

Maximizing benefits by cross-linking networks

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Since 1 January 2015 municipalities in the Netherlands have been given new tasks in the fields of care, social participation and youth services. In practice, many municipalities are too small to carry out these tasks effectively and efficiently. For this reason they often seek mutual cooperation in regional networks. In addition, central government also directly stimulates the emergence of regional networks, via various

projects and programs. University of Twente PhD researcher Esther Klaster has found that cross-linking these networks can generate significant benefits for the relevant organizations and for the citizens affected.

Klaster uses the term 'cross-linking' to describe the utilization of the overlap that exists between various networks, also known as a 'regional meta-network'. "If the government and regional players make better use of existing regional networks, new projects can get off the ground more quickly because they build on existing relationships of trust," Klaster explains. "What is more, the results achieved will be better."

In her dissertation, Klaster also advocates experimenting with a wider, regional budget, in which parties to the regional meta-networks can determine for themselves which issues have priority in their region. Initiatives that emerge from such an approach are expected to be more effective and sustainable than projects that arise from temporary state-subsidized networks.

Education and employment networks

For her doctoral research, Klaster studied thirteen networks in four different regions. The aim of these networks is to translate national targets into regional action. They receive financial incentives from various ministries. The networks consist of municipalities, schools for vocational and adult education, UWV job centres and businesses. These partners work together to address issues such as how to reduce the numbers of school drop-outs and youth unemployment.

Regional meta-network

The study, which consisted of interviews, questionnaires, social network

analysis, performance figures and observational research, reveals that many networks overlap within a region. Employees of these organizations keep 'bumping into each other' in a variety of network settings. Klaster refers to this overlap with the term "regional-meta network". In regions where optimum use is made of the meta-network, the parties involved succeed in combining the features of individual projects. This can result in a one-stop shop for multiple target groups, or an arrangement whereby coaches trained to help young people at risk of dropping out are also deployed to help unemployed youths.

Initiatives for more effectively coordinated policies

If resources earmarked for different projects are to be combined in this way, it is essential that central government facilitates such an approach. After all, every project is subject to its own set of rules and is funded in its own particular way. The policies of the various ministries and directorates therefore need to be well attuned, but the four case studies Klaster conducted at central government level show that this is no mean feat. Based on interviews, document analysis, and participating observations, collected over a period of four years, she analysed four initiatives that were intended to result in policies that were more effectively coordinated.

Lack of incentive for cooperation

It turns out that, although these initiatives do lead to minor improvements, they rarely achieve the desired outcome. One of the primary reasons for this is the lack of incentives for managers and [policy makers](#) to think and work beyond the boundaries of their own directorate. "As long as politicians attach greater importance to 'scoring points' within their own portfolio than to developing well-coordinated, integrated policies for citizens and organizations, managers and policy

makers have no real reason to seek cooperation with their counterparts in other directorates and ministries," Klaster explains. Working with wider, regional budgets in which meta-network actors (rather than politicians) determine the priorities is another measure expected to reduce the friction between ministries.

Esther Klaster, MSc in Business and Communication Studies, is a consultant for the B&A Group. In her consultancy work, she helps public organizations develop and improve policies in the social domain, including the fields of education, employment and welfare. The study was commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, PricewaterhouseCoopers and the University of Twente.

Esther Klaster, PhD student at the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the Institute for Innovation and Governance Studies (IGS) I has defended her dissertation on Thursday, 17 December 2015 at the University of Twente. An electronic version of the thesis *Toward more effective regional networks. A multi-method study on top-down stimulated networks in the Dutch public-policy areas of education and employment.*

Provided by University of Twente

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