

## **Changing Role of the Dutch regional Level: from a strategic to an implementation role in spatial planning**

### **1. Subsidiarity and changing roles at regional level**

Social, economic, and technological developments — e.g. individualisation, globalisation and developments in information and communication technology — have repercussions on spatial planning. There is evidence in society and in the economy of a continuous increase in spatial scale (reinforced by increasing mobility), which has repercussions for the level at which spatial issues are addressed. This will increasingly be the supralocal and the regional level. This is paralleled by a debate on urban governance: Hemphill et al. (2006) bring forward that urban governance has become the catchword of modern urban policy despite lacking precise meaning and often being used in a variety of different discourses. Whereas Hemphill et al. deal in their article with the move from state control and regulation of urban policy towards local empowerment and decentralised decision-making, in some cases of this phenomenon we are also seeing scaling-up to the regional level. This paper discusses the changing role of supralocal and regional government in the Netherlands and uses the French situation on spatial planning competences and practice on the supralocal and regional level as a mirror for the Netherlands.

Many countries are involved in a debate about the level at which public responsibilities in spatial planning should be addressed. The principle of subsidiarity plays an important role in this discussion (Spaans & De Wolff, 2005). Spatial planning is becoming the responsibility of different levels of government. On the one hand a state is facing globalisation. On the other the same state witnesses a process of decentralisation and regionalisation, which leads to a more autonomous level of governance on the sub-national level. As a consequence a supranational level and cross-border cooperation have arisen through the European unification as well as a stronger regional government. In the policy field of spatial planning there is thus evidence of an extension of the number of scale levels, a situation to which the formal spatial planning system in the various countries has yet to be adapted.

As planning practice is confronted with an increasing number of scales, planning instruments and competences thus have to be reconsidered against the principle of subsidiarity. The subsidiarity principle means that decisions should be taken at the lowest possible level. Consequently, decisions must be taken as far as possible in agreement with the wishes of those for whom it is relevant in order to generate a maximal contribution to their prosperity. The principle took root with the increase in the responsibilities of the European Union and can also be traced back in many national debates. Previously, most attention was paid to competences and instruments for the national and local government authorities in national planning systems, and relatively modestly for the regional government. A consistent application of the subsidiarity principle leads to the stretching of the number of government levels, the shifting of competences between these levels, and new demands on the functioning of government authorities. This leads to new roles of government levels.

Spaans and De Wolff (2005) analysed the changing role of the regional level in three countries and concluded that current changes in the Dutch planning system reinforce the implementation role of the province. The Dutch province already had competences at its disposal for the strategic role. In England the strategic role of the region has been reinforced, while in Flanders the province has become better equipped for both the strategic and the implementation role. However, in the Netherlands other than the province the city-regional level can also be

considered as the regional level. This paper therefore explores the new roles of both the Dutch city-region and the province and illustrates the change in role with some examples from current planning practice.

## **2. The regional level in the Netherlands**

As in many countries spatial patterns and the way in which government directs spatial transformation are changing in the Netherlands as well. The supralocal and regional level are increasingly the levels at which spatial problems are being addressed. Both urban policy and planning tools are being adapted to the increasing focus on the regional level and a governance-related approach should facilitate public-private partnership in projects with a regional focus. In the National Spatial Strategy (Tweede Kamer, 2006) the role of the regional level in spatial planning is stressed. In future, spatial considerations at this level will increase in importance, not only with respect to the coordination of planning, but also in the coupling to spatial investments. The idea is that the regional level will fulfil a coordinating and sometimes even a development role in projects at the regional and supralocal scale level. In the National Spatial Strategy both the province and the city-region are addressed as the regional level.

The National Spatial Strategy puts considerable emphasis on the change in central government management. Central issues are development-oriented planning, decentralisation, deregulation, and a focus on implementation. The white paper supports comprehensive area development in which all the stakeholders participate. Whereas the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment first used the concept of development planning (*ontwikkelingsplanologie*), this approach has currently been renamed regional area-development (*regionale gebiedsontwikkeling*). The area-based comprehensive approach to spatial problems focuses far more on the quality of a larger project envelope as a whole than on various individual objectives. The concept of the project envelope is often used, which offsets loss-making parts of the plan against those that make a profit. Finally, there is much attention for partnership between government, private sector and organised interests in developing and implementing spatial plans.

Hence scope is purposely created for innovative area-based models. A new role for the regional level emerges from the white paper. The appropriate tools to flesh out the policy will be anchored in the new Spatial Planning Act (which is expected to be implemented at the end of 2007) and new land policy instruments. Reason is that the current Dutch planning system and planning tools are not fully equipped for this change – while practice planning is increasingly taking place at regional level. As already mentioned two regional levels are distinguished in the Netherlands: the province and the city-region. This paper will introduce how these two levels have been dealt with in the adjustment of appropriate tools at regional level.

## **3. Changing role of the province**

On the basis of the actual Spatial Planning Act, the provincial competences are as follows. The province does not have at its disposal the competence to determine land use regulations on its own. The province can, however, formulate a strategic plan: the regional plan (*streekplan*). Furthermore the provincial approval of local land use plans (*bestemmingsplan*) forms an important instrument. In practice these two competences are often applied in combination. The planning approval takes place in accordance with the strategic spatial policy as set out in the regional plan. In this manner the province can exert considerable influence on local spatial policy through verification; undesirable land use changes can be opposed, provided such a step is well

supported by the planning policy. The province has fewer opportunities to enforce certain changes in land use. To be sure, there is an opportunity to give a local authority notice of a change in the local land use plan, but the use of this competence is procedurally time-consuming (Spaans & De Wolff, 2005).

In the proposed changes of the Spatial Planning Act, the provincial role will change. Henceforth a province will – other than formulating its policy in the structure vision (*structuurvisie*) – also be able to make binding land use regulations itself, using a provincial land use plan or the independent project procedure at the provincial level. This competence is, however, restricted to projects of provincial importance. Another change is that the provincial competence to approve local land use plans will be replaced by another form of control. The role of the province will now be concentrated to the early phase of objection jointly with the other stakeholders. As the House of Representatives doubted if the abolition of the retrospective approval of land use plans would not weaken the provincial role, an amendment to the new Spatial Planning Act was passed introducing the provincial competence to not put parts of the local land use plan into operation if these are considered as inconsistent with the provincial interest.

Another new competence acquired by the province is to establish generally applicable land use regulations, which local authorities must translate into local land use plans. The exclusion of certain land uses is more likely to follow (for example, building in areas of outstanding ecological value) than the stimulation of a certain sort of land use. Also preconditions on land use can be set (for example, a minimal amount of water storage capacity to be provided in an area to be developed). In the proposed planning system central government will still be able to object to a provincial land use plan. In addition, it will receive the competence to decide on a national land use plan if this concerns an issue of national importance.

One of the objectives of the revision of the spatial planning system was to strengthen the provincial role and has been met to some extent in the proposed Spatial Planning Act. But the strengthening also takes place through separate legislation concerning, for example, land policy instruments. Since many changes are still at a preparatory stage, there is no planning practice yet. However, planning experts face the changing role of the province towards more involvement in the actual implementation of spatial interventions with confidence.

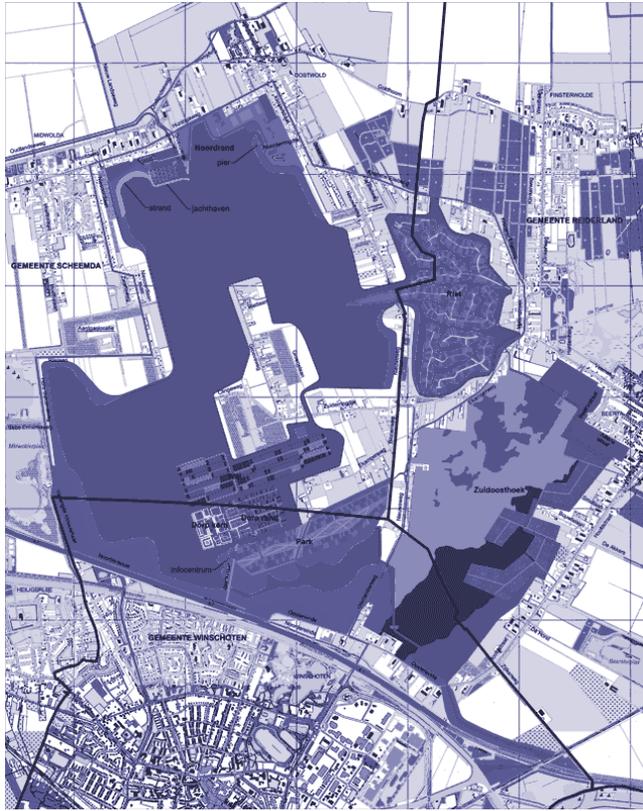
### ***Illustration of the new provincial role: regional area development***

As mentioned earlier there is currently a lot of attention in Dutch planning practice for regional area development. This approach is often dubbed *comprehensive* area development, where comprehensive refers to the coordination of different levels of scale, disciplines, policy areas and the interests of the stakeholders involved. The new type of area development might arouse associations with new towns in the Netherlands and Great Britain, but they differ in that in the case of new towns the emphasis was on urbanisation, the actors were organised locally, with strong direction from central government (but not from the regional authorities) and the allocation of roles and funding between public and private actors differed from the present situation.

For a number of years now area development has increasingly targeted the regional level in the Netherlands. One type of example is projects covering dozens of square kilometres and several municipalities, in which housing and office development is combined with developments in leisure, nature conservation and agriculture. Combining the different functions in one project envelope helps to finance investments in nature, leisure and agriculture with revenue from the more lucrative housing and office developments (Priemus, 2000). Regional area development requires a new approach as regards the actors involved, planning tools and funding. Examples of this type of regional area development are the Blue City (*Blauwe Stad*), Lake City (*Meerstad*)

and Wieringen Lake Area (*Wieringerrandmeer*). I will shortly elaborate on one of these examples of regional area development: the Blue City (Figure 1).

**Fig. 1 The Blue City**



**Source:** [www.blauwestad.nl](http://www.blauwestad.nl)

This project was initiated to stimulate the regional economy by developing an attractive living and working environment through the creation of a lake and surrounding nature and leisure facilities. The Blue City site covers some 1500 hectares in three municipalities in the upper north of the Netherlands. As waterside living is regarded as highly attractive and thus increases the value of housing and open water also attracts leisure activities, the idea was to sacrifice agricultural land in order to create a large new lake. It was also proposed to create a nature area. The lake and the nature area would be funded from the sale of new building plots and dwellings. In addition the Province of Groningen and the municipalities considered a plan to improve the quality of life in the villages around the Blue City. The project is being developed as a public-private partnership. The public partners are the Province and the three municipalities. The private partners have formed a consortium of three developers. The Water Authority is also closely involved with everything concerned with water, and the State Forestry Service and the Groningen Provincial Nature Conservation Society are responsible for developing natural amenities.

A lot of time was invested in collaboration with all stakeholders and communication with the population while drawing up the plan. The plans were presented at village community centres, the farmers involved were visited in person and everyone was kept up to date with a newsletter. The Province has been a crucial actor throughout the period. The persistence of the Groningen

provincial authority and the good partnership with central government, the municipalities, the water authority and the private-sector partners are generally regarded as having been vital to the project. The private partners have displayed great commitment to the Blue City since its inception. The Province is responsible for land acquisition, among other things, and is prefinancing the project at a low interest rate. The three developers have agreed to purchase the building plots and are also responsible for building the houses and selling the plots.

#### 4. Changing role of the city-region

Whereas the Dutch province is a democratically chosen government level, the city-region is not. It is characterised by the local authorities participating in the Dutch largest urban areas as an extension of local government. The history of the status of the city-region is one full of changing focuses. Since the 1950s a statutory basis exists to take care of the interests held in common by the large urban local authorities and the smaller authorities in their immediate surroundings. In the last few decades much discussion on the Act concentrated on if and how government in the largest urban areas should be institutionalised. In 1994 a provisional Act on Government in Transition (*Kaderwet: bestuur in verandering*) set the legal framework for introducing regional public bodies. As a result seven city-regions were introduced. This provisional Act was introduced to facilitate the transition of the seven city-regions to regional government; the Act came into force in 1994 and remained so until 2004. Meanwhile, this Cabinet decided that the city-region will not become a formal (and democratically chosen) government level. The Amendment of the Intermunicipal Statutory Regulations-Plus Act (*Wijzigingswet WGR-plus*) confirmed this and elaborated on the responsibilities of the city-region (Tweede Kamer, 2004). The Act came into force as of January 2005.

Under the current Spatial Planning Act local authorities in the city-regions are allowed to transfer some of their competences to this city-regional body. The current planning instrument available for the city-region is the regional structure plan (*regionaal structuurplan*), which could have become a strong planning instrument. However, its significance has in practice been rather small. One of the reasons is that regional cooperation in the Netherlands is based on consensus. This means that the regional structure plan actually comes down to a joining of the local structure plans. Because the city-region is not democratically elected, but appointed by the local authorities involved, the city-regions hardly used their formal powers they received under the 1994 Act. In addition, the provinces may delegate some of their powers to the regional bodies, which they hardly did in practice. This resulted in the fact that in practice the present role of the seven city-regions is rather limited. When altering the local land use plan, local authorities must keep to the current strategic regional plan (by the city-region). But in contrast with the province, the city-region does not have a strong development control competence: it only has an advisory role, not the retrospective validation competence of local land use plans (Spaans, 2006).

On the basis of the recent Intermunicipal Statutory Regulations-Plus Act the seven city-regions are able to continue to exist as city-regions (the 'WGR-plus' regions) but with adapted responsibilities. In addition, it will also become possible to set up new regions. The idea was that city-regions would retain the same package of tasks, including among others spatial planning and land policy. In the Enactment of the new Spatial Planning Act (*Invoeringswet Ruitelijke Ordening*) a separate chapter was reserved for the competences for the city-region. The original idea was that each WGR-plus (city-) region would have the competence to set up a structure vision and the province could delegate to the city-region its competence to set up a binding land use plan. However, one of the latest proposed changes by the House of Representatives relates

to the transfer of competences to the city-region. Even though this was originally the basic principle, it is now considered as undesirable. The argument is that local authorities play an important role in the new Spatial Planning Act and dispose of sufficient instruments to gear to tuning within the city-region. The transfer of competences in the field of spatial planning from local authorities to city-regions is thus considered as undesirable. If the amendment is indeed included in the new Spatial Planning Act, this will result in a decline of the competences available to the city-region under the new Spatial Planning Act. An escape clause is that each province may choose to delegate part of its competences to the city-region(s) within the province's boundaries. The strategic and consensus role is expected to remain, even though the abolition of the availability of the structure vision in the new Spatial Planning Act will not stimulate a further strengthening of this role. The city-region will not receive any competences to play an implementation role in spatial planning. Central government chose to either initiate a spatial intervention at the local or at the provincial level. It is up to the concerned local authorities to choose for tuning with other local authorities. This means that the role for the city-region, which is presented in the National Spatial Strategy, will not be taken forward in the Enactment of the new Spatial Planning Act.

### ***Illustration of the city-regional role: VINEX funds***

Central government anticipated on a more important future role for the city-region in urbanisation in the VINEX White paper (Fourth National Policy Document on Spatial Planning Extra) in the 1980s. The seven city-regions were thus the main contract partners in the urbanisation contracts with central government. These contracts included housing, business parks, infrastructure for public transport and nature and leisure projects. As a result the city-regions acquired a central role in the implementation of the urbanisation agreements; not so much in the actual project realisation, but in the setting-up and management of overarching funds for cross-subsidisation between development sites within the city-region area. Examples are the formation of funds by the city-regions of Amsterdam and Rotterdam within the framework of the VINEX. I will illustrate this for the city-region of Rotterdam. This city-region and its 18 participating local authorities agreed on the realisation of a spatial programme as part of the VINEX covenant and which has largely been realised. The use of planning gain between different sites within the city-region plays an important role. Deficits of large development sites are being covered by a fund, which has been raised by contributions of central government and the participating local authorities (related to the population figure in the municipality). These deficits were calculated on the basis of cost estimates. A second fund of about 15 million euros has been set up to (partly) finance nature and recreation areas and infrastructure projects included in the urbanisation contracts. This fund has been built up by a compulsory contribution for each newly built dwelling by the local authorities. This compulsory contribution is part of the agreements between city-region and municipalities in the urbanisation contract. The construction with the funds worked pretty well in practice, but problems are expected for the future. The original prospect of a formal government level of the city-region seems to have greatly influenced the agreement with the local authorities. Now that the future status of the city-region will not become stronger, problems are foreseen with the extension of the agreements. Local authorities will probably not hand over funds for planning tasks by neighbouring local authorities. Jointly bearing the costs of regional green or infrastructure projects can count on more support than clearing away the debts by another local authority (De Wolff et al., 2004).

## **5. France and the regional level**

The preceding sections examined the changing role of the Dutch regional level. Both the province and the city-region can be considered as regional, the first being democratically

elected, the second not. With the reallocation of spatial planning competences Dutch government ultimately seems to choose for a reinforcement of the province and the local authority at the expense of the city-region. In this section I will examine the French situation with respect to the current changes in competences in spatial planning at the supralocal and regional level. This will be used as reflection on the Dutch situation.

Since the decentralisation of the 1980s France has had four administrative levels – and in some places even six. The four levels that apply everywhere are the state (as French central government is called), the regions, the departments, and the municipalities. Hierarchic relations exist between the state and each of the three decentralised administrative bodies with regard to juridical, policy-making, and financial issues. However, the three decentralised administrative bodies are not linked to each other by way of a hierarchic chain of command. All levels exercise their own authority, operating alongside one another without having to account for their actions to the rest (Spaans, 2002). Unlike in the Netherlands the huge number of municipalities was not reduced to improve the efficiency of the local level, but a level has been added to join forces. Central cities and their powerful mayors used to have a privileged position over other territorial actors. Nowadays they depend much more on these other authorities to fulfil many basic governance tasks. In addition, a layer of organisations, agencies and networks has formed to co-ordinate the collective action of these actors in areas of mutual concern (Nicholls, 2005). The *communauté urbaine* (urban community) was imposed at the end of 1960s to a dozen of large conurbations. The purpose of the *communautés urbaines* was to achieve cooperation and joint administration between large cities and their independent suburbs. This step often followed failed attempts to merge municipalities within a metropolitan area. However the decisive impulse for cooperation was given by the 1999 Chevènement Act (*Loi relative au renforcement et à la simplification de la coopération intercommunale*). This Act reduced the different forms of cooperation to three formulas, one adapted for rural areas municipalities (*communauté de communes*), the two other dedicated to urban areas (a less integrated formula, the *communauté d'agglomération*) and a more integrated one, the *communauté urbaine*). Unlike in the other types of *communautés* a municipality cannot leave freely a *communauté urbaine*. What is also new is that the state can force municipalities to participate in a community (Négrier, 2006). Officials at all levels of government, with the exception of the intermunicipal body are directly elected. In the latter municipal councils nominate the members. The *communauté urbaine* is responsible for strategic policy domains and large financial resources for example for urban planning, infrastructure and economic development.

In addition to reinforcement of the intermunicipal level, the cooperation between *communautés* has also been addressed, thus creating a level between *communautés* and regions. The aim of the left-green Jospin government was to build up solid integrated governments able to launch policies positioning the cities in the European territorial competition and to combat social exclusion through interventionist housing policies for instance. The CIADT (*Comité interministériel d'aménagement et de compétitivité des territoires*; the new name for DATAR) focus is also on the incentive to the building up of pro-growth coalitions around territorial projects in cities and regions. The 2000 Voynet Act (*Loi d'orientation pour l'aménagement et le développement durable du territoire*) enabled the creation of development councils (*conseils de développement*). These form a sort of forum for the local urban societies and provide the institutional space for the creation of enlarged urban coalitions gathering senior politicians alongside with social, cultural and economic local elites (Pinson & Le Galès, 2005). The territorial policies of the Jospin government reinforced the role of the region by placing it as an intermediary between central government and the municipalities, in particular through the *projets de pays* and *projets d'agglomération* (Motte, 2006).

The reinforcement of the regional level was also the basis for a competition by central government on metropolitan cooperation (being the level between *communautés* and regions). It was part of the future policy on contracts between state and regions and was issued in 2003. The aim was to promote the development of key French metropolitan cities (other than the Paris area). The bid was not meant to formulate an investment policy, but a plan for a process by the major public actors of the metropolitan area to develop projects with an international competitiveness dimension. Six major themes emerged from all submissions: economic development, knowledge (higher education and research), accessibility (mostly railway and air transport), culture (and tourism) and environment. Spatial planning was seldom taken into account. Since the first call submissions of 15 urban regions (*métropoles*) were approved in two sessions. The state awarded 3,5 million euros for these initiatives in 2005 and 2006. The focus is very much on strategic issues in order to improve the position within Europe and not on specific spatial planning projects. The call for cooperation focuses on the elaboration of a strategy and a network of public actors in the new metropolitan area. The contents of the strategic projects are defined in a very open way by the central authorities. It consists mainly in the elaboration of a strategy rather than in the definition of a physical programme (Motte, 2006). At the strategic level this new initiative will undoubtedly have large impact in the future, but with respect to spatial planning competences it is not expected to have much influence.

The intermunicipal bodies will remain the major players at the supralocal and regional level with respect to spatial planning. There were some changes in the spatial planning competences of the *communauté urbaine*. For example, as part of the reform of the *Loi Solidarité et Renouvellement Urbains (SRU)* the land use plan (*Plan d'Occupation des Sols, POS*) was replaced by the local town-planning plan (*Plan Local d'Urbanisme, PLU*). The POS was essentially a management document for spatial and land issues, and presents the sites which are allowed to be built and those which are not allowed to be built and the building regulation. It is at the disposition of the local authority. The PLU on the other hand is a future- and development-oriented document. It contains strategic choices for a ten-year period also addressing the quest for quality of space and environmental protection. It is at the disposition of the local authority and the intermunicipal body, either the *communauté urbaine* or the *communauté d'agglomération*. If an intermunicipal body is available it is this body that will draw up the PLU. The *communauté urbaine* has a number of competences available which facilitate the implementation of spatial planning projects. It disposes of the pre-emption right (*droit de préemption urbain; DPU*), the right to create a development area (*zone d'aménagement concerté; ZAC*) or an area where pre-emption right applies (*zone d'aménagement différé; ZAD*) and finally the right to expropriate land for public use. The intermunicipal body has thus crucial competences from strategic spatial planning policy to actual realisation of spatial interventions.

### ***French planning practice by the communauté urbaine: Lille Métropole***

One of the major *communautés urbaines* is Lille Métropole Communauté Urbaine (LMCU), in which 85 municipalities participate. In the 1970s the region was struck by an economic recession and since then many efforts were made to compensate for the economic decline by stimulating new economic activities. A key strategy was to attract institutions of higher education and research institutes. In the early 1990s Lille Métropole decided to go ahead with a programme of economic development consisting of seven major projects. If local authorities wanted to set up a project outside of that programme, they were required to deposit 25 percent of the revenues gained from such projects in a economic development and solidarity fund (*Fonds de Développement Economique et Solidaire*) (Van den Berg et al., 1993). Those seven projects were the following: Euralille, two multimodal transport platforms (Centre international de transport and Plateforme Multimodale), two new business parks (La Haute Borne and Ravesnes les Francs), a zone for advanced telecommunications (Eurotéléport) and the multifunctional

revitalisation of an obsolescent industrial site, including the development of residential areas and service activities (La Fosse aux Chênes). The big projects were spread out over the whole *communauté* for the sake of creating a balance in economic development. In addition, the municipalities had a right to pursue local economic development. In at least a number of these projects Lille Métropole had a leading role and may be the commissioning body in the realisation of projects for which it had the responsibility (Spaans, 2002).

This example shows that the *communauté urbaine* plays a crucial role in the allocation of strategic projects with respect to the economic growth and spatial planning in the urban region. This body can force the participating municipalities to keep to the agreements. But other than in the Netherlands it can also participate in the actual realisation and management of the individual projects.

## 6. France as a mirror for the Netherlands

Dutch central government has reinforced the implementation role of the province to address spatial planning issues more efficiently at regional level. The role of the city-region has not been reinforced. In this paper we compare current changes in the Netherlands with those in France. Although there are differences between the two countries in for example institutional context and spatial planning tradition, there are enough similarities to use the French case as a mirror. French spatial planning (*aménagement du territoire*) for example focuses much more on regional economic development than Dutch spatial planning (*ruimtelijke ordening*) which is more a comprehensive integrated approach (European Commission, 1997). Similar in the two countries is the search for adequate government structures to deal with issues at supralocal and regional level. Partly this is an answer to general trends resulting in the supralocal and regional level increasingly being the level at which spatial problems are addressed.

In the Netherlands the province and the city-region are considered as the supralocal and regional level, in France this relates to the *communautés* and the newly formed *métropoles*. Both the Dutch city-region and the French *communauté* are not democratically chosen and local authorities appoint the members. Whereas in France the *communauté* disposes of competences to actively get involved in the realisation, in the Netherlands this role will be reinforced at provincial and not at city-regional level. The city-region might even lose spatial planning competences in the Enactment of the new Spatial Planning Act if the latest proposed change by the House of Representatives will indeed be taken over by the minister. As opposed to France where the intermunicipal bodies were further reinforced.

In the Netherlands since the 1980s a process of decentralisation started off a large number of mergers between municipalities to enable them to professionalize and take up more responsibilities. The city-regions were thus not meant to bypass the local level, but to add a new level to address issues relevant at this level. In France on the other hand mergers between municipalities failed to be implemented because of resistance by local elected officials. One of the main purposes of the intermunicipal bodies is to force municipalities to cooperate and professionalize their activities at this level. Dutch government seems to have chosen to reinforce the local authority in favour of the city-region. A reason might be that local authorities are democratically chosen and the assumption is that the local authority disposes of enough competences to voluntarily get to accordance with other local authorities within the city-region on issues that need to be addressed at supralocal level.

In the Dutch approach of regional area development central government has chosen to provide the province with more adequate tools to enable the realisation of such projects. Actual regional area development projects are indeed outside the current city-regions and justify the choice to reinforce the province. The focus on project envelopes including nature, leisure and water land uses and most of the competences for these land uses being in provincial hands, confirms this choice. In case other types of regional area development come up that may be addressed more adequately at city-regional level and for which it does not dispose of appropriate competences on the basis of the new Spatial Planning Act, delegation by the province is the option. But even then this will probably only concern strategic issues and not competences for actual realisation such as those of the French *communauté urbaine*.

Concluding: Dutch central government seems to favour the democratically chosen province and trust that local authorities are reinforced sufficiently to be able to join forces if necessary in supralocal spatial issues, whereas the French state focuses more on the non-democratically chosen intermunicipal bodies as mergers between local authorities have failed. Dutch regional area development projects seem to justify this choice. However strategic economic and spatial projects that are considered of main importance for the economic growth of an urban region may be addressed more easily within the French than the Dutch context. If the proposition to further decrease the competences of the city-region, will indeed be included in the new Act, it will depend on the province in question whether delegation of competences to the city-region will enable the city-region to assume the strategic and implementation roles adequately.

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