Stability despite reforms

Structural asymmetries in Dutch local policy networks

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Summary
This article addresses the development of local policy networks in the Netherlands in the period 1996-2005. It is argued that there is a surprising stability in such networks seen from the perspective of local policymakers. Those working inside city hall as politicians and as members of the local administration remain the core members of the inner circle in policy networks, while societal groups remain outsiders and political party-groups are absent in the local policy networks. This conclusion is based on three identical standardized surveys among local politicians and top administrators at the local level, which were conducted in 1996, 2000 and 2005.

This outcome is surprising, because it is contrary to the high expectations arising from numerous institutional reforms taking place in this period, aimed among other things, at diminishing the gap between citizens and policymakers; the numerous experiments in co-production, public private partnerships, and interactive policy processes; and the widespread documentation and dissemination of outcomes of such experiments.

Possible explanations for the results are that the experiments, however successful they might have been, never got a structural follow-up, and that the structural reforms, no matter what they accomplished otherwise, did not achieve their goal in enhancing interactive policy making, because both neglected that local policy makers see the local political system as a representative democracy and not as a direct democracy. On that basis it is to be expected that support for policies by policymakers is mainly sought among influential actors, who are elected or appointed to develop policies and whose interests have to be taken into account. The public and societal groups don't satisfy that criterion. They can and do seek support from policymakers but the latter are hardly inclined to seek support from them.

1. Introduction

Since decades Dutch politicians, opinion makers, scholars in public administration and political science warn about what they call "the gap" between citizens and politicians. The problem refers to the role of citizens as outsiders, as uninterested and uninvolved inhabitants whose interests are hardly taken into account by policymakers and whose only contribution to the public interest is casting a vote once every so many years. This gap is not only seen at the national and European level, but would be especially visible at the local level. It is problematic, because it would result in growing apathy, indifference and even alienation of citizens from politics, declining turnout in local, provincial, national and European elections, and in absent political participation in general, political cynicism, and distrust in political institutions (See, among others, for an overview Van Gunsteren and Andeweg, 1993; Castenmiller, 1994).

This widely shared diagnosis among Dutch scholars resulted in the last decades in many processes to diminish the gap. In the late 1980s the Dutch government started a decentralization operation, intended to give more authority and power to municipalities. It was argued, among other things, by its expected effect on citizen participation, because it was thought to
be much easier to get involved in policy-processes on the local level than in such processes at the national level.

In the first half of the 1990s the Dutch government wanted to promote what they called political and administrative renewal, again with, among other things, the same goal in mind. Involve people at the start of policy processes so their interests and opinions will be taken into account during the remainder of such processes. At the end of the 1990s the country was renowned for its so-called “poldermodel”, of which the idea was to consult everybody before making a decision. At that time the possibility of holding referenda was introduced. This was expected to promote public debate and public involvement and to increase the influence of citizens in the decision making phase of policy-processes. Finally, in 2002 Dutch government changed the local political system from one in which monism was the adage to a system in which dualism became the adage. It meant changing the structure in such a way that the local councils would become more influential, that the distance between local council and the executive body of aldermen and major increased, that the council got its own administrative support and the councillors would become more responsive to the public at large.

Such structural changes were not the only measures in order to diminish the gap. During the last decades many experiments with new ways of policymaking were conducted. Experiments with co-production, interactive policymaking, policy networks, forms of deliberative democracy in all kinds of ways were initiated to progress toward forms of direct democracy. These experiments are well documented in the literature (See, among others, Edelenbos & Monnikhof, 2001; Pröpper, 1998, 1999).

To be expected from these structural reforms and experiments is that the way local policymaking processes are designed has structurally changed and that the role of societal groups has become more influential. Whether that is indeed the case is investigated in this paper. Its purpose is to show whether and which changes are visible in the policy networks surrounding local policymakers.

The data on which this paper founds its conclusions are derived from a three times repeated survey among local policymakers in the Netherlands. From 1996 onwards, a total of 1045 local politicians and top administrators were asked who they sought support from in case of complex policy-processes and who sought their support in such circumstances. The details of this repeated survey are presented in section 4. The responses as presented in section 5 of this paper give a surprising overview of the development of local policy networks from their perspective.

Before these data are presented we first address the issue of the gap itself. This is done in the next section. Subsequently we address the structural reforms that took place in the Netherlands in the last 20 years, and we will give a concise overview of the experiments and the dissemination of the results thereof in order to argue that the Dutch seem to have tried everything to diminish the gap between citizens and policymakers. The paper is concluded with some reflections on the way the outcomes can be explained.

2. The gap

To address the distance between citizens and politics is to assume that such a distance poses a problem for mature democracies and that representation and casting a vote now and then is insufficient. This section concisely discusses the nature of this problem and its causes as perceived by Dutch scholars.

2.1. The problem

Few Dutch scholars still see the distance between citizens and politics as the necessary consequence of the division of labour in democracies, which is a fundamental aspect of a system of
representative democracy, and enhances the quality of political decision making in which policymakers have to weigh the total of societal interests (Daemen, 1998). Many others see representative democracy itself as a problem which is unable to bridge the gap between citizens and elected politicians (Middendorp, 1991; Castenmiller, 1994; Pröpper & Steenbeek, 1999; Edelenbos & Monnikhof, 2001; Denters & Geurts, 1998). Sometimes they base this problem on very old philosophies like those of De Tocqueville or Montesquieu. Denters & Geurts, do so, for instance, when they see forms of direct democracy and active citizenship as a school for democratic citizenship, better administration and a protection against a too intrusive and powerful government, which eventually results in a qualitatively advanced form of democracy (Denters and Geurts, 1998: 12-13). They perceive that the problems facing such a democracy have increased since the 1980s, because of the increased emphasis on efficiency, service delivery and the corresponding role of citizens as clients in which political factors became invisible and a growing technocratic form of policymaking was visible (Castenmiller, 1994: 81; Derksen 1987, 1989; Castenmiller & Veldheer 1989). As they argue, political participation a signal of a connection between citizens and the political system, as an indispensable input for personal development, the only guarantee for truly democratic decision making and a necessary condition for achieving accountability, efficiency, procedural fairness and distributive fairness (Castenmiller 1994: 4 who cites Weatherford, 1992: 150-151). They see it as the only way to form a countervailing power of different societal forces to the otherwise undoubtedly biased and unbalanced power relations and policies of government.

2.2. The causes

The causal models as proposed by Dutch scholars are equally important as the normative judgments. Here we just mention the most often mentioned causes.

The first large scale studies into the subject were conducted after the local elections of 1990 which had a disappointing turnout of no more than 61.3%. It was shown that the municipalities were not seen as political entities, and that there was a close network between politicians and administration, but absent contacts between local officials, either elected or appointed, and societal groups or citizens. People were found to be still politically interested, but hardly anyone of the elected politicians was interested in what they had to say and the politicians were inclined to take the solution of local problems in their own hands (Derksen, 1998: 63).

Others found that policy preferences were very different when comparing local politicians and local citizens, that political parties should manifest themselves as channels of interest formation, that the role of civic society, the societal organizations could increase, and that the bureaucratic competencies of citizens could improve (Middendorp, 1991: 273).

Still others point at the invisibility of local politics, in which political choices are masked under a layer of bureaucratic consultations, national boundary conditions, fixed coalition agreements and technocratic support. In local politics the role of political parties would have changed into one of catch-all parties, and the dominant idea would be that citizens are just consumers (Pröpper & Kessens, 2000). Local politics in these scholars' conception is sometimes too much about prestige, a political game in which personal standing is at stake or just a leisure game aimed at staying in office and should be more about public interests and citizen involvement (Ibid, 18).

Notable is that most observers point to micro-level political factors as causes of the problem. They point to political parties who neglect their role in the process of interest formation and local politicians who are encapsulated in seemingly administrative processes, whereas they should point out the political consequences of their choices in order to stimulate the public debate.
3. Reforms

This section argues that the Dutch tried nearly everything to diminish the gap between citizens and politics. It argues that three structural reforms were in order since the 1980s, namely decentralization at the end of the 1980s, political, social and administrative renewal in the 1990s, and introducing so-called local dualism within municipalities at the beginning of the new century.

Next to and partly as a consequence of these structural reforms many ad-hoc experiments were carried out in different municipalities, often designed most originally and innovative. There were experiments designed to practice co-production, interactive policymaking and public participation and civil empowerment.

Thirdly, many publications appeared disseminating the positive outcomes of evaluations interactive policy processes at the local level and giving advice on how to manage such interactive policy processes.

3.1. Structural reforms

The first reform which had as its goal the promotion of citizen participation was the so-called decentralization-impulse at the turn from the 1980s to 1990s. Several state commissions had addressed the problem and white papers were written, all stating that centralization had gone too far and that the national government preferred decentralization. There was the commission Van Thijn in 1982, the commission Franssen in 1992 all arguing that decentralization could provide for tailor-made policies fit to resolve the specific local problems which vary over municipalities. Because the policy making process would be closer to the citizens, decentralization would be fruitful for democracy and bring the administration as close to the citizens as possible which was expected to improve the accessibility of government. Other effects that were foreseen, can be understood in the dominant new public management ideology of those days, namely the wish for deregulation, efficiency, less government, effectiveness and the possibilities of tailor-made policies (see also De Vries, 2000)

As a consequence many tasks and responsibilities were transferred to municipalities during the early 1990s. Policy areas like welfare, and more specifically public libraries, social cultural work, sport, recreation, elderly work, but later also social insurance policies, youth delinquency, social housing, city renewal, prevention in the health sector, regional economic policies, the care of monuments and policies for the disabled all became a responsibility of municipalities. Municipalities seem to have become less dependent on national government, because a larger proportion of the grants they receive are general grants, i.e. grants without restrictions as to the usage thereof. Nevertheless local autonomy to collect taxes and levies in order to finance their policies themselves is compared to other countries still very low. An expected effect of decentralization on the decreasing distance between citizens and politics was abrogated by the merging of municipalities at the same time. Because one perceived the decisiveness and quality of service delivery to be a function of scale, and one was sceptical about the possibilities of municipalities to deliver the services with regard to the decentralized tasks, many smaller municipalities had to merge. Where there were 672 municipalities in 1990, this has been reduced to 458 at the start of 2006. The side-effect of this merging-process was that it increased the distance between the local population and its administration.

A reform which occurred during the 1990s was the adage of renewal. At the local level one should strive for political, administrative and social renewal. The disappointing outcome of the turnout at the elections of 1990 resulted in ideas of reform. It was, for instance, thought outdated that the mayor was not elected by the people but appointed by the crown, that there
were no possibilities to organize local referenda, that the local council -although being formally the highest authority at the municipal level, was weaker than the executive of aldermen and mayor, that citizens lacked possibilities to influence policies, that only a very slight minority was willing to become a member of a political party, and that local politics was inert and to closely connected to the local administration and national politics. In 1991 the first local referenda are held, however, when - especially in Amsterdam and Rotterdam - such referenda resulted in an outcome contrary to the plans of the local politicians, local politicians became hesitant to proceed with this instrument. The same process was visible regarding the direct election of the mayor. Experiments in some municipalities showed a very low turnout and indifference among the population for such elections. Nevertheless the idea of political, administrative and social renewal became an umbrella to start many experiments. (See below in 3.2.)

The third structural reform intended to diminish the gap between citizens and politics at the local level came about in 2002 under the name of dualism. At that time the problem was perceived in terms of too close connection between the local council and the executive of aldermen and mayor. A state commission concluded that the council was too much involved in the process of policy development and had neglected, or lacked the time to control the executive or be responsive to demands from the population. Given the time devoted to policy development it lacked time to keep up the contacts with citizens and societal groups or to initiate political debates (Pröpper, 2000: 37). The state commission (commission Elzinga) proposed that the controlling powers, the judiciary powers, the administrative powers and the budgetary powers of the local councils should be strengthened. To do so it was said to be needed to create a distance between the councillors from the executive. The latter did not have to be members of the council anymore and could be recruited from outside the council. The councillors should focus on involving citizens, on initiating political debates, to translate the demands of citizens in policies and to create more opportunities for public participation. More transparency in the division of labour between the two was required so the commission said. This would result in a more responsive local administration, which acts more according to the wishes of citizens and which is able to weigh of the different interests. The commission not only proposed structural changes, but also pleaded for a change of culture within municipalities to increase local democracy.

3.2. Local experiments

Next to the structural reforms and partly as a consequence of these reforms the last 15 years are also characterized by many experiments in direct democracy at the local level. First there are of course the experiments with the new instruments such as the possibility to organize referenda and to allow citizens to speak during council meetings. Within the framework of social renewal one experimented with the organization of citizen groups and initiatives, the creation of neighborhood groups. Many municipalities initiated hearings, city-talks, local forums and platforms, think tanks, quality panels, citizen advice circles, and political markets, or council meetings outside city hall, "meetings on location", but also in some municipalities the right was given to citizens to put themes on the agenda of the council (Korsten, 1979; Pröpper & Steenbeek 1998; Thomassen, 1991; Veldboer, 1996; Van Deth et al, 1994).

Broader information from citizens is sometimes obtained by means of surveys, forums, citizen juries, community polls, round table talks, workshops, and starting meetings.

Other municipalities changed the format of citizen participation in order to attract a larger public into theatre plays, shows, cabaret and other playful settings. One also experimented with the new possibilities provided by ICT especially to attract young people (Jansen, 2002). This ranges from opening municipal websites, sometimes with the possibilities for interaction,
chat-sessions by councillors and aldermen, internet panels, to experiments using msn or even SMS and digital debates.

Furthermore, one experimented with giving citizens their own budget to solve neighbour- hood problems. The number of local experiments is nearly infinite and many different formats were tried. In the second half of the 1990s one started with experiments in co-production.

It seemed that every municipality had at least once a year start an experiment which was innovative and playful. Many of these experiments got positive evaluations in the sense that the organizers were satisfied with the idea, the implementation thereof and the results in terms of the originality of the ideas that came about.

In the second half of the 1990s the idea of co-production was introduced, in which municipal officials together with citizens and societal groups initiate a policy, define the problem, and formulate policy alternatives based on horizontal instead of hierarchical relations. (See Tops, et al, 1996). The idea is that the contribution of citizens and societal organizations is indispensable for successful policy processes (Tops et al, 1996:5).

3.3. The dissemination of outcomes
Notwithstanding the enthusiasm with which such innovative experiments are designed, criticism is heard also. Of course most would agree that citizens should be heard, of course local officials take democracy seriously, but many local officials see tensions that are hard to solve. Many see, for instance, tensions occurring in experiments with local democracy. They point to unresolved problems regarding dilemmas like,

- The problem of bottom-up development of policies versus representative democracy in which the council has the last say,
- People that show up at hearings versus the population at large,
- Information sharing versus the dominance of technocrats,
- Where does it end? This refers to the often holistic approach of citizens versus the sector approach of administrators,
- Innovative policy proposals versus path dependencies and boundary restrictions,
- Desirability versus feasibility,
- The playfulness of experiments in order to attract people versus the seriousness of politics.

The existence of such tensions and not knowing how to deal with them can cause hesitation in designing such experiments or to implement the structural reforms. That is one of the reasons why there have appeared so many books, reports, and articles in professional journals in the Netherlands about the proper way to design such experiments and to deal with interactive policymaking processes. Manuals and instructions about the process-management, project-management, rules of thumb, models, and factors of success and failure were all widely disseminated. Partly this was done by academic scholars (Edelenbos & Monnikhof, 2001; Hendriks, 1996; Van de Poel, 1998; Priemus, 2000; Pröpper, 1999; Teisman, 2002) but also by the national association of municipalities, national departments, research and advisory agencies, and the relatively large municipalities who were willing to share their experiences and wanted others to learn of them (Albeda, 2001; Arcadis, 2002; Berenschot, 2000; Canoy, 2001; DHV, 2000; GIDO, 2002; Groenewoud, 2002; Gemeente Hengelo, 2005; IPP, 2002; Van Duivenbode, 2002; Ministry V&W 2002; Ministry VROM 1999; Stichting Rekenschap, 2001). Most experiments were evaluated, most evaluations were disseminated, any advice needed can be obtained and every advisor is willing to help out.

Indeed, we can say that in the last 15 years the Dutch tried everything to enhance interactive policy processes and to make direct democracy at the local level work. The next sections will describe whether this had any impact on the networks of local officials in this period.
4. The survey

The data used in this research come from an international research project, titled ‘Democracy and local governance’. This international comparative project started after the events of the late 1980s in Eastern Europe. In all the countries involved, thirty communities comprising between 25,000 and 250,000 inhabitants were selected at random; within each of these communities about 15 political leaders and 15 leading officials were interviewed, resulting in a database of over 15,000 respondents. The interviews/questionnaires were standardized in order to make valid comparisons possible. It is a large scale survey into the background and opinions of local elites in a large number of countries in the northern hemisphere. The project includes the gathering of data from other countries such as the USA, Sweden, Switzerland and the Netherlands. (See among others De Vries, 1999, 2000; Jacob et al, 1993).

The data of the Netherlands consist of three identical surveys, conducted in 1996, 2000 and 2005. The respondents were the leading local politicians and administrators in 30 Dutch municipalities. The remainder of this chapter centers on the outcomes of these surveys and the tendencies being visible in the 10 years under investigation. We first took a random sample of municipalities with a number of inhabitants between 25,000 and 250,000. Because of the changing size of municipalities and the mergers that occurred, we could not make a further selection between cities with less than 25,000 inhabitants, between 25,000 and 99,000 and above 100,000. Most municipalities are in size between 25,000 and 150,000 inhabitants and the largest cities – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht – were excluded from the sample.

In the surveys conducted in 1996, 2000 and 2005, with 423, 283 and 339 respondents respectively, the political respondents were the senior politicians, the floor leaders of the political parties, the aldermen and the major. The administrative respondents were the town clerks, the members of the board of directors and the department heads. The response rates for the 1996 sample was 60 percent, for the 2000 sample 45 percent and for the 2005 sample 35%. The questionnaires were sent by mail after consultation with the chief public administrator and the major.

The respondents were asked, among other things, about the severity of municipal problems, the effectiveness of policies, responsibility, influence, contacts, and important in this respect, they were given a large number of statements with which they could (completely) agree or disagree on a four point Likert scale.

The questions as formulated in the questionnaire and addressed in this paper were the following:

1. When you as a leader face a complex policy process in which support from others is necessary, to whom do you usually turn?

   0 Local party leaders
   0 Local elective officials
   0 Local media
   0 Higher level party leaders
   0 City managers or top administrative officials at the local level
   0 Local leaders of political movements
   0 Local civic, professional or reform groups
   0 Special groups in local party organization
   0 Administrative colleagues
   0 State, county or higher administrative officials
   0 Local business groups (e.g. Chamber of Commerce)
   0 Local trade unions
   0 Public or citizens generally
   0 Local ethnic religious or racial groups
   0 Neighborhood organizations

2. Which people turn to you in order to get support in case of a complex policy process?

   Same categories
The responses to these questions are indicative for the networks surrounding the local policymakers in the Netherlands as seen from their own perspective. The first question indicates the inclination of local policymakers to involve specific actors in policy processes.

The second question indicates which other actors turn to the respondent and tells us to which actors he or she is usually listening and who give input to them in policy-processes.

Our data may be criticized. First of all, response rates declined over the years from 60% to 35% which is a problem with this kind of research. Although we did not find any structural deviations from the questionnaires returned and those sent, according to size of municipality, function of respondents and non-respondents within the municipality and party the politicians belong to, there is always the possibility that the response is biased in some other way.

Second, one can object to the question used and dispute whether this is a valid one given the underlying research question. Validity is not something one can prove. One can only argue such validity.

Questions always resulting from using surveys are related to the issue whether there is a correspondence between the real actions of people and what they say. As will be shown in the next section when the results are presented, we are supported by the stability of the answers over the years and the stable differences in the responses between politicians and administrators. Such a structure in the responses is not expected when people respond at random or in deviation of the real practice.

The point remains that the networks that will be presented are only networks from the point of view of the respondents. It is seen as an indication for their inclination to involve societal groups and citizens in general in complex policy processes. It implies that one should not over-stress the details in the outcomes, but rather look at the overall structure as indicative for the problem at hand.

5. The development in local policy networks

This section presents the analysis on the data. First the descriptive analysis is presented. This gives an overview of the changes and stability in the networks of local policymakers from their own perspective. To whom do they listen and who do they turn to in order to get support? It also gives an indication of insiders and outsiders. Second, the network is divided in three subgroups, people working within city hall, societal groups and political party groups. It is argued that these three groups differ in being part of the core of the network or having a role as outsider. In the third place it is argued that the inclination to incorporate the three groups in one's network is dependent on different features and that the same characteristics of local policymakers sometimes have an opposite effect on the inclination to incorporate any of the three groups.

5.1 Giving ears to everybody?

In figure 1-a and 1-b the responses are given to the second question as given above. It indicates which groups turn to the respondents in order to get support.

In figure 1-a the responses of the local administrators are presented and in figure 1-b the responses of the local politicians. Figure 1-a shows that local administrators are especially responsive to people in their direct surroundings, namely all those working within city hall. More than 80% mentions local elected politicians, local administrators and the top of the local administration. As soon as a group outside city hall comes to the fore, the percentages drop rapidly. Although there are differences, percentages for these groups are all below 50%. It is indicative for the internal orientation of local administrators. Their input comes especially from other administrators and the political representatives.
Figure 1a and 1b. Openness of local politicians and administrators

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The second peculiar observation is that the responses are rather stable over the years. Despite minor deviations, the overall structure of this network does not change. Citizens and neighbourhood groups are mentioned somewhat less often over time, reform groups somewhat more often, but the ranking of the different groups remains the same.

In figure 1-b the same responses are given for local politicians. The first thing seen, when looking at the picture and comparing it to the one above, is that it has a very different structure. Although political colleagues also for them do form an important reference group, the normal local administrators are hardly mentioned anymore, whereas neighbourhood groups, reform groups, local media and citizens are mentioned more often then they were by local administrators. The local politicians seem to be, compared to local administrators, more susceptible to groups outside the walls of city hall.

This indicates that the idea of a gap might have to be modified. Societal groups and citizens in general are heard by local politicians. Only the local top administrators are more distant to these societal groups.

Similar for both groups is that political parties, in whatever form, party-leaders, special groups in the organization, or local boards of the political party, are mentioned neither by administrators nor politicians. These organizations hardly seem to give input in complex policy processes. This might have been expected because of their classic role with regard to interest formation and aggregation, or as it is called in other theories, their role as gatekeepers. These figures indicate that they don't have this role at the local level in the Netherlands.

5.2. Variance in support seeking behaviour

Listening to various groups inside city hall, societal groups and groups within political parties is one thing. That is important with regard to the first phases of a policy process. Something quite different is whom the same politicians and administrators seek support from in such policy processes. This refers to the first question given above in section 4 and seems to be more indicative for the influence of these networks in the phase of decision-making and the seeking of legitimacy for the choices made. The responses are presented in figure 2-a and 2-b, which are otherwise completely comparable to figure 1-a and 1-b.

Figure 2-a shows, when comparing it to figure 1-a, that local administrators seem even more internally oriented when they are asked whom they seek support from. They seek support mainly from those working within city hall and administrators within higher levels of (National and provincial) government. Societal groups, citizens and party groups completely disappear from the network. The comparison shows they are inclined to listen to citizens in general, but seek legitimization for their policies among their colleagues and the local politicians.

As for the Dutch local politicians, the majority thereof also looks mainly for support from their political colleagues and the top of the local administration, but otherwise there is much more variation in their inclination to seek support from societal groups, political parties and citizens in general than their administrative counterparts. This variation is especially seen with regard to local leaders of political parties, citizens, neighbourhood groups and leaders of reform groups. When comparing figure 2-b with figure 1-b it is shown that much less local politicians are inclined to seek support than are inclined to listen to such citizens, neighbourhood groups and leaders of reform groups.

Another point is that many theories on the gap between citizens and politics mention the close ties between local and higher level administrators and local and higher level politicians. These data don't support that observation. The core of local networks surrounding local policymakers consists of local organizations and local people. Higher level administrators and higher level party leaders are hardly mentioned by local politicians as groups to seek support from.
Figure 2.a. and 2.b *Support seeking by local policy makers*

Groups seeking support from local administrators:
- local elective politicians
- local administrators
- local top administration
- administrators higher level
- local party leaders
- local Neighborhood group org
- local ethnic religious groups
- Public citizens in general
- local unions
- local business chamber of commerce
- leaders in business
- special groups in local party org
- reform groups
- leaders from political movements
- higher level party leaders
- local media

Support seeking by local administrators:
- local elected officials
- administration in general
- local top administrators
- higher level administrators
- local party leaders
- neighborhood organizations
- local ethnic religious groups
- public in general
- trade unions
- local business chamber of commerce
- Business leaders
- special groups in local party org
- reform groups
- local leaders political movements
- higher levels party leaders
- local media
Their influence goes through the local administrators. The local network, although indicative for a still existing gap, is indeed mainly local.

Another observation deviating from current notions on the gap between citizens and politics is the often mentioned close resemblance of local politicians and local administrators and the criticism that politicians have become bureaucrats and act as if they are administrators. These data are not congruent with this notion. The structure of the network surrounding local politicians is very different from the structure of the network of local administrators. The latter’s orientation is for instance more internal than that of the former.

When comparing the figures over the years, an overall stability is seen. This goes for local administrators as well as local politicians in their support seeking behaviour, although this stability is stronger for administrators. A growing part of local politicians seems to be seeking external support over the years and a diminishing group of the politicians seeks administrative support. Neighbourhood groups, citizens and leaders of reform groups are more often mentioned in 2005 than in 1995, local top administrators are mentioned less often. This can be seen as an indication that the gap between citizens and politics, as discussed before, slowly diminishes.

The next section will address this point further, by presenting the data other ways. The presentation given here is meant to improve the insight in the role of all separate groups in the network of local politicians and administrators. In the next section the data are aggregated to see if the preliminary conclusions are substantiated.

5.3. Symmetry and stability

The results presented above showed three things. First that there are large differences between local politicians and local administrators, second that there are differences between groups working inside city hall, societal groups and groups in political parties, and third that there is a difference between listening to groups and taking the opinions of these groups into account by seeking their support for policies.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of these trends is subjective and one might say that the changes are marginal. The rank order of importance of groups over the years hardly changes. In this interpretation, the structure of local networks seen from the perspective of local policymakers was and still is indicative for a representative democracy. The local officials listen to societal groups and citizens, but seek support especially among their colleagues and those locals having political power.

In this section this point is argued further, by presenting the data in a different way. The outcomes of the analysis above suggest that there are three circles surrounding local policymakers which differ in tightness and symmetry. The aggregated position of these groups seen from the perspective of local policymakers is given in table 2.

This table shows first, that there is the inner circle of local elected politicians and local top administrators holding on to one another. The vast majority of them is asked for support by these colleagues within city hall and is inclined to ask for support from these colleagues. It is the tight, stable and relatively symmetric core of local policy networks. It is tight because of the high percentage of the respondents mentioning them. It is stable because these percentages hardly change over the years and it is symmetric because the support seeking works two ways, namely towards the policymakers and asked by them.

Next to this core there is the influence of political parties, given in the last two columns of table 2. It is striking that their support is hardly sought and that they are mentioned not very often as actors that express wishes or seek support from the policy makers. For politicians as well as local administrators political parties belong to the outsiders. This is peculiar, because one of the classic functions of political parties is to aggregate wishes and demands and to act
as a gatekeeper in the political system. At the local level in the Netherlands this function is hardly recognized by local policymakers.

### Table 2. Three groups in local networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present position</th>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Internal support seeking by respondent</th>
<th>Internal support seeking to respondent</th>
<th>Societal support seeking by respondent (excl. parties)</th>
<th>Societal support seeking to respondent (excl. parties)</th>
<th>Political party support seeking by respondent</th>
<th>Political party support seeking to respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>politicians</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>* 71</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The average percentage of internal actors the local politicians in 1996 seek the support from in case of complex policy processes is 71%.

Third, there is the position of societal groups and the public in general as indicated by the two centre columns in table 2. Local politicians as well as the administrators are more frequently asked for their support by these groups than by political parties, but it cannot be said that these societal groups belong to the inner circle. The position of the societal groups differs from that of the inner circle, because it is characterized by an asymmetry. Although societal groups seek the support from local politicians and to a lesser degree that of administrators, the policymakers are much less inclined to seek the support of those societal groups. Another peculiar finding is that the position of societal groups is stable during the whole period of investigation, while it was expected, because of the structural reforms and the experiments as described above, that their position would become more influential.

Of course one can present such data in different ways. Another insightful way of presentation for me was the following. Almost all of the local politicians seek the support of more than one third of the internal actors (93, 92, and 87% for each of the years respectively). For the local administrators this is a constant of 94% over all years. On average half of the local politicians seek support from all internal actors and more than 60% of the administrators do so. On average 25-30% of the politicians seek the support of more than one third of the societal groups and hardly anyone seeks the support of all of them. Less than 15% of the local administrators normally seek the support of more than one third of the societal groups and none of them seeks the support of all of them.

### 6. Explanations for the outcomes

The outcomes show the rather unexpected result of structural stability of the network and the question remaining is how to explain this. The unexpectedness of the results lies in the fact that the Dutch seem to have tried everything to diminish the gap between public and politics during the last 15 to 20 years, while the structure of the network of local policymakers remains quite stable in the same period. This section addresses the question what might be explaining factors. It presents four possible explanations and arguments that substantiate them.
It is not possible to do any quantitative analyses on this question, because quantitative analyses are meant to explain variance. This section tries to give an explanation for the relative stability of the networks surrounding local policymakers. Therefore, we have to be satisfied with a more interpretative analysis.

The four explanations are:

- The gap is not a problem for the local policymakers, but in their view an inherent and necessary consequence of living in a representative democracy,
- The diagnosis of the problem of the gap shows serious deficiencies. The problem was tackled in the wrong way,
- The structural reforms were ineffective because they were not primarily aimed at reducing the gap, but also at resolving other problems and the gap was just an side argument to convince others that the reform should go through,
- The experiments with interactive policymaking were ineffective, because they did not get a structural follow up, which is due to the problem that the outcomes conflict with laws, interests, boundary conditions and preferences of the local councillors.

Sup 1. The gap is not a problem at all, but is only constructed as a problem by people who have nothing better to do. Indeed this seems to be the view of many local policymakers and citizens in the Netherlands. The Dutch national and local political system is by law first and foremost a system of representative democracy. Citizens may vote every four years and have to rely on their representatives to make the best decisions for them. The local policymakers act, as shown in the analysis presented above, as if they live in a representative democracy. They listen to societal groups and citizens when confronted with complex policy processes, but seek support for their plans among those who matter, that is their colleagues within city hall. They don’t seem to see the point in seeking support from citizens if they can develop, decide about and implement policies without them. Their dominant view seems to be that citizens have elected them to take the decisions for them. This view is supported by the response to other questions in the survey. For instance, the two major ways our respondents think people can be influential is by joining parties and by voting (in 2005 78% and 73% respectively).

The citizens themselves also do not want to be bothered. The latest issue of the yearly report from the Social Cultural Planning Agency mentions that surveys among citizens point out that an increasing number of them does not want to participate in policy processes. They want the government to take care of their interests. The same research reports that membership of societal organizations was never as low as now at the beginning of this millennium. The conclusions to be drawn from those figures is that citizens want things to be done for them instead of participating in what they often call boring procedures under the guise of public participation, interactive policy making co-production or what other novel terms are invented (SCP, 2005).

It also implies that the problem of the gap is interesting for intellectuals and scholars in political science who remember massive participative procedures of the 1960s and 1970s, but not for ordinary people, nor for practitioners. Of course, the former may have convincing fundamental, moral and philosophical arguments to underline the necessity of at least a balance between direct and indirect democracy. (Jolles, 1974; Norris, 1999; Denters, 1998; OECD 2001; Aarts, 1991; Van Kersbergen, 1995; Castenmiller, 1994; Van Gunsteren, 1994; Simonis et al, 1991; ROB, 2005). However, it seems that these arguments have not been very convincing for the outside world of local government.

Sup 2. A second explanation is that the diagnosis of the problem is seriously flawed, because where the problem is one between citizens and government, the structural solutions sought
until now only address the relations within government. The decentralization tendencies at the end of the 1980s were primarily a matter of changing the power and authority over policy areas from one governmental layer to another. Altering the monistic local system to a dualistic local system at the beginning of this decade, changed the power relation between the (controlling) local council, which was strengthened, vis-à-vis the (executive) the board of mayor and aldermen, whose power diminished. The idea was that such structural reforms would have an impact on the relation between citizens and government. Local politics would become livelier and hence more interesting for citizens. However, this was only partly a valid idea. With regard to decentralization, the structural reform indeed resulted in conflicts between governmental layers and conflicts within city hall did emanate as a consequence of the introduction of dualism. The number of conflicts within city hall is indeed large, which is indicative for the statement that politics at this level has become livelier. When asked about conflicts within the community almost 50% of our respondents first of all points to conflicts within city hall as interfering with policymaking processes. It is the dominant type of conflict in the Dutch municipalities and by far exceeds conflicts in the communities based on differences based on race, religion, income, education, societal position, and work relations et cetera, which are mentioned only by a small minority of the respondents. The idea that such liveliness would induce people to become more interested and participate does not seem to be valid. Although the local population might read and laugh about such conflicts within the administration, it does not seem amused by them and the conflicts certainly do not induce local inhabitants to participate. The same is also seen with regard to problems. When in the latest survey of 2005 the respondents were asked what the major problems in the community were, 45% of them pointed to problems within city hall and 28% mentioned municipal finances. The first social problem mentioned was social housing by 25% of the respondents. It indicates that the reforms had the effect that the local administration became very busy with these reforms and the consequences for the mutual relations instead of moving them to strengthen their relation with local societal groups.

Sup 3. The third explanation is that the structural reforms could have made a difference if the aim thereof had been primarily to enhance local empowerment. However, there were several goals involved in the decentralization process and several goals with regard to introducing a dualistic system at the local level of which enhancing civic empowerment was only one and not the most important.

As to the decentralization process not only goals were mentioned with regard to enhancing citizen participation, but also with regard to efficiency, tailor made policies, flexibility, innovation, effectiveness. Especially the impacts on efficiency operation were considered to be important. A 15% reduction in financial support was introduced at the same time policy areas were decentralized, because of the expected efficiency gains (De Vries, 2000). This suggests that the impact of decentralization on citizen empowerment might only have been seen as a possible side effect and it certainly was not the main objective of this operation.

With regard to the introduction of dualism this also was not just aimed at the representative role of the local councils, but several goals were also formulated toward the controlling and boundary setting role of the local council. When, for instance, during the project dualistic local government (PDG) local councillors were asked which instruments they saw to fulfill their boundary setting role, making green papers to involve citizens were seen as only one of the possible instruments, next to the budget, regulations, white papers, planning, agenda setting, quality control, amendments to policy proposals, interpellations and contra-expertise. When referring to the function of control, interactive evaluation was only one aspect mentioned among other instruments like making use of the local auditor, evaluation committees, hearings, interpellations, asking questions to the board of aldermen, and using performance meas-
urement (cf. www.vernieuwingsimpuls.nl). Again one might say that the prime objective of this operation was not to enhance civic empowerment. The two examples suggest that given the multiple goals of both operations, some of these goals were emphasized and that to enhance public participation did not belong to these prioritized objectives.

Sup 4. As to the experiments, one can say that the organizers thereof did everything to make them a success. The variety in designs, the thorough evaluations and dissemination of results are to be judged positively. However, the problem is that it remained experiments lacking a structural follow-up. In the Netherlands local elections are ones every four years and the representatives seem to be satisfied when one experiment with interactive policymaking is conducted in this period. However, the local politicians and especially those who are experienced seem to think that such processes should not be widespread. When we presented them with the statement that widespread participation often results in undesirable conflicts, 60% of the experienced local representatives responded in the affirmative and 40% of the newly elected councillors did so. Also, whereas only 10% of the newcomers think they cannot be too careful with people in general, this is twice as high among the experienced politicians. This is indicative for the fact that, seen from the local councillor’s point of view, experiences with interactive policymaking processes may not be that positive after all. Especially the experienced local officials might see problems arising due to such processes and are inclined to see a potential conflict between direct democracy and their own position as elected representatives, the desirability of policies and the feasibility thereof, the restrictions given in, for instance, law and the unrealistic outcomes of such processes and the one-sided interest based outcomes and the general interest for which they are responsible. Additional supportive evidence for the impact of these dilemmas is offered by multivariate analyses that point to the fact that right wing, male, experienced and religious local politicians are less to seek the support of societal groups, political parties and citizens than first time elected, female, left wing and non-religious local politicians. This is indicative for the fact that no matter how positive the outcomes of experiments, many local politicians have fundamental objections to making interactive policy processes structural.

[The author would really appreciate it if the participants of the workshop would think about additional explanations for the outcomes and would share their views with the author]

7. Conclusion

This paper investigated whether or not the policy networks surrounding local policymakers in the Netherlands, local politicians and top administrators, have changed during the last 16 years. This might have been expected because of the structural reforms partly aimed at enhancing public participation, and the many experiments with interactive policymaking processes, the positive evaluation thereof and the dissemination of the results.

The conclusion is that despite the reforms and experiments, the networks surrounding local policymakers, have not undergone structural change. There was and still is an inner circle of politicians and top-administrators talking and seeking support from one another, and a group of outsiders consisting of societal groups and citizens in general. Of course, some changes are visible in these networks, but these are marginal compared to the overall trends. For societal groups and citizens as well as for political party-groups, their position did not change that much that they ever became members of the inner circle.

These results are indicative for the conclusion that Dutch local policymakers, public administrators and politicians alike, perceive the local political system first and foremost as a system of representative democracy and not as a system in which direct democracy prevails.
The population utters wishes and seeks the support of policymakers. The latter convene among one another and seek support from top administrators and elected politicians.

At the end of this paper four explanations were provided for the unexpected results. The first one suggest that the Netherlands, despite its reputation, is in the eyes of local policymakers, first and foremost a representative democracy, which is also preferred by them, and in which – as in other countries – citizens are expected to exert influence by voting and becoming member of political parties – in order to influence policies. The second explanation suggests that the issue of a distance between citizens and politics – the gap - is wrongly diagnosed, making the structural reforms and experiments, ineffective in this respect. The third explanation suggests that the structural reforms could have been effective in promoting local empowerment if it had been focused on this outcome instead of trying to achieve a multitude of objectives. The last explanation states that the experiments could have had a similar effect if they would have got a structural follow-up, which absence may be due to personal preferences of local policymakers.

All in all, this paper shows results that are not very positive about the degree of direct democracy at the local level in the Netherlands. Viewed in relation to the objectives of the reforms that went on during the last decade, these results are disappointing. Departing from the reputation this country upholds in this respect the same goes. Departing from the perspective of local policymakers, who see the local system primarily as a representative democracy, in which they are the representatives, the outcomes can, however, be seen as self-evident. Interpreted in terms of that perspective, they act as they are supposed to act.

8. References


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