Neteland

Description of the collaboration

The collaboration brings together five municipalities, who collaborate in 32 domains (grouped together in five themes: leisure, health, environment, internal affairs and external affairs). To understand why the project was established, interviewees refer to the so-called region screening program of the Flemish government (2011-2012). With this programme, the Flemish government wanted to identify a set of fixed regions in which municipalities had a significant amount of (informal) intermunicipal collaboration. The aim was to incentivise municipalities in these regions to collaborate more intensively and more formally in order to achieve more efficiency in intermunicipal collaboration and to reduce administrative clutter. In that regard, Neteland was seen as a forerunner that will provide inspiration and policy scripts for future regional formation in Flanders.

The collaboration itself first emanated from a discussion among the mayors and the general managers of the five municipalities, who are still the main hub in the project. Initially, collaborative initiatives were entirely informal. Eventually, in 2017, an agreement between the five municipalities was concluded that formally established the project association (i.e. one of four possible legal models for intermunicipal collaboration in Flanders) with a formal structure.

Partly as a result of this agreement, the project gained more traction by establishing policy groups (that bring together aldermen) and advisory groups (that bring together civil servants). It is in these two bodies that the intensive collaboration mainly happens today.

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1 However, various other public, private and third sector partners are sometimes engaged with in order to set-up, coordinate, manage and deliver services in these domains. The main collaboration takes place within the group of five municipalities, but for each individual project (e.g. GIS-data, library services, Covid-19 call center) other partners may be involved.
Rather than being driven by a lack of internal support, the collaboration became formal because of legal requirements. The brand of Neteland was already well-established in the wider region. Yet, defining a clear, flexible and agile governance structure was very important according to interviewees. Over the last few years, decision-making moved from rather top-down discussions among the five municipalities towards bottom-up decision-making by civil servants in the field. In addition, budgets for the collaboration have been set collaboratively and a multi-year plan (or what interviewees refer to as a “ambition memorandum”) for the region has been drawn up, which is unique in Flanders. Leadership and ownership of the collaboration is shared, but due to its size and regional location, one of the municipalities is “primus inter pares”.

Impact of ICT on collaboration

At the start of the formal collaboration (i.e. 2016-2017) a survey was conducted among partners which concluded that in many policy fields, collaboration was useful, necessary and feasible, but not yet in ICT. Consequently, another survey was launched to map which software packages were used by the five municipalities for various policy tasks. This exercise showed that each partner uses a different set of software packages, and different providers and infrastructures are used. One interviewee considered this to be one of the most crucial factors that hindered the collaboration process (see further, section on red tape). ICT was therefore not used as a goal in itself. Rather the five partners opted to start from policy tasks (or domains) first and then coordinate which platforms, software and providers deemed most useful and feasible to collaborate with.

From that point of view, the use of ICT in the collaboration was initially largely ignored. However, since then, all of the five partners became more aware that ICT should be part of the shared back-office as a means for enabling other collaborative initiatives within the collaboration. There was a clear reluctance to set-up specific ICT-related work groups, but rather it was aimed to organise existing policy groups and advisory groups as much as possible around ICT. Thus, ICT became considered a production factor, rather than a production outcome, and this instigated the collaboration process according to interviewees.

In more recent years, many initiatives have been launched by Neteland wherein ICT has been important; not as a goal in itself, but as a means to cooperate. First, there is the collaboration in GIS-systems. Each partner, to date, works with different GIS systems, but due to the nature
of GIS, all partners can collaborate and share GIS-data in order to jointly provide services and to organize enforcement. Second, a shared ‘event counter’ was established. This platform also integrates the policy field of ‘inname openbaar domein’ (IOD, see example in Google Translate here), which entailed usually hundreds of files per year for each partner individually. Organizing and coordinating events on the one hand and administrating the IOD on the other hand are two processes that are present in the daily management of the five partners involved. Since the start of the project, a shared software platform was tendered to align these processes and to foster collaboration between the five municipalities and the police zone. Third, the role of ICT collaboratively tackling the Covid-19 crisis by Neteland is huge according to interviewees. The five partners established a large Microsoft Teams environment across their administrative institutions in order to digitally cooperate and coordinate solutions to Covid-19 related problems. This environment is also accompanied by an extensive file structure and a platform and division into various expert groups: logistics, welfare, volunteer work, schools, childcare. According to interviewees, this method ensures more efficient coordination in these subgroups. Fourth, as far as internal communication is concerned, a share-point has been set up in which fixed documents related to the house style of Neteland, reports of meetings are shared in order to allow wider staff from other working groups to read, thereby keeping everyone informed. Sixth, there is a digital volunteer platform that has been set up together with Give-A-Day to match supply and demand of volunteer work in each of the five municipalities. Give a Day is a Belgian online platform that connects citizens, schools, non-profits, municipalities and companies, and gives them the tools and inspiration to tackle societal challenges together through voluntary commitment. These are some of the examples of interviewees in which ICT has been the solution to meet policy needs in a collaborative way.

That being said, one interviewee points out that the deployment of ICT is certainly not decided by management only. It often starts bottom-up. Having a governance structure with policy and advisory groups means that many of the collaborative initiatives are initiated from the bottom-up and they emanate from a regular questioning of ‘how can ICT yield a breakthrough in this project’. Once ideas, plans and support have been established, the policy and advisory workgroups turn to management for a budget and further coordination. Additionally, on the topic of consulting staff before changing ICT arrangements, the survey makes it clear that this is necessary and very useful.
Various tools are used within Neteland to collaborate more efficiently. For example, there is a SharePoint (SP) to which all employees have access. Depending on the projects or workgroups in which an employee participates, he or she gets the necessary access rights. On this SP, internal news items are shared, the necessary documents are placed, and the reports of the workgroups are centralized. In addition to the SP, there are also Teams-groups created per work group or project group. According to interviewees, this had a visible effect on the “speed at which the collaboration intensified”.

In terms of the recovery of costs, an interviewee indicates that it plays an important role in the collaborative process, but that it is very difficult to assess within the short time frame of five years. Interviewees also mention that recovering ICT-related set-up costs should not only be calculated economically (how many full-time equivalents do we earn back after introducing this or that system), but also in non-financial or non-monetary terms. For instance, it is often more important to create administrative ‘breathing space’ within each organization and within the overall collaboration process in order to be able to do more in a qualitative, efficient service-oriented way.

Efficiency of the collaboration

According to interviewees, the project is still in default in this respect. The project management has not yet started monitoring numerically. There is a kind of measurement system, however, within the event counter project they look at how many files are now handled digitally, while there used to be an offline procedure with a lot of paperwork (red tape) for each partner. As mentioned earlier, certain effects of the collaboration will only become visible after some time, but some preliminary effects are already visible. For example, it is clear that events can be requested and approved much faster. Nonetheless, the interviewees agree that the overall quality and effectiveness of services has certainly increased. Something that has certainly increased the efficiency of service provision in the collaboration (compared to how service provision was done beforehand) is the deployment of the previously mentioned policy groups and advisory groups. Because of this bottom-up approach, ideas from citizens and civil servants are linked to possible solutions at an early stage. Neither of the interviewees found that the efficiency of collaborative services has deteriorated over time after starting the collaboration.

The project managers want to have much more specific attention for monitoring and efficiency measurement in the future. At the moment, it is mainly a matter of having civil servants in the
field indicate whether the cooperation leads to more efficiency. A lot of issues are now mainly addressed instinctively, without many graphs or tables. According to interviewees, the motive of efficiency has always played a role in every decision made by the collaboration. Process-wise, there are many efficiency-gains visible because different steps in the process are slimmed down. But there is too little monitoring via separate systems. What initially affected many of the partners was the burden of one-man services. After intensifying Neteland, this burden has been reduced, on the one hand by sharing services, but on the other hand also by digitizing services (e.g. library work, event counter, ...). Today, the quality of service-delivery has rather increased, according to interviewees. The involved partners learn from each other's operation and citizens as well as users of the services are now offered a wider range of services. By also pursuing a joint offline and online communication policy Neteland is able to reach more people for its activities.

The territory of the five municipalities is relatively large encompassing an area of 150km² and about 69,000 inhabitants with a population density of 460/km². According to the interviewees, the regional size of the collaboration does not have an extremely visible impact on the efficiency of the cooperation, but there are clear economies of scale by bringing together different departments of the five municipalities. One of the municipalities forms the geographical and symbolic heart of the cooperation. However, an interviewee from one of the smaller municipalities would argue that these are the smaller partners that have experienced the greatest efficiency gains. On the other hand, the collaboration results in the central partner being able to employ capacities more quickly and efficiently (as was done for instance when setting up the joint Microsoft Teams environment), which subsequently leads to the other partners having more administrative power to contribute to the cooperation. Collaboration also takes a lot of time sometimes, for example for consultation and coordination. In addition to regional cooperation, there are also tasks and objectives that have to be achieved by each actor alone and, according to respondents, the combination of the two is not always easy (in terms of the relation between carrying capacity and time constraints). Moreover, by limiting the partners of Neteland to five, much more efficiency is achieved compared to the former project with 11 partners, which turned out to be too extensive. According to one of the interviewees, there are limits to economies of scale in the context of municipal collaboration in a variety of policy domains. Bringing together 11 partners and organizing intensive collaboration with this number of partners turned out to be actually hampering efficiency and increasing all sorts of tangible and intangible costs related to the collaboration. The current collaboration takes place
in a pre-defined region where no entry or exit is possible (i.e. for each now collaboration endeavour the same five municipalities are primarily involved). This resulted in more systematic and more efficient collaboration between the involved actors, as the turnover of collaboration partners used to be a remarkable impediment to collaboration initiatives in the past. By ensuring that the partners are adjacent (spatially, but also in terms of shared goals and vision), partners are able to get to know each other better and faster. In terms of creativity and innovation – something interviewees also consider as a form of effectiveness – the smaller municipalities actually take on a larger role.

With regard to the costs related to setting up and maintaining the collaboration, one respondent reported that the costs were initially quite low. The understanding between the five partners has grown fairly organically (see earlier). The fact that the five partners had already worked together on an ad hoc basis in the past meant that the costs of building trust, establishing contacts and getting to know each other remained fairly low. Involving partners that knew each other beforehand and bringing together a ‘coalition of the willing’ was important to diminish upfront collaboration related costs. In that sense, the benefits of collaboration have increasingly outweighed the costs of collaboration. What initially did cost a relatively large amount of time and resources was setting up the current governance structure. All partners considered this to be an important task and the eventual governance structure has effectively led to a smooth cooperation today. For the partners, it was important to always approach each initiative of collaboration with the same structure (five partners, one advisory group, one policy group). Something that, according to interviewees, was much more difficult (and therefore more expensive) was to find a common way of working. This relates to establishing the previously mentioned unified ICT processes, but also to more recurrent processes of municipalities that now have to be aligned with one another.

Prior to the formal collaboration (i.e. before 2016), the five partners examined whether and how efficiency gains could be achieved, but above all, there was a shared commitment to tackle matters together with a view to efficiency. The project managers relied on the regional screening report (see earlier) as a starting point. By means of a qualitative and quantitative cluster analysis, an inventory was made of all existing formal and informal collaborations, structures and area delimitations at the Flemish local level. The inventory took place in the second half of 2011 and was commissioned by the Flemish Minister of Interior. The report is regarded by the partners as one of the main starting points of the current aim to make the
collaboration more effective. It provided quantitative and qualitative evidence for the feeling that various intensive and less intensive collaboration practices already took place between the five involved municipalities. Consequently, the report was viewed by the Neteland founders as a token of inspiration for further collaboration.

Red tape

The interviewees often refer to the history of the collaboration to explain how the current collaboration affects red tape (and vice versa – how red tape affects the collaboration process). As mentioned earlier, ICT is perceived by interviewees as a catalyst in the collaboration process. In that context, one of them points out that the IT supply landscape in Flanders used to be very fragmented (but now more and more mergers are taking place), so each of the five partners has relied on its own and specific IT system for their recurrent administrative and service-related activities. Because of this path dependency, a very different environment has been created within each of the five partners in both administrative and IT architecture. By working together, problems of data sharing and open information emerge. Interviewees also emphasized the constraints of procurement red tape, at least in the early phases of the collaboration. Initially, each of the partners had to follow its own tendering procedure. Throughout the collaboration process, informal agreements between the partners were established in order to alleviate these administrative burdens. Today, the entire tendering procedure is conducted centrally by Neteland. There is close collaboration in order to arrive at a draft of specifications, and afterwards to select a provider/contractor that was supported by each of the five involved partners. However, at the same time, some aspects of the tendering procedure (or those decisions following a tendering procedure) still have to be taken individually by the five partners (i.e. advisory councils, colleges of mayor and aldermen, city councils, …). In this way, the administrative burden has actually increased. In conclusion, interviewees indicate that, in some respects, the initial perception of administrative burdens have successfully been relieved, while in other respects, the collaboration has enhanced burdens.

The partners also discussed for a long time whether they would develop the same IT system, as the different existing systems provided additional burdens towards the collaboration process. In this context, recent financing or ongoing (long-term) contracts made it difficult to set up (or for some actors to engage in) new collaborative initiatives. Something that, according to the interviewees, seems very difficult to point out that one of the partners is working with a
fundamentally different back-office IT system (mainly in terms of basic IT-architecture: which comes down to a discussion between using Google or Microsoft environments). Apparently, this was a huge impediment to the collaboration process. From the management’s point of view, there is a feeling that something needs to be done about this, but especially at the frontline administration of that specific partner there seem to be few voices in favour of a transformation of their IT back-office system.

Hence, several aspects of this collaboration have an impact on the presence or absence of different forms of red tape (and the presence of red tape in turn sometimes has an important hampering influence on the execution and process of the collaboration). Tradition and path dependency seem to be the main impediment of red tape reductions. Funding (i.e. budgetary and procurement red tape) also plays an important role, in the sense that partners do not just want to undo recent funding (or terminate/breach contracts) for the benefit of collaboration, which inherently involves uncertainties in terms of outcomes and effectiveness. However, on the other hand, collaborating also meant that some aspects of red tape were reduced. Being able to set-up additional innovative collaborative initiatives (e.g. the Covid-19 call centre) within Neteland can now happen quicker.