatory planning instruments because of the costs and massive delays their use would entail, and the realization of this made the province more restrained in its role as the leading project planning authority. An additional complication came when the former provincial deputy was convicted for fraud in relation to informal conversations and agreements with befriended property developers.¹ Although in the Bloemendalerpolder case no fraud was discovered, the scandal of an elected deputy being gaoled for bribery, forgery and money laundry did pressure the province to change the Bloemendalerpolder development.

The global economic recession of 2008 (following Lehman Brothers' fall) and this fear of scandal drove a renegotiation between the consortium stakeholders, which sought to use fewer provincial regulations and build more on connections within the city-region. The new agreements fell more in line with Muiden municipality's wishes (e.g., less housing) and the municipality consequently rejoined the project. The legal planning framework for the revised project was set out by both municipalities via the local land-use plan, thereby re-establishing former arrangements between the regional and local planning levels. In essence, the project returned to a more traditional planning approach, with municipalities drawing up the legal framework and setting requirements for the plan, whilst the private developers realized the residential areas, as set out in the requirements.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper discussed the tension between formal and informal regional governance arrangements and questioned how blending formal and informal regional arrangements creates fuzzy governance spaces and interferes with effective policy implementation. The case studies show the entangled nature of Dutch formal and informal regional governance spaces. The provinces (formal regional planning authorities) are one of many stakeholders operating at the regional level, often having to negotiate informal arrangements towards policy implementation. This creates two pressures – top-down international and bottom-up informal – obstructing provincial accountability and legitimacy for fair and equal planning processes. Yet, enforcing regulation hampers negotiation in informal arrangements and negatively affects provincial planning powers. The interconnected

informal governance arrangements, at both supra-national and metropolitan levels, derive their effectiveness from the additional support and capacity brought by their fuzziness.

The Dutch history of formal regional planning authorities endows it with more legitimacy and support than formal regional authorities in other countries, but the additional powers granted in the 2008 reform did not increase their effectiveness, as found in other contexts (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010; Janssen-Jansen & Hutton, 2011). Yet, the cases also clearly demonstrate informal and formal regional arrangements becoming mutually entangled, something often neglected in regional planning debates. In the Bloemendalerpolder case, stakeholder investment in property rights to secure powerful and development positions further strengthened the mutual dependency within fuzzy governance spaces. The pressure from informal governance arrangements increased formal authorities' capacity, making this fuzzy governance of entangled scales seems a useful necessity. The same is observed in the TEN-T corridors case, where formal supra-national governance arrangements such as the EGTC were installed via existing informal networks derived from other European projects or inter-city coalitions.

We conclude that formal and informal regional arrangements can strengthen each other's practices. We therefore argue for cross-linking (inter)national policy-making and local policy implementation at the metropolitan planning level. This level must withstand the upwards pull by supra-national tangles, while simultaneously using these supra-national policies to strengthen local policy implementation. Regional planning authorities, therefore, need to be granted the power and capacity to take up an intermediate role in governance arrangements. Future research could expand on the relationship between regional governance arrangements and the issue of 'scale', and the implications of informality for allocating responsibilities within (informal) governance arrangements and (formal) public administration. Informal (socially produced) governance arrangements should have the ability to include a formal regional authority, or at least permit formal authorities a more powerful role, not necessarily or exclusively focused upon legitimate and accountable targets. Conversely, institutionalizing fuzziness could also prove counterproductive. Future research could study institutionalization of fuzzy governance arrangements, and measure their performance after institutionalization to learn about its effectiveness. In our view, such future research allows for a disentangling of tensions of scalar problems faced by many regional governance arrangements.

NOTE

1. Case number ECLI:NL:GHAMS:2015:1212.

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