

Intergovernmental Partnership, Assemble Together

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1 ABSTRACT

Today, here in Flanders and all over the world, hierarchical approaches are making way for network approaches. Processes are being redesigned, relationships are being redefined and local administrations are being given more autonomy. In Flanders, this means that new expectations are being created between the Government of Flanders, the 5 provinces and the 308 cities and municipalities.

The purpose of this paper is to show how ‘Ruimte Vlaanderen’, the Spatial Policy Department for the Government of Flanders, is taking a pole position in this shifting approach and how intergovernmental partnership is currently taking shape in urban planning.

2 SHIFT IN APPROACH

Spatial planning in Flanders has evolved considerably in recent times. After decades of strong, centralised management and control, responsibilities are gradually being shifted to the local policy area.

The trend toward decentralisation was accelerated by the economic crisis which occurred at the end of the last decade. The Flemish Government wished to have effective authorities during decisive times with measurable efficiency gains. The white paper on internal state reform (Witboek Interne Staatshervorming) (2011) laid the foundation for improved administrative cooperation. It was necessary to transform a controlling Flemish authority into a supportive Flemish administration, and municipal autonomy took its place on the agendas.

Ruimte Vlaanderen incorporated these goals into its mission statement (2012) and reorganised itself around this. The green paper on a spatial policy plan for Flanders (Groenboek Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen) (2012) confirmed this new policy philosophy and laid the basis for a network approach. The core tasks of Flemish spatial policy would be carried out in cooperation with actors and authorities, and a bottom-up initiative would be encouraged in this regard.

Joke Schauvliege, Flemish Minister for Environment, Nature and Agriculture, declared intergovernmental cooperation to be a strategic goal in her policy memorandum (2014). The municipalities, cities and provinces are the best positioned to take charge of policies pursued on their territory. The combination of tools and financial incentives will be geared toward strengthening administrative capacity and improving intergovernmental cooperation. Far-reaching subsidiarity still remains the common theme here.

3 ASSEMBLE TOGETHER

Management and supervision have given way to the assumption of responsibility and the assigning of trust. It is in the interest of all parties to cultivate a partnership and to work together. This poses questions such as: how do we build on partnership? How do we put far-reaching subsidiarity into practice? How do we improve intergovernmental cooperation? Ruimte Vlaanderen is doing this by 1) investing in the network that includes local governments, 2) cooperating on and learning from region-specific processes and 3) making adjustments to tools and processes accordingly.

3.1 Learning network

In 2007, Ruimte Vlaanderen took the first steps toward setting up a structural network model with the local governments by means of the Atrium Learning Network.

Municipal, provincial, Flemish and intermunicipal officials come together in trust at regular intervals to exchange knowledge and experiences. Networking events are organised around small, permanent peer review groups as well as larger groups on a regional scale. By doing this, Ruimte Vlaanderen introduced a

change in culture and created a platform for informal consultations. Today this investment is undeniably contributing to shared and understood objectives. The atria form a convenient platform for co-creating spatial policy and for identifying relevant local initiatives and problems..

A smart move in this context is to build the Atrium Learning Network into a more goal-oriented initiative alongside the regular atrium system that utilises permanent groups. Ruimte Vlaanderen is doing this by organising ‘atria on call’ and by making a virtual network available.

3.1.1 Atria on call

The Learning Network is being deployed to organise ‘customised’ arrangements (based on target group or theme) named the ‘atria on call’ The aim is to gather local input so as to give further shape to spatial policy at the Flemish level. These atria are being used to co-create with local partners.

Two pilot atria on administrative capacity took place at the start of this year. These pilot atria form an interesting test case that demonstrates that the combined involvement of officials and local politicians creates added value.

In South-East Flanders for instance, the principles of spatial efficiency formed the subject of the group discussion. This was an indication that many municipalities are trying to figure out how to assume an active governing role. Ruimte Vlaanderen was expected to provide compelling and inspiring frameworks that would help with the negotiations. The aldermen and officials in attendance exchanged experiences concerning intergovernmental cooperation and civic participation, elements which testify to municipal administrative capacity.

In Antwerp, the theme of administrative capacity revolved around the benefits of hiring a municipal urban planning official at the intermunicipal level. The experiences related by the relevant intermunicipal company and mayor of the municipalities taking a pioneering role in this area provided a great deal of inspiration and insight. The subsidy for hiring an intermunicipal official is clearly a trigger; the official educated in spatial planning can make greater use of his or her ambitions on an intermunicipal scale, and an intermunicipal pool of workers offers organisational advantages. The story about the integral and strategic policy plan of the municipality of Nijlen showed that investing in such an official pays dividends.

3.1.2 Virtual network

In the pursuit of partnership, a focus on knowledge sharing and knowledge building is crucial. Until recently, much knowledge was locked inside email inboxes. This was hardly an efficient system.

Based on the aim to learn from one another, Ruimte Vlaanderen offered a accessible virtual platform that makes it easy for members to interact with each other. The decision was made to use Yammer, a virtual social knowledge network for professionals. The network is provided free of charge, and serves as a complement to the physical Learning Network: questions can be posed, any user may reply or ‘like’, events and reports can be posted, and information can be announced.

In one year’s time, the network has turned into a success story. Even when separated by hundreds of kilometres, we are seeing municipalities helping each other. The Yammer network is utilised by more than 500 members each day.

To streamline its bottom-up operations and to guarantee an impact, Ruimte Vlaanderen also invested in a digital monitoring system. The local process managers of Ruimte Vlaanderen are picking up signals that contain within them suggestions which are relevant to Flemish policy or the Flemish monitoring agenda. These signals are brought up during consultations and where possible they are incorporated into the agendas for further improvement.

3.2 Fieldwork

Region-specific consultation processes constitute a new form of cooperation. Where its own territorial ambitions are high, Flanders can assume a lead role. But in most cases, the main keys in spatial development are in the hands of the local governments. The way in which Ruimte Vlaanderen is seeking to cooperate is demonstrated by means of three region-specific consultation processes: T.OP, BRV and pilots.

3.2.1 T.OP Limburg

Limburg is confronted with a major challenge. The economic and social landscape of the region will be drastically altered due to the closure of Ford Genk, just like it was back in the days when the coal mines were closed. In order to contribute positive momentum to this transformational dynamic and to attract investors, all socio-economic actors are devoting their efforts to the SALK (Strategisch Actieplan Limburg Kwadraat - Strategic Action Plan for Limburg Squared) project.

The spatial pillar of SALK is the Limburg Territorial Development Programme (Territoriaal Ontwikkelingsprogramma Limburg - T.OP Limburg). This development programme is intended to improve the coordination of economic and spatial development within the region and to create synergies and new opportunities in the process. T.OP Limburg is seeking win-win situations among Flemish partners, between bottom-up initiatives and goals at the Flemish level, between short- and long-term implementation processes and between the current state of affairs and what could be achieved. To this end, this is bringing many actors together. Their dialogue is being fed via research, spatial design and cartography. The task is to identify avenues for cooperation which are both desirable and ambitious, the ultimate goal of which is to arrive at shared implementation.

T.OP Limburg views categories as being more than just top-down or bottom-up. The distinction between government and entrepreneur is also becoming more vague. An entrepreneurial spirit among the public sectors is a success factor for area-based development. For the many actors working together on the RE-MINE project, a common denominator applies: decisiveness and the will to take action.

The gains being sought include: a broadening of support and visibility (also international visibility); the shared development of vision; cost savings via the coordination of investment agendas (Flemish and others); additional resources via fundraising (including on the European level); and joint action and effective implementation.

3.2.2 Testing BRV

The importance of developing a shared policy within a broad intergovernmental and social partnership also has an impact on the process of the spatial policy plan for Flanders (Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen - BRV). BRV will be the successor to the spatial structure plan for Flanders. This policy plan is focused on a strategic, dynamic and results-oriented spatial development policy. Via civic participation, partner dialogues and intensive cooperation with the other policy areas, Ruimte Vlaanderen has given extensive consideration to future spatial policy.

The partnership is recently broadened by getting local partners involved via a regional project initiative. Ten regional working groups distributed throughout Flanders, which together provide a representative sampling of current spatial issues, have begun work. The chairpersons are local stakeholders. The working groups are made up of Flemish and local partners assembled together. The working groups are testing the vision, strategies and concepts from the BRV green paper on the basis of actual practices. The intended result of this still-ongoing exercise consists of policy recommendations as well as a number of tangible quick wins to contribute momentum to local regional development.

3.2.3 Framework and pilots

The spatial vision and spatial concepts of the BRV are being realised in a more concrete and results-oriented way through thematic and region-specific policy frameworks. One of these policy frameworks being developed concerns urban regions, for example. It is designed to encourage governments and other actors to come together and form a municipal region and in doing so enter into a cooperation partnership. Within this partnership, a joint spatial development plan can take shape.

One key pilot project is the strategic project for the Antwerp urban region. Its project coordinator is being subsidised by Ruimte Vlaanderen for a period of three years. The City of Antwerp initiated an urban-regional partnership with its peripheral municipalities in order to address the demographic challenge. A consultation platform involving all administrative levels is enabling shared visions for spatial development to take shape and to be coordinated with each other. Via a declaration of intent, the majority of the south-eastern peripheral municipalities as well as Antwerp province have pledged their cooperation based on a recognition of the need for intermunicipal and intergovernmental cooperation.

The pilot project is an educational process in which Ruimte Vlaanderen identifies and facilitates, and where needed plays an integrating role with respect to the relevant Flemish policy areas. The participation of Ruimte Vlaanderen in Antwerp's urban-regional cooperation project moreover allows the policy framework on urban regions to be fed by means of empirical insights. The project is still in the early stages, and securing the mutual trust of the city and the peripheral municipalities is forming a major challenge. Once successful, the cooperation will unquestionably represent added value for the region's spatial processes and other ongoing projects.

3.3 Shaping the framework

Besides learning from each other and working together we ask ourselves: how to ensure far-reaching subsidiarity and equal partnership? What must be changed and how can we change it?

3.3.1 Financial incentives

The new spatial narrative of Ruimte Vlaanderen is aimed at making region-specific achievements in combination with our partners. The financial aspect is a driving force that often overwhelms the logic of spatial planning.

For this reason it would be appropriate to reorient the current subsidies for local governments towards a more selective and goal-oriented subsidy policy. The subsidy can bring partners together (administrative capacity) and align the local agenda with the Flemish agenda (direction). This implies that the subsidies be used to encourage local administrations to incorporate Flemish goals into the local agenda and to take the initiative towards intergovernmental cooperation and integrated regional development. A project call could specify the Flemish thematic goal that the project must address as well as the actions that are expected. At the same time, it must be possible to conclude a subsidy promise with municipalities and provinces when a Flemish ruling containing spatial tasks is implemented, based on the desired result and the agreements made.

3.3.2 Directing the process

For the governance model to succeed, an optimisation of the available set of instruments and stimulating tools (project calls, guidelines, example booklets, etc.) will be required to bring the partners on-board. Flanders is setting out its vision, programmes are being negotiated, agendas are being laid down, and responsibilities are being agreed upon and taken on. Ruimte Vlaanderen believes that policy coordination will be a core process. Ruimte Vlaanderen is identifying and responding to processes by proactively cooperating and by assuming an active co-director role from the sideline.

For example, Ruimte Vlaanderen has been taking an active role in addressing the situation surrounding youth centres that lack the proper zoning permits. The goal is to devise a comprehensive approach to problems facing the youth centres. A strategic plan approved by the Flemish Government is being implemented by means of close cross-policy cooperation between Visit Flanders and Ruimte Vlaanderen. Ruimte Vlaanderen is studying data on the status of permitting and planning and is assessing the intentions of local partners, municipalities and provinces alike, as they relate to planning initiative. Customised atria are being organised to encourage initiative among interested municipalities. In these atria, active and cross-policy area support is being proposed by Ruimte Vlaanderen and Visit Flanders.

4 CONCLUSION

The Flemish vision of urban planning policy cannot be realised on its own. It is strongly believed that urban planning goals will be reached if we can cooperate with local administrations and stakeholders.

Today, more than ever, the government is seeking to devote effort to far-reaching subsidiarity and decisiveness. Management and supervision have given way to the assumption of responsibility and the assigning of trust. Within spacial development everyone tend to agree that each administrative level must be able to play its own role. At the same time it is in the interest of all parties to cultivate intergovernmental partnerships and finding ways to work together.

Ruimte Vlaanderen is doing so by taking charge of processes and projects which represent a high priority for Flanders and by envisioning an additional role for itself within the governance model concerning relevant local initiative. A role as a bridge-builder and co-director from the sideline that consists in being committed

to region-specific activities and directing local initiative, to process-oriented support and appropriate policy impact and last but not least to trust and knowledge sharing.

By so doing, we get a better picture of how intergovernmental cooperation can work out.

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