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Governing inter-municipal partnerships in the Netherlands: a democratic deficit

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Abstract

In response to ongoing processes of decentralization, municipalities across European countries have been part of extensive municipal amalgamations, have engaged in ever-expanding inter-municipal collaborations, or have experienced both reforms. While amalgamations are usually negatively assessed by citizens, we still lack knowledge on the democratic performance of inter-municipal partnerships. This paper provides an assessment of the day-to-day functioning of inter-municipal partnerships in the Netherlands, a country in which the combination of trends is most clearly visible. Based on semi-structured interviews with politicians and civil servants active in the boards of inter-municipal organizations, the paper confirms the lack of democratic oversight on inter-municipal partnerships. However, the analysis also highlights three other, so far underestimated problems of these partnerships: their lack of transparency, the multiplication of roles by board members, and the prevalence of informal networks. In combination, these findings reveal that inter-municipal collaboration results in a considerable democratic deficit.

Keywords Local politics · Inter-municipal collaboration · Democracy · The Netherlands · Democratic deficit · Qualitative interviews

Introduction

Across Europe, subnational communities are becoming more and more powerful. Over the past decades, virtually all European countries have decentralized powers and competences to (autonomous) regions, provinces, and municipalities (Hooghe et al. 2010; Ladner et al. 2016). As such, decentralization produces complex patterns of multi-level governance in which political tasks and responsibilities are shared by a range of administrations (Hooghe and Marks 2003; Keating 2013). Expanding

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European integration, which results in an ever more powerful supranational administrative layer, further adds to this administrative complexity. The once more or less exclusive authority of European states is now increasingly shared by a great variety of tiers. This expanding multi-level governance makes it harder for citizens to determine which administration is responsible for which particular policy (Däubler et al. 2018). Since the quality of democratic representation depends on clear lines of accountability between citizens and their representatives, multi-level governance may actually undermine the capacity of citizens to hold politicians accountable.

In response to decentralization, municipalities across Europe have engaged in two types of profound reforms, both of which represent a scaling up of governance: municipal amalgamations and inter-municipal collaboration. Municipal amalgamations are often unpopular among citizens because they create fears about a loss of identity, autonomy, and services (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013). From a democratic institutional perspective, however, the changes are relatively minor as the new municipality commonly has similar democratic structures as the previous one. By contrast, increases in inter-municipal collaboration (or regional governance) are less visible and threatening to citizens, whereas their democratic implications appear to be more profound. By shifting powers from municipalities to the non-elected level of inter-municipal organizations and platforms, inter-municipal collaboration may seriously undermine the democratic influence of citizens, and their capacity to hold politicians accountable for their actions.

One of the European countries in which both amalgamations and inter-municipal collaboration have profoundly expanded is the Netherlands. In recent decades a great variety of public tasks—among which long-term healthcare, youth healthcare, nature protection, and spatial planning—were transferred from the Dutch national government to municipal administrations (Peters et al. 2020). Simultaneously, ongoing municipal amalgamations have resulted in almost a halving of the number of Dutch municipalities in thirty years' time: from 672 municipalities in 1990 to 344 municipalities in 2022. In similar fashion, inter-municipal collaboration has blossomed, as the number of inter-municipal partnerships in the Netherlands increases by approximately 5 percent every year (Van den Berg and Boogaard, 2021). This also has important financial ramifications: while Dutch municipalities in 2005 spent approximately 8 percent of their budgets on inter-municipal partnerships, this had already increased to between 25 and 30 percent in 2021 (Boer 2021).

Various scholars have criticized the weak democratic embedding of inter-municipal partnerships in the Netherlands (Boegers et al. 2016; Boegers and Reussing 2019; De Greef 2019). In addition, an earlier survey among Dutch municipal councilors reveals that they experience a profound lack of oversight on inter-municipal platforms (De Blok, 2015). However, we lack knowledge of the day-to-day functioning of inter-municipal platforms themselves, and its ramifications for the performance and quality of local democracy. Therefore, this paper asks: how do inter-municipal collaborations function in practice, and what are the consequences for local democracy? On the basis of an in-depth analysis of six inter-municipal platforms in the Dutch city of Leiden and seven surrounding smaller municipalities, the present paper aims to shed light on the practical, day-to-day functioning of inter-municipal platforms. The analysis consisted of a document-based inquiry into the



purpose, role, and structure of the selected platforms, combined with twelve semi-structured interviews with local politicians and civil servants who are part of the executive boards of the selected partnerships.

The paper starts with a discussion of the academic literature on municipal amalgamations, inter-municipal collaboration, and regional governance from a democratic perspective. Subsequently, the case selection of this study is outlined and the research methods are explained and motivated. The ensuing analysis confirms that inter-municipal collaboration reduces the democratic position of municipal councilors, who are often unaware and unable to control the decision-making that occurs in these platforms. However, the interviews also point to a secondary and so far underexplored problem of inter-municipal collaboration: the importance of informal, personal networks of participants in these platforms, and the resulting lack of transparency of inter-municipal decision-making. The practical functioning of inter-municipal collaboration therefore poses a number of additional problems for local democracy, amounting to what can be characterized as a democratic deficit. In the conclusion, the implications of these findings for the broader debate about decentralization, municipal amalgamations and inter-municipal partnerships are discussed.

The academic debate on amalgamations and inter-municipal collaboration

Across Europe, but also in other parts of the world, extensive powers and tasks are decentralized from national governments to subnational administrations. Decentralization is often motivated by a perceived need to bring government closer to the people, and an assumption that this will increase the democratic power and control of citizens (Diamond and Tsalik 1999; Rodden and Wibbels 2019). Aside from a rearrangement of the relations between various administrative layers, decentralization is in this sense primarily a matter of scale: to transfer tasks from the national level to subnational levels of government essentially means organizing politics in smaller administrations (De Vries 2000; Gerring and Veenendaal 2020). While the assumption that this will reinforce the democratic position of citizens is widespread in both the academic and public debate, the empirical foundation for this assumption remains surprisingly thin (Fleurke et al. 2021; Treisman 2007; Veenendaal 2015, 2020).

Aside from the validity of claims about the benefits of small-sized governance, the question can also be posed to what extent decentralization actually succeeds in bringing politics closer to the people. In many European countries, the transfer of powers and competences from the national to the local level has coincided with extensive municipal amalgamations. Key examples of European countries in which a larger number of municipalities have merged over the past decades are Denmark, Finland, Greece, and the Netherlands. While the process of municipal amalgamations has been gradual in some countries (e.g., the Netherlands), in Greece the adoption of the Kallikratis reform in 2010 resulted in a drastic and sudden reduction of municipalities, from 1,033 to 325. The Kallikratis reform correspondingly resulted in an increase in the autonomy and tasks of Greek municipalities, but since



these were allocated to much larger municipalities, there has arguably been both an increase and a decrease of scale. A similar pattern has occurred in the Netherlands, where commentators speak about a “decentralization paradox” (Boogers and Reussing 2019).

Empirical research into the effects of municipal amalgamations suggests that mergers indeed offset some of the supposed benefits of a small population size. In particular, various studies show that municipal amalgamations have a dampening effect on voter turnout, which can not only be attributed to the larger population size of the merged municipality, but also to a decrease in voter’s political awareness and efficacy (Heinisch et al. 2018; Lapointe et al. 2018). Similarly, municipal mergers have been found to decrease citizens’ levels of trust in politicians (Hansen 2013). Obviously, municipal amalgamations not only change the borders and populations of municipalities, but also have important sociological effects: they erode citizens’ identification with their municipality, decrease the sense of community of municipal populations, generate concerns about the provision of public services, and are in a general sense often strongly disliked by voters (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013). While it may be hard to fully disentangle these effects, it is clear that municipal amalgamations in essence represent a scaling up rather than a scaling down of governance. In addition, it is clear that municipal amalgamations are often not supported by citizens, and may therefore be considered to lack democratic legitimacy.

Yet whereas municipal amalgamations typically result in significant changes in the scale of governance units, their institutional ramifications often remain rather limited: amalgamated municipalities usually have the same political institutions as the preexisting municipalities. Institutionally, the only change is often that the number of political positions (municipal councilors and aldermen) increases, reflecting the increase in population size. In addition, the increase of the electorate means that the voting power of individual citizens decreases, but the decisiveness of individual votes was arguably also limited in the preexisting smaller municipality. While they are often strongly resisted by citizens, from a purely democratic institutional perspective municipal amalgamations therefore do not represent a significant weakening (or strengthening) of democratic institutions and processes, even if they are disliked by voters.

However, in many countries, decentralization is accompanied by a second category of reforms, which also represent a scaling up of governance: inter-municipal collaboration (or regional governance). In response to the increased number of tasks transferred to the local level, municipalities have a strong incentive to work intensively together to reap benefits of scale and to mitigate risks associated with the execution of these tasks (Hulst and Van Montfort 2007; Bel and Warner 2015; Teles and Swianiewicz 2018). Inter-municipal collaboration is increasing in virtually all European countries, but the power balance between municipalities and inter-municipal partnerships differs from country to country. In Scandinavian countries the larger municipalities remain highly autonomous, but in a country like France, with many tiny municipalities, inter-municipal partnerships have become the main centers of local governance, and municipalities themselves almost appear to have become empty vessels (Hertzog 2018). Inter-municipal collaboration can happen in many forms, ranging from completely informally to very formalized. However, in



most countries, such collaboration occurs on the basis of newly established institutions and organizations, which have varying legal statuses.

In contrast to municipal mergers, inter-municipal cooperation leaves the pre-existing municipalities intact, and therefore does not automatically have profound sociological consequences: it is also much less resisted by citizens than municipal mergers (Bischoff and Wolfschütz 2021). In fact, citizens often appear to be unaware of increasing inter-municipal collaboration, as such reforms may happen entirely under the radar (Spicer 2017). In terms of efficiency and policy effectiveness, inter-municipal collaboration has indeed been found to result in better public service delivery (Giacomini et al. 2018), although the extent to which this is the case also depends on contextual factors like the structure of local government and the formalization of inter-municipal collaboration (Bel and Warner 2015). In similar fashion, inter-municipal collaboration has been found to reduce the costs of local service delivery (Bel and Sebő 2021; Silvestre et al. 2020).

However, while perhaps more efficient and effective, various studies show that inter-municipal collaboration does have important downsides for local democracy: it moves important decision-making authorities and prerogatives to a (usually unelected) higher level, creating a democratic deficit (Denters et al. 2016; Gendźwił and Lackowska 2018; Spicer 2017). While decentralization supposedly increases the power and control of citizens, these powers may in turn be strongly undermined if the responsibilities granted to municipalities are subsequently relegated to unelected institutions and organizations over which individual citizens—or their elected representatives—have very little control. Seen from this perspective, municipal mergers have one important advantage over inter-municipal collaboration platforms: the democratic legitimization of merged municipalities is at least institutionally better guaranteed.

In recent decades, inter-municipal collaboration has blossomed in almost all European countries, but most notably in larger countries like France, Italy, and Spain, which continue to have a large number of very small municipalities. In these countries, inter-municipal collaboration can be regarded as the main alternative to municipal mergers, allowing municipalities to remain intact while still reaping the benefits of a larger scale that collaboration with other municipalities provides. As such, it would be logical to expect inter-municipal collaboration in systems that do not experience extensive municipal mergers, and vice versa. However, the Netherlands stands out as one of the few European countries in which both processes can be observed: since the 1990s, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of municipalities due to mergers, *and* a significant increase in inter-municipal collaboration (Boogers and Reussing 2019). For this reason, the Netherlands provides a particularly interesting case to examine the consequences of inter-municipal collaboration on local democracy.

Existing studies on the democratic consequences of inter-municipal collaboration in the Netherlands primarily discuss the organizational and legal structures of these platforms (Boogers et al. 2016; Boogers and Reussing 2019; De Greef 2019) or focus on the role of elected councilors (De Blok 2015; Van den Berg and Boogaard 2021). Not much is known, however, about the day-to-day functioning of these institutions, and the consequences this has for the quality and



performance of local democracy. Addressing this gap, the present study focuses on the behavior and perspectives of the main actors involved in inter-municipal cooperation: the aldermen and mayors who represent their municipality and are also actively involved in the governance of inter-municipal organizations and partnerships, as well as the civil servants who are chief administrators of inter-municipal organizations.

Case selection and methodology

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of six inter-municipal partnerships in the Dutch city of Leiden and seven surrounding municipalities. An overview of the selected partnerships is presented in Table 1, and in Table 2, an overview of the eight selected municipalities participating in these partnership has been provided. Leiden is a mid-sized Dutch university city with approximately 125,000 inhabitants, located in the densely populated western part of the country, a region known as the *Randstad*. While the municipality of Leiden itself is urban, and the adjacent municipalities of Leiderdorp, Oegstgeest, and Voorschoten are essentially part of Leiden's metropolitan area, the four other municipalities of Kaag en Braassem, Katwijk, Teylingen, and Zoeterwoude have a more rural character, comprising multiple smaller villages. As such, inter-municipal partnerships in the Leiden region may be regarded as typical for the Netherlands, consisting of one larger city and several surrounding smaller municipalities.

As Table 2 demonstrates, the selected municipalities differ strongly in size: while Leiden belongs to the 25 most populous municipalities in the Netherlands, Zoeterwoude is among the 10 municipalities with the smallest populations. Reflecting the earlier-mentioned combination of municipal amalgamations and inter-municipal collaboration in the Netherlands, it should be noted that three of the analyzed municipalities were also merged relatively recently: Katwijk and Teylingen in 2006, and Kaag en Braassem in 2009.¹

As the overview of selected inter-municipal partnerships reveals, Leiden and the seven surrounding municipalities collaborate on an extensive range of issues and policy domains. While the selected partnerships are among the most important in terms of their scope and budget, a great number of additional inter-municipal partnerships could be mentioned here, ranging from collaboration on archives and heritage management to collaboration on public utilities and garbage collection. Virtually all of these partnerships are covered by one law: the *wet gemeenschappelijke regelingen* (WGR) or law on joint arrangements. The WGR allows for five types of partnerships, which differ in their organization structure and the extent to which they are legal entities. The most common type of partnership is that of the so-called public body (*openbaar lichaam*), which also provides for the most far-reaching type of

¹ Katwijk was formed out of the preexisting municipalities of Katwijk, Rijnsburg, and Valkenburg; Teylingen was formed out of the municipalities of Sassenheim, Voorhout, and Warmond, and Kaag en Braassem was formed out of the municipalities of Alkemade and Jacobsouwde.



Table 1 Overview of selected inter-municipal partnerships

Platform name	Founded	Policy domains	Members	Annual budget
Servicepunt 071	2012	Business operations, ICT, human resource management, legal counseling	4 municipalities and Holland Rijnland	€ 53 million
HECHT	2006	Healthcare, medical assistance, care for vulnerable citizens, ambulance care	18 municipalities	€ 100 million
Holland Rijnland	2010	Economic affairs, nature conservation, spatial planning, traffic and transportation, housing, social security	13 municipalities	€ 8,3 million
Belastingsamen-werking Gouwe-Rijnland (BSGR)	2011	Local tax collection, determining real estate value	11 municipalities and the Rijnland water board	€ 13,5 million
Veiligheidsregio Hollands Midden (VRHM)	2010	Crisis management and disaster relief	18 municipalities	€ 54 million
Omgevingsdienst West Holland (OWH)	2000	Environment, sustainability, waste management, soil contamination, construction, energy policies	12 municipalities and the province of Zuid-Holland	€ 17 million

partnership. Five of the six selected inter-municipal partnerships are public entities; Servicepunt 071 has the status of a business operations organization (*bedrijfsvoeringsorganisatie*), which is the second most far-reaching type of partnership. Public bodies are legal entities, which means that they can operate autonomously, and, for example, have the right to sign contracts, recruit their own personnel, manage their funds, and even to establish new public or private partnerships. Municipalities can delegate almost all of their tasks to public bodies, including those of both the executive and legislative councils.

Inter-municipal platforms that are public bodies all have a similar administrative structure: they have a general board (*algemeen bestuur* or AB) out of which a daily board (*dagelijks bestuur* or DB) is formed. As the name indicates, the daily board takes care of the day-to-day management of the partnership, often together with the organization’s director (an appointed non-political figure). Both of these boards primarily exist of members of municipal executive councils: mayors and aldermen.² Servicepunt 071, which is a business operations organization, only has a single board comprised of four members. Board members therefore have a dual role: they

² While the general board of the *Omgevingsdienst West Holland* also includes municipal councilors, this was found to be in conflict with the law, and future boards of this platform will no longer include councilors.



Table 2 Overview of municipalities participating in selected partnership

Municipality	Population	Territory	Participates In:
Leiden	125.000	23 km ²	All
Katwijk	66.000	31 km ²	All except Servicepunt 071
Teylingen	38.000	33 km ²	All except Servicepunt 071
Kaag and Braassem	28.000	72 km ²	All except Servicepunt 071 and BSGR
Leiderdorp	27.000	12 km ²	All
Voorschoten	26.000	12 km ²	All except Servicepunt 071
Oegstgeest	25.000	8 km ²	All
Zoeterwoude	9.000	22 km ²	All

are in charge of the management of the inter-municipal organization, but also represent one of the municipalities participating in this collaboration. In addition, they have to combine their duties as board members and representatives of their municipalities with the executive function they perform in their own municipality. The fact that the boards of inter-municipal partnerships do comprise members of the municipal executive but not of the municipal council obviously undermines the information position of municipal councilors, who are much less aware of the activities of these partnerships than their executive counterparts.

Given the fact that members of the municipal executive play the three different roles of (a) board members of inter-municipal platforms, (b) representatives of their municipality in these platforms, and (c) members of the executive council of their own municipality, nine of these members have been selected as respondents for semi-structured interviews, which occurred in the spring of 2022. To also include the perspective of high-ranking civil servants within the inter-municipal organizations, three of the six civil servants who are at the head of the administration of their organization were interviewed as well. While interviewing as a research method has various downsides—most notably that the information provided by respondents can be biased or unreliable—interviews offer an excellent opportunity to retrieve information about the informal, practical, and day-to-day operation of politics, and may therefore offer a glimpse beyond the layer of formal institutional structures. Among the mayors and aldermen, one interviewee was selected from each of the eight municipalities; from Leiden two public officials were interviewed. Three of these respondents were mayor of their municipality, while the remaining six interviewees were aldermen. Since most of these interviewees are active in multiple inter-municipal partnerships, at least two board members of each selected inter-municipal partnership were interviewed. For the sake of anonymity and confidentiality, the names and specific positions of the twelve interview respondents are not disclosed.

The joint corpus of interview data was analyzed to identify common patterns and perspectives. As such, the interview material discussed in the analysis reflects the dominant views of the interviewees. Observations and perspectives of respondents were iteratively contrasted with existing theories and literature according to the logic of abduction: a method of data analysis that is neither inductive or deductive,



but involves moving back and forth between empirical material and abstract theory (Corbett and Veenendaal 2018). The abductive method allows for both an assessment of the plausibility of existing theories, as well as for the inclusion of new patterns and perspectives that emerge from the assembled data.

To complement the data gathered during the interviews and control for the accuracy of the interview data, a document-based inquiry into the purpose, role, and structure of each of the six selected platforms was performed as well. Most of this information could be retrieved from the websites of the respective inter-municipal partnerships; if necessary the partnerships were contacted by e-mail to provide clarifications. The combination of documentary analysis and interviews allowed me to productively contrast the formal structures of organizations (document analysis) with their day-to-day practical functioning (interviews).

Analysis: the daily functioning of inter-municipal partnerships

As discussed above, the formal structure of the six selected inter-municipal partnerships is rather similar. However, in practice, respondents indicated that there are strong differences in the functioning of these platforms, which are mainly related to the policy domains in which they are active. Most respondents agreed that BSGR (tax collection) and OWH (environmental services) function quite smoothly because these organizations primarily implement, rather than create policies. Respondents also mentioned that the democratic deficit is less of a problem for these organizations, since the policies are decided on another level and there is usually very little disagreement about the most effective implementation of these policies. In other words, inter-municipal collaboration in the area of policy implementation appears to function quite smoothly. While Servicepunt 071 is also mainly a policy implementation organization, the differences in quality of services required from this organization by the four municipalities recently resulted in a change of the structure of this organization. Whereas the organization until now provides similar services for the four member municipalities, in future the organization will be integrated into Leiden municipality, and the other three municipalities can then buy services at a level and cost they consider acceptable.

The smooth functioning of policy implementation platforms differs strongly from inter-municipal partnerships that are also active in the creation of policies, among which HECHT, Holland Rijnland, and VRHM. Almost all respondents agreed that the democratic legitimacy of these partnerships is deficient and problematic. More concretely, interviewees pointed to three types of problems: (1) the lack of transparency of these organizations, (2) role multiplicity among the board members of these organizations, and (3) the significance of informal contacts and networks in these organizations. In the subsequent analytical sections of this paper, each of these



problems will be discussed in detail; interview quotes will be used to illustrate or support the analytical narrative.³

A lack of transparency

As mentioned earlier, research has shown that Dutch municipal councilors experience a lack of control and oversight on inter-municipal platforms (De Blok 2015). This notion was confirmed by the interviewed aldermen and mayors, who agreed that there are very limited opportunities for municipal councils to fully grasp and monitor the activities of inter-municipal platforms. As one interviewed alderman describes:

I was appointed as alderman by the municipal council of [municipality X], and therefore represent [municipality X] in Holland Rijnland. However, the municipal council has no idea what I am saying there or what others are saying. So we are hardly accountable: policies are always the result of negotiations and are not made by democratically elected bodies. So it just goes on and on, and the control of the municipal council is really very weak.

Obviously, the lack of oversight by municipal councils can also be convenient for the board members of inter-municipal platforms, because it means that they cannot be effectively held accountable for their actions and decisions. As one informant confesses:

Sometimes this is actually quite nice: if you present it convincingly the municipal council will always agree, because they don't know anyway.

In contrast to members of the executive council, municipal councilors only perform their function part-time, which means that they have to combine it with another job. In practice, this means that they do not have a lot of time to fully delve into the activities of all the various inter-municipal partnerships. A complicating factor is that the information provided by inter-municipal platforms is often very technical and inaccessible. A wide majority of respondents indicated that a very high level of expertise is required to understand the documentation provided by inter-municipal platforms, and most councilors lack this expertise and also do not have time or opportunities to gain it somewhere. According to some interviewees, inter-municipal platforms deliberately create an information overload in order to keep municipal councils at bay. As one interview respondent reveals, this is particularly the case for HECHT and VRHM, which are also the platforms with the largest budgets:

³ It should be emphasized that this analysis focuses exclusively on the democratic legitimacy of inter-municipal partnerships, which a wide majority of respondents considered to be deficient. Respondents generally confirmed the supposed advantages of inter-municipal collaborations (effectiveness and cost-efficiency), but since this is not the focus of this paper, these arguments have been left out of the analysis.



There are two inter-municipal partnerships that councilors should really keep an eye on, because they deliberately create a lot of vagueness and repeatedly come asking for extra money: these are HECHT and VRHM. These are the two partnerships that aldermen and councilors should really watch carefully, but that is difficult because their communication is often very vague and complex.

The budgets of most inter-municipal partnerships are provided by the member municipalities; the national government often provides a very limited contribution, or none at all. Interviewees confirmed that the budgets of most of these partnerships increase over the years, and that municipal councils do not have a lot of opportunities to resist these increases. Both HECHT (healthcare) and VRHM (security) sometimes also use scaremongering tactics to convince municipal councilors to support increases of their budgets, for example by suggesting that a failure to increase the budget will result in an unsafe situation for children in out-of-home care, or an incapacity to quickly respond to disasters.

When it comes to transparency, inter-municipal platforms not only provide documentation to the councils of member municipalities, but also have board meetings (of the AB or general board) that are open to the public. However, all respondents confirmed that these board meetings are usually very boring and technical, because most of the negotiations and politics of inter-municipal platforms occurs outside of these meetings. According to one interviewee:

Meetings of the general board are public, but nobody ever watches them. They are also impossible to follow: it is much too complex. The context is completely unclear.

Inter-municipal platforms that are public bodies (which includes all selected platforms except Servicepunt 071) all work with a system of voting ratios, according to which larger municipalities or municipalities that contribute more to the organization also have a stronger vote. However, all interviewees confirmed that these voting ratios are never used in practice: any differences of opinion between the municipalities will usually not be addressed in public, but will be remedied before the board meeting takes place. This explains why the context of board meetings is completely unclear to outsiders (including municipal councilors): in practice, they primarily have the function to ratify agreements that were already made before the board meeting.

The aldermen and mayors who are active in inter-municipal platforms all represent different political parties. However, an overview of all board members of the selected inter-municipal platforms reveals that more than 80% of these members belong to the four traditional governing parties in the Netherlands: CDA (Christian-democrats), VVD (liberals), PvdA (social-democrats), and D66 (social liberals). The interviewed board members all agreed that party membership or ideological affiliation hardly plays a role of significance in inter-municipal partnerships, since board members generally feel that they primarily represent their municipality rather than their political party. But even different interests among municipalities rarely result in a conflict at the level of inter-municipal platforms: all respondents confirmed that



there is a strong culture of consensus in these platforms, and that dissenting opinions that threaten the consensus are generally not appreciated.

The interaction between municipalities and inter-municipal platforms in many ways resembles that of the European Union and its member states; the EU also suffers from a well-known democratic deficit. Various scholars have pointed to these similarities, including the ‘two-level games’ that members of municipal executive councils must play (Van den Berg 2015): they simultaneously conduct negotiations at the municipal level and at the level of inter-municipal platforms, and these overlapping negotiations determine their actions. Some scholars have argued that European political elites deliberately transferred powers and competences to the democratically deficient level of the European Union in order to evade democratic oversight (Mair 2013). A minority of the interviewees made similar claims about the creation of inter-municipal platforms, arguing that they enabled municipal executives to take swift and decisive actions without having to deal with ‘difficult’ municipal councils.

Several respondents pointed out that municipal councils can take actions to increase their control on inter-municipal platforms and thereby increase the transparency of these platforms’ decision-making. Commonly mentioned suggestions were for municipal councils to proactively specify the mandate of municipal representatives in inter-municipal partnerships, or to organize joint meetings between the municipal councils of all municipalities included in a partnership. However, respondents also underscored that while such measures may somewhat increase the transparency and accountability of inter-municipal partnerships, they do not eliminate their fundamental democratic deficiencies, which are integrally linked to their institutional structure.

Role multiplicity

As mentioned before, both the general (AB) and daily (DB) boards of inter-municipal platforms are composed of members of the municipal executive (and in one case also members of the municipal council) of member municipalities. This means that the aldermen and mayors who are active in the boards of these platforms perform a multiplicity of roles: they are (1) alderman or mayor of their respective municipality, (2) representatives of their municipality in the inter-municipal organization, and (3) members of the executive of that inter-municipal organization. Yet despite these various roles and responsibilities, in the end they are held accountable by only one institution: the municipal council of their own municipality.

When it comes to the membership of the boards of inter-municipal platforms, a further distinction can be made between membership of the AB, in which the function of representing the interests of the municipality is most important, and the DB, in which the administration of the inter-municipal organization takes primary significance. Members of the DB mostly also remain member of the AB, so for these officials a further role distinction can be made between their membership of these various boards. Apart from providing a platform for the representation of



various municipalities, the function of the AB is also to supervise the actions of the DB; in this sense the two boards can appear to almost have an executive-legislative relationship. Interviewees indicated that the larger municipalities usually provide the members of the DB, which as the following respondent indicates gives them a clear advantage:

In practice the larger municipalities have often already agreed on a proposal in the DB. It then goes to the AB, but for smaller municipalities, it is then very difficult to turn things around.

As this quote reveals, even *within* municipal platforms there may be a perception of a lack of oversight and control. This can at least partially be attributed to role multiplicity of the various board members.

Interviewees confirmed that the combination of roles and functions can sometimes create vagueness or even conflicts of interest. A scenario that was repeatedly mentioned is that the municipality demands a certain service or treatment from the inter-municipal platform, whereas providing this service or treatment is not in the interest of the inter-municipal platform or the other member municipalities. In such cases, the board member of the inter-municipal platform will have to choose between the interest of their municipality and the interest of the inter-municipal platform. As a member of the DB of one inter-municipal platform revealed:

I am of course alderman in [municipality X] and I carry that with me; also the well-being of the citizens of [municipality X]. But since I am a member of the DB of [inter-municipal platform Y], I am not sitting there on behalf of [municipality X] but on behalf of all municipalities of [inter-municipal platform Y]. It is very important to be aware of that, and it requires a bit of balancing: sometimes you need to take a step back or forward on an issue that is important for your municipality. It is always a balancing act between the interests of the DB, the general interest, and the interest of your municipality.

Many interviewees indicated that they were able to distinguish between these various roles, and were therefore able to avoid conflicts of interest. However, apart from their own perception, the multiplicity of roles can also create confusion about responsibilities among outsiders. Interviewees indicated that it was not always clear to municipal councilors if they were asking questions to the alderman of their municipality, or to a representative of the inter-municipal platform. Conversely, for civil servants working at the inter-municipal platforms the variety of roles performed by board members sometimes also creates confusion, as the following respondent—who is a member of the DB of an inter-municipal platform—indicates:

Sometimes I am also angry with [inter-municipal platform X] and they find that very difficult: I will then put on my alderman's hat and say "come on guys, we had agreed that you would deliver to my municipality within such and such a period."



To make matters even more complex, inter-municipal platforms not only maintain contact with their member municipalities (i.e., the lower governance tier), but also with the national government, provincial administrations, and administrations of water boards (higher governance tiers). And also when it comes to these contacts, role multiplicity may create vagueness:

Sometimes it is not really clear if I have contact with the province as representative of [municipality X] or as representative of [inter-municipal platforms Y and Z]. Sometimes that gets mixed up. I have a seat at the table in many networks and venues, and this is very important when you want to get things done.

Obviously, the multiplicity of roles and functions may not necessarily be a problem, and might certainly facilitate swift and effective decision-making. However, from a democratic perspective, role multiplicity does create problems when it comes to political accountability. The fact that municipal councilors experience a lack of control and oversight on inter-municipal partnerships can at least partially be attributed to the multiple roles that the aldermen and mayor of their municipality perform, which complicates opportunities to hold them accountable. Aldermen and mayors are given a specific mandate by the municipal council for their actions and negotiations in inter-municipal platforms. The fact that these aldermen and mayors (may) also represent the interest of the inter-municipal platform itself can create problems when it comes to the realization of this mandate. If mandate fulfillment fails, municipal councils cannot effectively hold their alderman or mayor accountable, because s/he can always claim that decisions needed to be made in the interest of the inter-municipal platform. The lack of transparency of decision-making in inter-municipal platforms also makes it easier for aldermen and mayors to blame other municipalities or the inter-municipal organization itself.

Informal networks

As discussed above, most of the ‘action’ in inter-municipal platforms does not happen at official meetings of the boards (AB or DB), but important decisions are already made before these meetings occur. Interviewees indicate that this happens behind closed doors, primarily during informal contacts (which may happen in person, via e-mail, or via telephone / WhatsApp) between the various board members and high-ranking civil servants. This informality creates obvious problems for transparency, but also means that informal networks are crucial for getting things done; aldermen and mayors who have a more extensive network (for example because they have been in office for a longer period of time) therefore clearly have an advantage over those who don’t. This difference between experienced and new board members was illustrated by one of the interview respondents:

People who are just starting usually believe that they can exercise influence during meetings, but often this is only the very last stage. It starts much, much earlier, if you want. You contact a fellow board member to announce “I will



submit an amendment, what do you think? Are you willing to support it?" And so you try to gather support beforehand. Sometimes it's funny to see that the other municipalities then suddenly start falling in line. But that can only happen when you prepare things really well, and for that personal contacts are extremely important.

As this quote reveals, the formal structures of inter-municipal organizations are in practice much less important than the personal connections and networks of the actors involved in these organizations. Again, a parallel can be made with the European Union, in which informal contacts between political leaders are also of crucial importance:

You need to make friends in these platforms, so you need to see if you can make alliances with Leiden or other municipalities. This needs to happen before meetings, not afterwards. It is just like the European Union when it comes to this. Sometimes [municipality X] calls me: "you need to help me in the AB because I cannot do it on my own."

While voting ratios are hardly ever used because it almost never comes to a vote, interviewees indicate that all actors involved are very much aware of the power of larger municipalities in these informal contacts. As in the European Union, a common pattern is that larger municipalities, which together control a majority of votes, make informal pre-arrangements. Smaller municipalities then do not have much choice, and are essentially presented with a *fait accompli*. While interview respondents from small municipalities indicate that they (can) also play a leading role in informal negotiations and the creation of majorities, it is clear that informal negotiations put smaller municipalities at a disadvantage. In turn, this means that the democratic control of these municipalities on inter-municipal partnerships is further weakened by the informal style of decision-making, and that the size of municipalities strongly affects the extent to which (representatives of) inter-municipal partnerships can be held accountable.

For inter-municipal platforms which also have an important role in policy-making (like Holland Rijnland, VRHM, or HECHT), the importance of informal networks means that important policy decisions are not made by municipalities and not even in formal structures of inter-municipal platforms, but by a small number of political actors who contact each other outside the formal political channels. One respondent indicated that informal contacts are especially important and prevalent in these types of partnerships:

In substantive partnerships, you cannot do without preliminary consultations: that is even essential if you want to reach an agreement. If you don't do this, the meetings will take way too long, and are not fun either.

While the decentralization of public tasks to municipalities was at least partially motivated by a perceived need to increase the involvement, control, and power of citizens, in practice, important decision-making powers are therefore concentrated in the hands of a few representatives of (mostly larger) municipalities, who take decisions behind closed doors for which they can hardly be held accountable. The



outcomes of these informal negotiations are often irreversible: ordinary citizens, municipal councilors, and even members of the AB's of inter-municipal platforms have very limited opportunities to change them.

Finally, when it comes to the importance of networks, the linkages between board members and civil servants working at inter-municipal partnerships should not be underestimated. Various respondents indicated that informal connections with these employees (among whom the directors) can often result in favorable treatment. The previously discussed role multiplicity increases these opportunities, because board members can use their position to achieve something for their municipality, as the following quote illustrates:

One of the other advantages [of the combination of roles] is that I have very direct connections. For example: as alderman I am involved in a major [X] project in my municipality, in which [inter-municipal platform Y] also plays a role. Then it helps to have very direct connections with the employees of [inter-municipal platform Y]. I do not hope that they work harder for me than for someone else, but of course it helps that you are closer to them. I can easily ask them directly “gosh, how about this?” because they know me.

As this statement shows, also in the internal organization of inter-municipal partnerships, informal connections can be crucially important. The lack of democratic oversight on these partnerships can only be assumed to increase the significance of informal relationships.

Conclusion

Decentralization is often motivated by a perceived need to decrease or remove the ‘gap’ between citizens and politicians. However, almost everywhere in Europe, decentralization is accompanied by either municipal amalgamations or the proliferation of inter-municipal collaboration, which both represent a scaling up of governance. While municipal amalgamations are often very unpopular in the eyes of citizens, the newly created municipalities are at least democratically legitimated through free and fair elections. Inter-municipal cooperation also results in larger governance structures, but the difference is that their democratic legitimation is strongly deficient, and based on very indirect lines of accountability. In contrast to a municipal merger, expanding inter-municipal collaboration usually happens incrementally and may not be directly noticed by citizens, as a result of which it is less unpopular. In practice, however, inter-municipal collaboration arguably has more detrimental effects on the democratic position of citizens than municipal mergers.

Existing research shows that Dutch municipal councilors experience a profound lack of oversight on inter-municipal partnerships (De Blok 2015; Van den Berg and Boogaard 2021). However, so far not much was known about the practical, day-to-day functioning of these partnerships. Based on a qualitative investigation of six inter-municipal partnerships in which nine municipalities in the



Leiden region collaborate, this analysis has pointed to a number of additional democratic problems that can be associated with these partnerships, among which 1) their lack of transparency, 2) role multiplicity of actors involved in these partnerships, and 3) the importance of informal networks and informal decision-making. While existing studies primarily show the perspective of municipal councilors and/or citizens, this study is based on semi-structured interviews with the main actors involved in the administration of inter-municipal partnerships. Their answers to interview questions confirm the findings of existing studies, but also add a number of democratic deficiencies of inter-municipal partnerships that have not yet been identified by existing studies.

Democracy is not the only public value of importance, and inter-municipal partnerships are often cherished for generating more effective and cost efficient governance. These other public values are also underscored by the interview respondents. As such, a trade-off can be observed between more democratic but less effective governance in autonomous municipalities versus less democratic but more effective governance via inter-municipal partnerships, with a clear Europe-wide trend toward the latter. Importantly, the democratic problems highlighted in this paper (informality, role multiplicity, and a lack of transparency) may also appear in jurisdictions with more democratic structures, such as municipalities. However, the point of this paper is that the structure of inter-municipal partnerships in the Netherlands inherently produces these democratic shortcomings.

As subnational administrations across European countries acquire more tasks and competences, research into the quality of local democracy remains of crucial importance. As Hooghe and Marks famously argued (2003), the ‘unraveling’ of the state occurs in two directions: upward in the form of European integration, and downward in the form of the decentralization of powers to subnational administrations. The democratic shortcomings of the European Union are well documented, but this paper and other studies show that inter-municipal collaborations generate a similar kind of democratic deficit. While expanding multi-level governance may be unavoidable and even produce myriad benefits, this shows that there are clear risks for the protection of democratic accountability, transparency, and legitimacy.

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