# Challenged or championed by local political leadership?
# The democratic anchorage of local governance networks in South-West-Flanders (Belgium).

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## Introduction

Over the last two decades we witness a proliferation of local governance partnerships in Flanders (Belgium) (Agentschap voor Binnenlands Bestuur 2012). A particular kind of partnerships are governance networks. Governance networks gather a variety of public and/or private actors in order to pursue an ambition to steer and influence local decision-making on some complex policy domain. In this working paper I will introduce a local governance network in the region of South-West-Flanders. The region is made up by thirteen municipalities with a total population of about 284.581 inhabitants (2014). The biggest municipality is the town of Kortrijk with a population of around 75.128 inhabitants (2014). South-West-Flanders is not an official governmental level but constitutes an intermediary level of governance structures between its member municipalities and the province of West-Flanders. It clusters many governance partnerships on a wide variety of policy domains ranging from culture, leisure and tourism to socioeconomic policy and spatial planning. The region's strategic decision-making is mainly centered within the realm of three organizational bodies: the intermunicipal company for regional development known as Leiedal, the Conference of Mayors and the Regional Socioeconomic Consultation Committee called RESOC. Most of the board members of these governance arenas are local elected politicians who are mandated by their respective municipal council. Other members are representing business interests, trade unions or other governmental levels.

Often it is argued that local governance networks challenge traditional merits of representative democracy like popular control, territorial sovereignty and the primacy of politics. Yet some argue governance networks might widen the scope and deepen the debate of local democracy through the participation of stakeholders and affected citizens. A central issue in this debate is the democratic anchorage of governance networks or how these alternative decision-making bodies are connected to local democracy. In political theory the role of local elected politicians is often highlighted in this regard. Some scholars argue that they can be seen as the lynchpin between both worlds. However one can question if the mere presence of mandated politicians and elected monitoring bodies is sufficient to secure the democratic anchorage of such governance networks. To answer this question one needs to open the "black box" of local governance. In order to understand how politicians act within a governance setting, I study "democracy-in-action". As a consequence this paper is less about

"what" democratic politics is then on "how" democratic politics is performed (or not) (Latour 1987; Saward 2010).

While my research draws upon the reconstruction of multiple critical cases, this paper is limited to the unraveling of a single critical case: the adoption of a regional windmill implementation strategy. I regard this case as critical since it treats a strategic and complex policy issue. The issue is strategic because wind farms were a new phenomenon for which no policy framework had been developed yet. Hence a common policy among the different local municipalities could shape how the implementation of windmills would continue within the region. The policy issue is complex since various actors had (conflicting) interests: project developers, private enterprises, public administrations, etc. Likewise the policy issue involves more than one policy domain. Treating such a policy issue within a local governance network is clearly not business as usual. Therefore it is an interesting case to scrutinize the democratic anchorage of local governance networks. Who gets to deliberate, what is represented, who gives accounts? When and how? In this paper I try to discuss how local elected politicians play their part in this. Do they challenge or do they champion the democratic anchorage of governance networks?

## The rise of governance networks. Something happened to representative democracy?

Since the last decades of the 20th century there has been much ado about the so-called rise of governance (Sørensen and Torfing 2005; Stoker and Chhotray 2009; Bevir 2011). I adopt the comprehension of Rhodes (2007) that governance equals "governing with and through networks". Hence the emergence of governance networks should not be understood as the end of state authority but rather as a redefinition of it (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). I base my understanding of governance networks further on Sørensen and Torfing (2007) who define a governance network as:

"a (more or less) stable articulation of mutually dependent, but operationally autonomous actors from state, market and civil society, who interact through conflict-ridden negotiations that take place within an institutionalized framework of rules, norms, shared knowledge and social imaginaries; facilitate self-regulated policy making in the shadow of hierarchy; and contribute to the production of 'public value' in a broad sense of problem definitions, visions, ideas, plans and concrete regulations that are deemed relevant to broad sections of the population."

Admittedly this definition is covering a wide array of phenomena. Therefore I emphasize three dimensions which are already implicitly present in this definition.

First, governance networks are "being formed, reproduced, and changed by an ecology of games between these actors" (Klijn 1996). Hence governance networks do not equal fixed institutional settings but institutional settings that *change over time*. Decision-making within a governance network is composed of many moments and all of these moments can be seen as tipping points where the whole process could have proceeded in a different direction (Block, Steyvers et al. 2010).

Second, the complexity of governance networks is defined by their *composite character*. Chains of explicit and implicit decisions get interwoven in a nexus of different governments, various arenas of governance and informal channels (Kingdon 2003; Block and Paredis 2012). Governance networks

consist of many (sub)systems, parallel circuits and tangled series of decisions (Teisman 2000; Teisman 2005; Block, Steyvers et al. 2010).

Third, governance networks involve *strategic and complex policy issues*. The issues are complex because they go beyond the existing institutional boundaries of governments and involve many policy domains. This complexity is moreover reinforced by the diffusion of resources like knowledge, competences, legitimacy and means of production among different actors. The issues are strategic because they have the ambition to define the operational margins of public policy in space and time (Mintzberg 1978; Marcussen and Torfing 2007; Blanco, Lowndes et al. 2011; Provan and Lemaire 2012; Torfing, Peters et al. 2012).

The recognition of the rise of governance networks has triggered many scholars to express a concern that something "odd" has happened to representative democracy. Claims are made about the marginalization of parliamentary institutions, the "technocratization" of political decisions, the divorces between the spheres of politics and policy making and the prevalence of "peer" forms of accountability within governance networks (Papadopoulos 2007; Papadopoulos 2013). Hence skeptics warn governance networks might undermine political equality through the bypassing of elected representatives and harm individual liberty through the blurring boundary between state and society and between public and private. Moreover governance networks are regarded as undermining the territorial basis of a political community (Sørensen and Torfing 2005).

Other scholars however emphasize the democratic repertoire has been widened with so-called post-liberal conceptions from which governance networks are no longer straightforwardly labelled as undemocratic. Governance networks, seen from this perspective, allow to open up decision-making circles to affected actors on a case-by-case basis. Moreover it is argued that governance networks potentially enhance political mobilization whereby more actors participate, discuss and deliberate policy issues. This way governance networks might respond to the fragmentation of society with tailor-made decision-making. From this point of view the blurring of the traditional borderlines is not necessary seen as a threat but as a prerequisite to increase the democratic potential of such governance settings.

Yet, it is argued that the contribution of governance networks to democratic deliberation still depends upon their democratic anchorage and in particular upon the extent to which certain mechanisms allow the reconciliation of governance networks with representative government (Sørensen and Torfing 2005; Barnett 2011; Torfing, Peters et al. 2012). Local elected politicians are often seen at the crossroads of both and given their unique position in the democratic polity they may be considered as crucial for subsequent anchorage. How local elected politicians provide linkage is key to whether governance should be considered as undermining the influence of elected authorities on the political process or should be regarded as a reorientation and readjustment of their capacity to govern in an increasingly complex environment (Hansen 2001; Aars and Fimreite 2005). In essence this connection is a matter of how local elected politicians perform, organize and control democratic representation and accountability.

## Research strategy and methods

Since the aim of my study is to analyze how local elected politicians perform representation and accountability within governance networks in Flanders, I need to uncover their roles in related decision-making processes. Therefore my analysis requires the reconstruction of political events. As such, a qualitative approach best suits the purpose of my research. I have chosen for a case study since it has the particular advantage that it allows to get "close" on how decision-making unfold in practice so I can reasonably hope that it enables me to take full account of the complexity of democratic governance. Its in-depth character allows to recognize the details, richness, completeness and within-case variance of the situation under inquiry (Yin 1984; Sadovnik 2007; Flyvbjerg 2011). Furthermore, I have chosen a so-called critical case selection (Yin 1984; Flyvbjerg 2011). This selection method is based upon the laboratory-logic that extreme cases often reveal more insight in various political mechanisms than standard situations. While one cannot simply reproduce the outcomes of a particular case in another case, these insights still transcend their particular context.

To select cases I conducted several exploratory interviews with chief-executors of municipalities and intermunicipal companies, staff members of the Flemish agency of internal affairs, academic experts, and employees of the interest group of local governments as well as the interest group of intermunicipal companies of regional development. This way I picked the region of South-West-Flanders as an extreme case in Flanders due to its long tradition of intermunicipal governance. While keeping the local institutional environment and political culture stable, I selected a variation of critical cases within the region (Van Parijs and Steyvers 2013). The regional windmill implementation strategy is just one of these cases.

In my study I adopt a triangulation of methods (Bogason and Zølner 2007). While semi-structured expert interviews provide the tacit knowledge, the analysis of policy documents, news articles, legislation, governance settings and so on, put the resulting data in perspective. For the case study described in this paper I conducted twenty-four expert interviews. Ten with local politicians (mayors, aldermen, provincial deputies and local councilors), seven with employees of local administrations, four with staff members of Leiedal and three with involved parties at RESOC. I also carried out a focus group with most of the interviewees to review my preliminary conclusions and strengthen the validity of my analysis.

## Analytical toolbox

### Decision-making processes in governance networks

In my study I draw upon a network perspective itself to understand the decision-making processes in governance networks. I think it is important to get the broad picture of a governance network straight before making any reflection on the role of local elected politicians within it.

For my understanding of the analysis of decision-making processes in governance networks, I am indebted to Teisman (2000), in particular to his conceptualization of the rounds model. In this model a decision-making process consist on *a series of rounds*. A round is defined by a particular *choice situation* on an issue. Decisions both conclude rounds as initiate new rounds with new chances for all actors involved to influence the preliminary outcome. Moreover interdependent actors do not only

make decisions jointly but also separately from each other. All these decisions mutually influence, elbow or build on each other. Seen through this lens a decision-making process consists of a series of decisions in various arenas, hence suiting the aforementioned characteristic of governance networks. A governance network in this model is formed by a *policy game* about a complex and strategic policy issue. The policy game itself takes place in and between governance arenas. A particular *governance arena* includes a set of specific *actors* that want to influence the policy issue at hand and is constituted by some organizational arrangements and a code of conduct (Teisman 2000; Koppenjan and Klijn 2004; van Gils and Klijn 2006).

Policy games are not played in a vacuum, therefore (parts of) other policy games might interfere with a specific policy game. Hence the institutional milieu, the political culture and the institutional milieu surrounding a governance network will mediate the functioning of this network (Di Gaetano and Strom 2003). The *institutional milieu* shapes key positions, possible interactions and relations in a network through both formal organizational rules and informal logics of conduct. Governance networks are also embedded in a *political culture* that prescribes the appropriate roles and goals of political actors. Lastly, macro societal parameters like economic structures, demographics, extra local regulation and so on, have an impact on the functioning of a governance network. These shape the *structural context* of a governance network. Hence if we want to analyze the democratic anchorage of a governance network we need to take this layered complexity and dynamic into account.

## Representation-in-action: the representative claim framework

Since my research confines the study on the democratic anchorage of local governance networks to the examination of processes of representation and accountability, one could argue I limit democracy to its representative variant. Scholars often introduce a dichotomy between representative democracy and participatory forms of democracy. However I follow the arguments of Saward (2010) and Urbinati and Warren (2008) that this divide constitutes a misconception. The opposite of representation in our democratic jargon is not participation but is called exclusion. The opposite of participation is not representation but non-attendance. From this view democratic deliberation is unthinkable without representation, even in a participatory setting. The liberal democratic ideal of representation reflects the desire that all potentially affected by collective decision-making might, at least in theory, have an equal opportunity to be represented on their matters of concern (Hendriks 2009). This desire is the basic principle of both the elected bodies of representative government as for the new participatory and deliberative arenas within the frame of network governance.

Yet as Pitkin (2004) pointed out, we can also not simply assume the relationship between representation and democracy. For example, the presence of a mandated politician in a governance network is not sufficient to call that governance network democratic. Therefore we need some active attachment of a governance network to the local democracies. In spite of this there has been a long tradition in political science of describing representation in terms of "standing for" rather than "acting for" (Rao 1998; Andeweg and Thomassen 2005). The focus is then on who representatives are and not on what they do (Mansbridge 2011). This view approaches representation as static. Hence it is not particularly helpful to understand representation-in-action.

Some contemporary scholars employ an action approach to representation (Urbinati 2000; Saward 2010; Disch 2011). Representation for them is not the unmediated reflection of demands and interests. It does not reproduce a state of affairs but produces effects. To scrutinize this

"representation-in-action" I adopt the representative claim framework of Saward (2010). Saward approaches representation as an economy of representative claims. For him representation involves the making of representative claims by would-be representatives. The represented interests in a decision-making process are selective portrayals in his view: "to speak for others is to construct portraits of the represented that bring selected character traits and the interests of the latter into some focus" (Saward 2005).

Saward's framework highlights five elements of representation: the maker, the subject, the object, the referent, and the audience. The maker of representations puts forward a subject which stands for an object that is related to a referent and is offered to an audience. The maker is the political agent of representation. He makes a certain claim whereby he taps into familiar understandings and existing terms. These so-called "ready-mates" come from the political culture or the institutional milieu in which he functions. A maker may often be the subject of a representative claim but this is not necessarily always the case. The subject stands for an object. Yet this object is an account of a referent, not the thing itself. Hence there might be rival accounts by different makers about the same referent. The referent is the actual constituency. Lastly, a claim is made towards a certain audience. The audience receives the claim and accepts, rejects or ignores it. Also the audience may equal the referent but this too is not necessarily always the case. Representative roles as described in traditional accounts on representation, such as trustees and delegates, are not thrown out like a baby with the bathwater but are reconsidered as resources employed by would-be representatives. Representatives might change roles (trustee-delegate), shift objects (economics-environment-…), jump constituencies (party-municipality-region) and switch audiences (colleagues-citizens-…). Hence the representative claim framework helps to analyse strategic political manoeuvres by local policy-entrepreneurs (Kingdon 2003).

Interestingly with regards to governance practices is that representation in this framework does not have to be conceptualized through an electoral link. While electoral reward and sanction remains possible for elected representatives, other would-be representatives like stakeholders, social workers, human rights advocates, etc. might claim their legitimacy from other sources than election. As Thompson (2012) rightly points out Saward's emphasis on representative claims by would-be representatives brings new normative elements to the standard account of democratic representation. It increases the responsibility of those who claim to represent someone, some group or something to submit themselves to some form of democratic accountability for their claims.

## Accountability-in-action: a social mechanism

Also with regards to accountability I have been looking for a framework that suits best the exploratory aims of my research. I found an insightful framework in Bovens (2007) understanding of accountability as a social mechanism of relations.

Based on his definition accountability can be considered as a relationship between an actor and a forum involving an obligation to explain and justify conduct (Bovens 2010). This conceptualization implies a few elements: the need of the actor to provide information about his performance to the forum, the possibility of debate between actor and forum and the ability for the forum to pass judgement on the actor through sanctions or rewards. The actor-forum conceptualization makes a distinction between three natures of obligation in accountability relationships. In a vertical relation an actor feel compelled to give an account because of the formal hierarchical position of a forum.

The nature of obligation is regarded as horizontal when the actor gives an account from a social commitment towards a forum. Lastly, an actor might also indirectly give an account to a forum. This relationship involves then a third party standing between the actor and the forum. The nature of the obligation is then regarded as diagonal (Bovens 2007; Bovens, Schillemans et al. 2008).

This definition helps to make a clear distinction with other concepts such as responsiveness or the mere communication of information since these concepts lack an element of judgement and/or deliberation (Bovens 2010). However I follow the addition of Willems (2014) that an actor does not give an account to a forum as such, but gives an account to another actor in a forum. In my understanding the notion a forum by Bovens is pretty close to the conception of an audience by Saward and therefore very compatible. As Willems (2014) argues the term "forum" evokes a strong and comprehensible image of the forum Romanum of ancient Rome, a "methaphor that captures the notion that accountability is in essence a process of discursive interaction in public". To render an account is "to construct and present a narrative of past events and actions" (Black 2008). While the actor will follow some narrative logic that make sense to himself as well as to his audience, the story he tells might alter the behaviour of both the actor as well as the forum to bring itself more into accord with the accountability narrative been told. Just as with representative claims, accountability claims might have a transformative effect and potentially build a new understanding about the objectives, means and ends of a decision-making process (Black 2008). Finally, I think the actor-forum understanding of accountability can withstand the empirical messiness of governance networks since actors can be giving accounts to different actors in various forums. The nature of each forum can range many spheres political legal, administrative, professional to social (Bovens 2007).

## An interpretative benchmark for democratic anchorage

I argue a notion of democratic representation alone can never be regarded as sufficient to normatively underpin the democratic anchorage of governance networks. While governance networks might increase access to decision-making for some affected stakeholders they might also raise chances for unequal representation (Urbinati and Warren 2008). I follow Papadopoulos (2007) in his argument that a governance network is democratically anchored as long as it is at least performing within the "shadow of democratic control". If we want to guarantee the liberal democratic ideal of political equality it seems impossible not to imagine an accountability link to an actor that has been elected through universal suffrage in a defined political space (Hendriks 2009). Hence processes of accountability play their democratic role in preventing a governance network to detach from the common good (Prezeworski, Stokes et al. 1999; Willems 2009).

Yet also democratic accountability is insufficient for the democratization of a governance network. A democracy also needs representation as a mechanism of voice in order to be deliberative. In this regard, Saward (2010) makes a distinction between a threshold for democracy and a continuum of democratization. The threshold is some form of accountability to institutions of representative government that are elected by universal suffrage. Beyond that threshold lays a continuum to make a democracy more democratic. The inclusion of a plurality of actors with various representative claims further democratizes a governance network. Clearly, beyond the threshold there are no hard-and-fast criteria to further examine the democratic anchorage of governance networks as this question is not a matter of either/or but a matter of degree. Depending on the vision on democracy one adopts, the interpretation on the democratic quality of a certain governance setting will be different (Torfing, Sørensen et al. 2009; Torfing, Peters et al. 2012).

There are three broad understandings on how governance networks can be democratically anchored (Saward 2010). First, from a principle-agent perspective one can wonder if the participating actors occupy a position in the line of democratic delegation from voters to ultimate policy makers (Strøm 2000). This is the traditional liberal view on democratic government. Second, one can examine if a governance network is embedded in a larger democratic system. This perspective argues that a governance network can be legitimate as long as it is subordinated by a democratically elected institute (Saward 2010). Last, some network approaches stress that actors are "locked into" a tight or dense network of organizational or other like ties (Saward 2005). Because actors are embedded in a network of mutually dependent relationships they are limited in how and about what they can govern since "a ruling by one triggers a review by another" (Disch 2011).

I argue that to comprehend the democratic anchorage of governance networks one needs to study both representation and accountability in practice. Through a reconstruction of policy games we get better insight on how decisions are made in which arenas by who and when, we can understand who gets to deliberate where and how and we can get clear who gives accounts about what, when and how. Finally all these insights together facilitate a reflection on the democratic anchorage of governance networks.


## Case-study: regional windmill implementation strategy

I will proceed this working paper with an application of the aforementioned analytical frames on a case study regarding the regional windmill implementation strategy in South-West-Flanders. In what follows I present a network analysis, an actor analysis and a game analysis. I conclude the paper with a reflection on the democratic anchorage of the involved governance network.

### Network analysis: the game board

The decision-making in this case mainly took place within the context of the intermunicipal company Leiedal. On the one hand through the Board of Directors at Leiedal and on the other hand by the Conference of Mayors which is hosted by Leiedal. Also the Regional Socioeconomic Consultation Committee called RESOC was involved in the process. However the latter mainly to support the proposals of the other arenas.

The Board of Directors of Leiedal observes and discusses the operational activities of the company. According to Flemish law the board is in principle composed by elected politicians who act as delegates for their respective municipalities or province. In spite of this principle Leiedal found a way to broaden the composition of members at its board. Leiedal invites two external experts with an advisory voice to its board meetings. One is a representative of the employers' federations, the other a representative of the unions. Both representatives are at the same time the vice-presidents of RESOC. Hence they act as an intermediary between both arenas. Even though Flemish law foresees in a voting procedure, it is the tradition of the board to take decisions by consensus. The meetings are not public but on demand local councilmen can ask for the minutes of these meetings.

The Conference of Mayors is a monthly informal political consultation between the thirteen mayors of South-West-Flanders. Also the local provincial deputy and the general director of Leiedal are invited. The conference is founded by Leiedal in order to involve all mayors in the regional agenda. The conference presents itself as a peer group that talks with no strings attached. Still decisions made by the conference have a certain authority in the region and other actors find it very difficult to

oppose this authority. The meetings are not public and decisions are made by consensus. Leiedal does the secretarial work of the conference.

RESOC is an advisory board on the socioeconomic policy in the region. Its main objective is to develop and uphold a strategic vision for the region. RESOC consist, according to Flemish law, of eight representatives of the employers' federations, eight members of the unions, four political representatives of local municipalities and four political delegates of the provincial council. RESOC is free to invite additional members with an advisory voice to its meetings. Hence RESOC South-West-Flanders welcomes among others the general director of Leiedal.

The game analysis (see further) shows that at times the governance process is not restricted to these political spaces alone. But it is clear that they form the backbone of the governance network. The arenas are held together by many members who function as go-betweens. Eleven board members are at least present in two of the three arenas. The general director of Leiedal is present in every meeting, just like three mayors. The interviewees stressed that these intermediary actors, especially the general director (at the time), facilitates the development of a common regional agenda. Without doubt also the long tradition of neocorporatism in Belgium and in the region in particular and the long tradition of Christian-Democratic party homogeneity in the region (until recently) underpinned the formation of this regional agenda (Block, Steyvers et al. 2010).

## Actor analysis: the players

In the actor analysis I shortly give an overview of the involved actors in the policy game and their respective resources (knowledge, legal competences, legitimacy, means of production etc.).

The **local mayors** are active through the whole process. They are directly involved through the Conference of Mayors and some are a member at the Board of Directors of Leiedal and RESOC. They possess various resources. On the one hand they have democratic legitimacy and local expertise through their function as the political heads of their respective municipalities. On the other hand they share some power together with their colleagues of their respective bench of Aldermen: they have an advisory competence for town planning and environmental permits regarding the implementation of wind farms. In the occasion that most of the produced energy will be directly consumed by the owner of the wind turbines the local executive has even full power over the town planning permit.

Besides the mayors some **other local elected politicians** are delegated to the governance arenas. If they are an Aldermen they at least formally possess the same powers as the local mayors. However as the game analysis further shows most of these actors do not play the first fiddle.

The **professional staff of Leiedal** has plenty of knowhow on spatial planning. The intermunicipal company is also owner of many business parks in the region. Due to their position as regional go-between for municipalities, policy consultation bodies, enterprises and unions they gained a certain credit as facilitator and stimulator of the regional agenda. As the game analysis points out Leiedal uses this unique position to guide the decision-making process.

The **employers' federations and the unions** are present at both the Board of Directors of Leiedal and RESOC. However they are in the first place involved as advisory members. The other actors do not regard them as decisive actors in the governance networks.

**Private enterprises** have been pivotal for the policy game. Project developers have the expertise and means of production for the implementation of windmills. Some enterprises were owners of crucial terrains for the implementation of windmills. Other enterprises were keen on producing energy to reduce their own energy costs. In the game analysis it becomes clear that some big enterprises used their economic power to influence local decision-making on the topic.

During the preparation of the regional windmill strategy citizens, action groups or environmental groups were not involved. At a certain point a local **action group** got formed in one municipality (see further).

**Other governments at higher levels** also have substantial power regarding wind farm developments. The provincial executive is entitled for the environmental permits and is authorized to judge appeals on town planning permits. The Flemish administration has the power to approve town planning permits when the energy is produced for the national grid. The Flemish government is entitled to judge appeals on the environmental permits granted by the provinces.

## Game analysis: how the game is played

### Previous history
Around the turn of last century the policy domain of renewable energy takes root. The EU approves some policy goals that have to stimulate a transition regarding the energy policies of its member states. Also Flanders commits to this policy targets. The building of big wind turbines is regarded as the prime option to reach these goals and some measures are taken to promote the development of wind farms. In this policy context the region of South-West-Flanders is confronted with the issue. Energy producers and project developers actively approach local governments and Leiedal with their plans.

Leiedal is afraid that the development of wind turbines in the region will be only guided by economic opportunities and will not consider the impact on the regional landscape. Leiedal claims to act for the region and argues the region wants to remain a high-quality spatial landscape. Therefore Leiedal successfully urges the Conference of Mayors and its board to order an exploratory study (2003) from Leiedal on the potential spatial qualities of wind farms in the region. During the research Leiedal provides (interim) feedback to the Conference of Mayors and the Board of Directors. Municipal councils, boards of Mayors and Aldermen and municipal administrations are not directly involved. The mayors however announce already in 2002 the study at the annual press talk by the Conference of Mayors. In this press talk they demand that local governments have a say in the demarcation of potential wind farm zones. A message intended for the higher level governments. For the involved actors accountability was not an issue at the time. Feedback remained at the level of the governance arenas and the legitimacy of the representative claims by the mayors and Leiedal was taken for granted by the claim-makers themselves.

### Round 1: towards a (renewed) regional strategy on wind turbines (2009)
The choice situation: the EU sharpens its renewable energy targets and Flanders loosens its wind farm zoning policy (so far only developments in business parks were possible). As a consequence there is a new wave of wind farm applications which pushes the case back on the regional agenda.

Leiedal drafts an up-to-date regional strategy on the implementation of windmills. The strategy reconfirms some general principles but does not define specific locations. The draft has been made in consultation with the governance arenas and is supported by a political alliance within the Conference of Mayors. Also the Board of Directors of Leiedal and RESOC back the regional strategy. Yet the document is not anchored in administrative terms. During the process the mayors and some board members at Leiedal stress a first time their concern that the demands by local private enterprises to produce energy at their own sites is not addressed in the document. The mayor of the municipality of Zwevegem (Z) claims he cannot support the strategy since he claims he cannot refuse an upcoming application of an important enterprise at his territory. Most (if not all) the other mayors accept this claim stating that "this company equals the municipality". The mayors agree to look the other way in this particular case and the mayor of Z does not veto the strategy. Another enterprise, in the town of Kortrijk (K), does not get the same treatment. The town of K takes a firm stand on the principles of the regional strategy and builds upon these principles in its argumentations against the project. Moreover Leiedal gets the permission by the conference and its board to start administrative procedures against any project that does not fit the strategy. The strategy is publicly presented at the annual press conference of the Conference of Mayors.

Interestingly, the mayors claim to represent the demands of local private enterprises on the one hand. While on the other hand they give a clear mandate to Leiedal to defend the spatial principles of the strategy against any project. This situation opens opportunities for cherry picking. The nature of the accountability obligation in the governance network is mainly horizontal as feedback stays between the regional arenas. Yet through lobby activities higher levels of government have been informed and Leiedal has been presenting the document at the local boards of Mayor and Aldermen. But these talks were with no strings attached. Moreover it is the staff of Leiedal, not the delegated politicians at its board who organize this feedback. Hence there seems no vertical accountability linkage active.

### Round 2: the undermining of the regional strategy (late 2009 - mid 2010)
The choice situation: two municipalities are facing a wind farm project that goes right against some principles of the regional strategy. The involved companies link the realization of their project with an additional investment in jobs. One wind farm is located at the territory of two municipalities: Harelbeke (H) and Zwevegem (Z). The other case is at the municipality of Avelgem (A). Which stance do the members of the political alliance take on these applications?

In the case of H and Z, the municipalities give an opposite recommendation for the permit and Leiedal lodges an official notice of objection against it. Z disagrees with this notice and abstains from voting in the board of Leiedal while H wants to be loyal to the regional colleagues. The province and Flanders cut the knot and approve the project. It seems all local actors could save their skin. Remarkably, the regional strategy trickled down to H's decision-making without a local word on the issue and this is exactly how the regional governors wanted the strategy to function. With the creation of the governance network the local politicians have a tool to move representative claims up a level (from local to regional interest). This representative claim is however not balanced by an active accountability link.

Whereas the governance arenas expected the former project the new development in A came as a surprise. The location of the project was also more controversial. Almost instantly a local action

group was founded. The group pointed at the fact that the local government subscribed to the regional strategy a few months before. In the local press the mayor claims that "affected citizens should use their rights" but he also drops that "there should remain space for entrepreneurs in Flanders to do their thing". The company argues that the investment is needed to remain competitive, otherwise they need to relocate their business. Due to the protest by the local action group the board of Mayor and Alderman is divided on the issue. The mayor however realizes that the plans of the company suits his plan to centralize all local industry in one economic zone. He informs his regional colleagues that he does not want to support the regional strategy any longer. This turn is not appreciated by his colleagues but they cannot change his ideas. At the same time his local political majority refuses to speak about the topic in the municipal council or in public "since the administrative proceedings are still running". The board of Leiedal decides to appeal against the application. However the municipality gives a late negative advice, which in practice means a tacit agreement. Yet the executive of the province does not approve the environmental permit and blocks the project. The enterprise lodges an appeal with the Flemish government against this decision. As a consequence of these developments the enforcement and the practical employment of the regional strategy is questioned within the regional arenas. It is peculiar that not the involved political delegates but a local action group defends the principles of the regional strategy in the municipality A. It seems the mayor is playing dogwhistle politics in his call that Flanders should support entrepreneurs while hiding at the local level behind the veil of procedural neutrality. In terms of accountability it is remarkable that the local government refuses any public debate on the issue.

### Round 3: an effort to redefine the strategy fails (mid 2010 – end 2010)
The choice situation: due to the developments in round 2 Leiedal wants to evaluate the regional windmill strategy.

During the evaluation the staff realizes that the application of the principles of the strategy means there are hardly any places in the region where wind farms can be developed. The board asks once more if the strategy cannot integrate the individual economic interests of private enterprises. The staff answers that this measure will only suit a few companies and will disturb fair competition. At this point there is a deadlock in the decision-making. Leiedal finally decides to bring the regional strategy before the individual boards of Mayor and Aldermen and ask them to take an official stance pro or contra the regional strategy. By evacuating the strategy from the governance network Leiedal hopes to bind local governments directly to the document. However every local executive board judges the strategy in a different way. Eight municipalities straightforwardly accept the strategy. Three local governments accept it conditionally, they want exceptions for business opportunities. Two municipalities (incl. A) refuse to take an official stance. As a result of these mixed reactions the consensus within the governance network does not return. The governance network rests its case and decides to wait for a new issuing initiative by Flanders.

It is intriguing that both the staff of Leiedal as some board members claim to represent the interests of small and medium-sized businesses (SMB's). This might be due to a longstanding discourse in the region that the region's wealth has been shaped by the collective efforts of SMB's. The staff of Leiedal argues that not SMB's but a few global economic players would benefit from any exceptions on the strategy, while some board members argue the region should keep on supporting these private enterprises. As a result Leiedal decides to give a full and vertical account on the strategy to all

local executive bodies. By this action the staff of Leiedal partly takes the formal function of local political delegates at its board. Yet the municipal councils remain out of play.

**Round 4: the end of a regional strategy (2011 – 2014)**
The choice situation: the Flemish government accepts the appeal on the environmental permit by the enterprise in A. Now the municipality of A has to react on a new application for a building permit by the company. Will Leiedal still lodge an objection against this application or has the regional strategy finally failed?

Since the enterprise changed it initial application, the company wants to mainly use the produced energy for itself now, the building permit should be granted by the local government. Leiedal does not any longer appeal against the case as they argue the strategy is no longer supported by the region. The local government refuses the permit in July 2012. In three months' time there are local elections and the local coalition must be kept together. If the municipality decided to take a clear position, the local elections would become a firm test on behalf of the local majority. Hence they prefer to not give a public account about the case. The enterprise gets finally its building permit through an appeal against this decision with the provincial government. However the local action group this time appealed with the Administrative Supreme Court against the decision. Finally the court judges in favor of the company's case in 2014 and the wind farm is developed.


# Reflection
In these concluding remarks I return to the title question of this working paper. Is the democratic anchorage of local governance networks in South-West-Flanders challenged or championed by local political leadership? As I pointed out the answer to this question can take various forms and depends on the view of democracy one adopts.

Firstly, from a principle-agent perspective one can argue that because the mayors play the first fiddle in the governance network there is a clear democratic line of delegation from voters to ultimate policy makers. Yet the democratic anchorage can be questioned too due to the ineffective employment of accountability linkages between the mayors, the elected councilors and the voters. Moreover it seems that the other political delegates in the governance network barely play their part in this regard. However one can wonder if these observations are particular to the local governance network or reflect a general poor accountability performance of local democracies in (South-West-)Flanders. At the same time, though mayors are not directly elected, my interviewees suggest they hold a strong democratic legitimacy within a municipality. From this view their dominance in the decision-making process might also be regarded as something positive.

Secondly, one can also observe that the governance network is embedded within a larger democratic system. The game analysis shows that the governance network seems unable to overplay its hand. The regional strategy never had any formal power and could easily be questioned by any municipal, provincial and Flemish governmental body.

Lastly, some network approaches argue that governance networks are democratically anchored as long as they are "locked into" a tight or dense network of organizational ties. I think this argument is not valid for the described case. It seems the different arenas consist of the same active group of usual suspects, while the majority of other (political) actors, especially in the boards of Leiedal and

RESOC, passively take note of the decisions made by the governance network. As a consequence there is a lot of room to maneuver for policy entrepreneurs, like some mayors and the staff of Leiedal. While in the beginning most mayors interpreted the regional strategy as a potential umbrella to hide from the wind farm storm or to actively promote a potential development site, they were also aware it would not become administratively binding. Especially, in the case of municipality A, it became clear that decisions by the governance network can become an instrument to move between levels of representative claims. One could become cynical about the influence of big private enterprises on the representative claims of some local actors. Yet this is the structural context local governments work in and it is everyone's democratic right to promote these claims. However I think it is more problematic that these representative claims stayed behind the closed doors of the governance network.

To conclude, I do think that the governance network challenges local representative democracies in South-West-Flanders. Especially, due to the very limited accountability performed or enforced by local elected politicians. This might be however a general characteristic of the respective local democracies. Moreover, at least formally speaking, the governance network is in line with the threshold of democratic anchorage. The most prominent actors in the game analysis, the mayors, enjoy popular support in their municipalities. Yet, it is obvious there are plenty of opportunities to democratize the governance network further.

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