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State-society relations in Belgian policy-making processes: Variations in governance structures and policy roles for civil servants. A comparative multiple-case study

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Abstract

This paper analyses state-society interactions in three Flemish policy sectors. Based on interviews and on the study of administrative archives, three policy processes were reconstructed in detail. This profound multiple-case research has resulted in a clear picture of the variations in institutionalised state-society interactions. The findings confirm the strength and influence of societal actors in Flemish policy-making and point at some implications for the work of civil servants, given the dominant consultational position of ministerial cabinets in Belgium.

1. Introduction: Executive policy-making in Flanders, a view on institutions and actors

As was asked the paper is strictly dedicated to empirical analysis. For a good understanding, it is, however, necessary to start with a short introduction to the Flemish policy-making system in which the policy-making processes took place. Therefore, we will describe successively the position of the Flemish Community in the Belgian state, the actors of the executive branch, the specific Belgian feature of the ministerial cabinet and the state-society relations at the macro level.

1.1. Flanders, part of the complex federal state of Belgium

Belgium is since 1993 a federal country, composed of different, but to some extent overlapping member states: three Regions and three Communities. Regions[2] have powers in fields that are connected with their territory in the widest meaning of the term: economy, employment, agriculture, housing, public works, energy, the environment, town and country planning, … . Since the Communities are based on the concept of "language"[3] and language is "dependent on the individual", a number of other powers are obviously associated with the Communities, such as culture, education and matters relating to the individual which concern on the one hand health policy (curative and preventive medicine) and on the other hand assistance to individuals (protection of youth, social welfare, aid to families, etc.). Each of these regions and communities has legislative powers, an own Parliament, an own Government and an own bureaucracy.[4] Belgian local authorities -municipalities (N=589) and Provinces (N=10)- are thus confronted with two or three central public authorities.

Demographically, Flanders is the largest[5] of these member states and it is a special one, since it has merged the powers of the Community and those of the Region into one Flemish Community, counting just one (legislature) Parliament and one single Government. The latter body implements the decrees issued by the Parliament and is responsible for the day-to-day running of the state. In fact, the Government constitutes the driving force behind policy.

1.2. The executive branch of the Flemish Community

Flanders has a multiparty system with no dominant party. Hence the Government is made up of a coalition. At the moment, a rainbow coalition of liberals, greens, socialists and Flemish-nationalists is in power. The Government counts 10 Ministers. Such offices as Junior Ministers or State Secretaries do not exist in the Flemish Government.

To elaborate and execute its policies, the Government can call on different types of actors/services. First of all there is the Flemish civil service, an organization of approximately 40.000 people. The civil service is fragmented in one central Ministry and several public institutions or external agencies, the latter counting for 2/3 rd of the total number of

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[2] the Flemish Region, the Brussels-Capital Region and the Walloon Region.

[3] Belgium counts three official languages: Dutch, German and French. So we talk of a Flemish, a French and a German-speaking community.

[4] Based on www.fgov.be. For further details see http://jsp.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/biblio/Brochures/english.pdf

[5] It counts approximately 6 million people. It should be mentioned that between the regional level and these citizens, there also exist municipalities and provinces. As central political mandates may be combined with local mandates and as Belgium is a strong partitocracy, it is clear that local, regional and central politics are intensively interwoven.

employees. The Ministry comprises several departments, consisting of administrations and sections. The Flemish civil service system is organized according to levels, ranks and grades. Level A posts require a university degree. The A level consists of 5 ranks: A1, A2, A2A, A3 (Director General) & A4 (Secretary General). A Secretary General is responsible for a department, composed of different administrations. A Director-General is responsible for an administration (level policy domain), composed of different sections or divisions (level policy field). Most policy work is done at section level, by the section-head (A2A) and his collaborators (A1's). The highest senior civil servants play more a role of coordination or are working on policy issues that exceed the sectoral level.

Very typical for the Belgian executive landscape is the existence –besides the civil service – of what is called *'ministerial cabinets'*, a personal staff for each Minister. As ministerial cabinets are the central players in Flemish policy-making, we will devote a special paragraph to them.

1.3. The role of Ministerial cabinets in Flemish policy-making

"Under the Belgian political system, a Minister is entitled to a ministerial cabinet, consisting of a staff of personal advisers whom the Minister personally appoints when (s)he takes office and who do not belong to the administrative hierarchy" (Suetens & Walgrave, 2001). This institution has been an object of study for quite some time now (Van Hassel: 1973, 1974, 1975, 1988) and has been looked at from different perspectives (Dierickx & Majersdorf, 1994; Suetens & Walgrave, 1999; Pelgrims, 2001). Its functions and dysfunctions were discussed recurrently[6]. We confine our analysis to its policy-making functions only.

According to Brans (2002), the existence of ministerial cabinets diminishes severely the policy role of the administration. By their scale[7], they are able to steer and control most of the main policy formation processes.[8] Furthermore, one could say that the ministerial cabinets monopolize some aspects of policy work. This does not mean that they exclude officials from policy-making, but they do restrict the authority and the policy role of officials as some tasks seem to be reserved for members of the ministerial cabinets[9]. Based on former and own research and interviews, we think the following tasks are the explicit authority of the ministerial cabinets:

- Decision-making: As the ministerial cabinet assists the Minister in every-day decision making, it has itself a lot of discrete decision-making power.
- Following this decision-making power in a coalition-government, the deliberations and negotiations with other coalition-partners are the explicit responsibility of members of the ministerial cabinet.
- The consultation of and negotiations with societal actors is mainly their prerogative. It is to ministerial cabinets that interest groups turn (Brans, 2002). This is not surprising, because "influence will be brought to bear, where power rests" (Key, 1961). Some officials have told us that they even are not supposed to inform societal actors of governmental decisions, indicating that in some policy fields, ministerial cabinets tend to monopolize all interactions with societal actors. Regarding this prerogative, it is important to mention that Ministers often explicitly co-opt members from interest organizations into their cabinet, with the aim of facilitating interest intermediation (Brans, 2002). Doing so, Ministers get in direct contact with societal organisations, providing him/her with expertise, field experience and societal contacts. In turn, societal organisations get direct access into decision-making.
- A last prerogative can be found in the contacts with the media. Governmental or ministerial spokesperson are working in the ministerial cabinets, not in the civil service.

One could conclude that the ministerial cabinets are centres of communication, consultation and co-ordination in Flemish policy-making. In Belgium, it is around the Ministerial cabinets that the policy networks are constructed (Suetens & Walgrave, 2001). The ministerial cabinet engages in extensive contacts with all other players in the policy-making process. We have tried to illustrate this central policy-making role in the following figure (Vancoppenolle & Brans, 2003).

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[6] See Brans (2002) and Suetens & Walgrave (2001) for an overview.

[7] At the moment, there are –for ten Ministers- approximately 468 people working in the Ministerial cabinets. Although they are very large in size, one has to mention that these 468 are not all advisors, as the cabinets employ an own army of secretaries, translators, telephonists, kitchen staff and drivers (Walgrave & Suetens, 1999). According to our own calculations, about two-third of them are real policy personnel (+/- 30 advisors pro Minister), comprising the functions: chief of cabinet, deputy chief of the cabinet, advisor, expert, spokesperson.

[8] Although they are not part of the administrative hierarchy, it is accepted that members of ministerial cabinets can give orders to officials. Compared to countries as the Netherlands or the UK, this is rather particular, since ministerial staff in these countries are kept out the line. Moreover, heated discussions took place in the UK about the role of special advisers (Committee on standards in public life, 2003). It was formally stated that special advisers are not allowed to give directions to the civil service. (See Vancoppenolle & Brans, 2003).

[9] This can be criticised, but one may not forget that in doing this, the cabinets shield the administration from external pressures, what implies that officials can stay neutral experts.

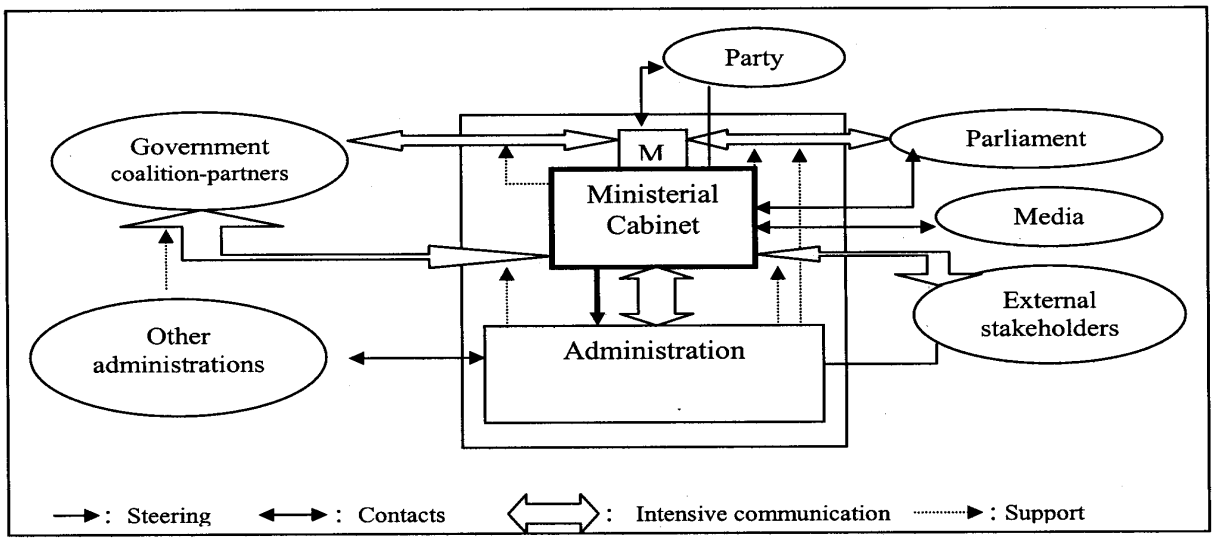

Figure 1: Policy-making interactions in the Flemish polity

1.4. State-society relations at macro-level

As the central theme of the working-group is the interactions with societal actors, it is useful to get a good understanding of the societal organisation in Flanders and of the state-society connection at macro-level, since we suppose that the organisation of civil society will differ tremendously between the studied countries.

Belgium can be classified as a neo-corporatist society in which social partners have gained a priviliged position in the Flemish policy-making. They are present in all the possible configurations of advice and deliberation. Their formal access is guaranteed. But Belgium is as well a strongly pillarised[10] country that can be categorised as a consociotional democracy (Van Den Bulck, 1992; Wintle, 2000). Its 'pillarisation' is expressed by the fact that political parties, trade unions, other interest organizations like the farmers association and health insurance institutions still have strong, formal and informal links. The main pillars are the christian-democrat or catholic pillar, the socialist pillar and the liberal pillar. Although the ideological 'cement' of the pillars[11] and the political integration in the pillars have eroded, the pillarized organisations of the past still exist. Partly, this has to do with the fact that a lot of public tasks are being executed by private organisations –the '*particulier initiatief*' (Van Mierlo, 1988)-especially present in such policy fields as welfare and education[12]. But those societal actors are not only involved in policy execution, they also take part in policy-making as members of the governing boards of public agencies or as members of the well developed system of advisory councils. All this reflects the fact that the principle of mutual consultation was acknowledged and that the pillars gained a formal right of representation.

As these pillarized actors have professionalised and continuously became more 'state' than 'particular', it is between the professionals of the Government and those of the '*particulier initiatief*' that policies are formed. One could conclude that a type of political osmosis has developed between the pillarised private institutions and the public service. Van Mierlo labels this situation as 'particular corporatism' (Van Mierlo, 1988).

2. Type, core and context of the cases

2.1. Inclusion-criteria & methodology

The three cases that will be described in the following sections were studied within the scope of a broader multiple-case design. The latter focuses on the policy work of civil servants and on the consequences of the type of policy processes (open or closed) for the competencies of civil servants and for the existing politico-administrative relations in Flanders. For this paper, we initially had the intention to compare only two processes. But as we were convinced that an additional case could result in a more representative picture of the 'internalisation' of external societal actors in the Flemish policy-making system, we added a third one. In the following we will discuss and analyse the policy formation process of three policy measures, labeled as 'Traning vouchers', 'Personal assistance budget' (PAB) and 'spatial executive plan for the urban region of Aalst'. These three cases were chosen for several reasons:

[10] Pillarisation refers to the organisations and institutions of all sorts which proliferated around vertical or ideological groups in politics, education, welfare, leisure and many other spheres (Wintle, 2000).

[11] See for instance Huyse, 1987; Elchardus, Hooghe and Smits (2000).

[12] See Mertens et al. (1999). They state that approximately 10.5 % of all paid jobs in Belgium.

- The policy formation processes were –at the moment of the start of our study- just or nearly finished, so the retrieval of the evidence was relatively easy and the respondents still had a vivid recollection of the policy process.
- As we wanted to take stock of a variety in policy roles, external stakeholders and state-society interactions, we opted to select most different cases that differed in several ways:
  - Different policy sectors: We tried to select different policy sectors. The cases were drawn from following policy fields: economic policy (Training vouchers), spatial planning (the spatial executive plan Aalst) and welfare policy (the introduction of the personal assistance budget system). These policy fields are populated by different external stakeholders, ranging from traditional socio-economic interests to local authorities, not-for-profit associations and individual citizens or action groups.
  - The measures differ in their judicial nature, as one case required a vote a in Parliament before the measure was elaborated by Governmental decisions, while in the other two cases the policy formation process consisted only of the elaboration of a Governmental decision. Our multiple case design thus contained both primary and secondary legislation, which implied different involvement-patterns of societal actors.
  - Different institutionalisations of state-society relations in policy-making and policy implementation. As will become clear in this paper, the cases reveal a broad variety of state-society interactions via advisory councils, deliberative committees, bilateral contacts, ad-hoc networks, parliamentary hearings, executive boards, … .
  - Different policy roles for civil servants: Of particular relevance is the case on spatial planning. This case is quite revolutionary for the Flemish policy institutions, in that the whole policy formation process remained in the hands of the civil servants, while the ministerial cabinet played a minor role and did only become relevant during decision-making. In the other two cases, interactions with societal actors were mainly mediated by ministerial cabinets. This variation fits perfectly with the research focus of the working group, as the interest lies in variations of both state-society interactions and the role of civil servants in those interactions.
  - Differing types of policy: As patterns of politics are significantly determined by the content of policies (Wilson (1980)[13], Lowi (1972), Velthut (2003)), we tried to include some variation in the type of policy. The *training voucher measure* is (mainly[14]) a distributive measure, in which the benefits go to most of the employers and in which the financial costs are dispersed among society. Even the natural opponents of the employers, the employees and their associations (trade unions) benefited from this measure, since their opportunities to follow professional trainings and enhance their potential have risen. However, we will see that all types of companies wanted to benefit, resulting in strong opposition against the selectivity of benefits for certain groups of employers. Our second case -*The personal assistance budget system*- at first sight looks distributive, but is in fact a redistributive one, since the powerful traditional caring institutions lost or could have lost by this measure. Our third case –the *spatial executive plan*- is in essence a measure that distributes benefits and costs among a variety of losers and winners. At the same time, spatial planning measures are of a special kind, since the costs and benefits are often unclear or are situated in the long term. As the case dealt with planning in an urban area containing different problematic sites, one could expect to have no clear winners or users for the whole case, but a huge variety of winners and losers, regarding to particular sites in that area.

The processes were analyzed in several phases. Firstly, an explorative interview was held with the official in charge in order to get a rough picture of the process and to arrange the study of administrative archives. Based on these archives and on supplementary documents (press-, information, parliamentary documents, …), the processes were reconstructed, the network was depicted, the interactions in the network were analysed, as well as the task division between bureaucrats and members of ministerial cabinets, and the different activities of the civil servants were profoundly listed. Following this analysis, we interviewed most of the relevant actors[15]. Through the interviews, we wanted not only to get more information about unclear aspects of the policy process, we also used a semi-standardised questionnaire to list their work and the competencies they needed in the process.

We now turn to an overview of the core, context and course of the three policy processes.

2.2. Training vouchers

The policy measure 'Training vouchers' was launched in 2002, after an elaboration period of approximately 1 year. With the training vouchers, the Government wanted to stimulate and support companies in their efforts to invest in their human capital. The system consists of a financial support by the Government for the training expenses of enterprises. Each company can buy a certain amount of vouchers (max. 200 a year, a rato of 30 euro) that can be used for training expenses paid to accredited training institutes. The Flemish Government pays 50% of the voucher amount.

[13] Wilson claimed that politics of regulation follows different patterns, mobilises various actors and has different consequences depending on the perceived costs and benefits of the proposed policy.

[14] The measure is mainly distributive, although it contains also some redistributive characteristics, since the vouchers replaced an old system in which there existed a different repartition of costs and benefits.

[15] We nearly finished two cases (Training vouchers and Spatial plan), the third process was already reconstructed, but we still have to analyse the archives and have to conduct the interviews.

In former days, other systems of governmental support existed, but these encountered several pressures for change. In the past, the policy measure '*Meertewerkstellingssteun*' supported companies who did investments that resulted in more jobs. This form of support was problematic in several ways. First of all, investments in Flanders were –given the relatively high labour-costs in Belgium- rather focused on the automatisation of the production process, than on creating more jobs. In addition, the investment-coupled subsidy system carried high risks in a globalised economy. This became painfully evident when Renault abruptly closed its plant in Vilvoorde. About 3000 people lost their job, although the Flemish Government had done great financial efforts to support the investments of Renault-Vilvoorde. This negative experience, combined with the ambitions of Europe to create a sound knowledge economy, convinced the Government to pursue a different policy, characterised by instruments that were less sensitive to economic volatility and that met better the specific needs of the Flemish knowledge economy and its workers[16]. The Government thus decided to adopt to a more modern industrial support policy, focused on the basic conditions for a healthy knowledge-economy: qualified human capital. The Minister for Economy installed a mixed Working Group ('*visiegroep'*) on Human Capital, with representatives from ministerial cabinets, administrations and relevant socio-economic actors. It was during the work of this 'think-thank' that one came across a system of training vouchers in the Walloon region. Such a system appealed the Minister and his staff because it seemed more effective and more efficient than the existing support measure for training (called *Vlamivorm*). *Vlamivorm* was not only inefficient by its administrative complexity (fiscal advantages for investments in training, resulting in a heavy case-load for the administration). In addition, its effectiveness was rather poor, since most of the resources went to bigger companies, while several studies had pointed out the stronger need of smaller Flemish enterprises, since these traditionally invested little in training.

The Minister launched the training voucher idea at the end of 2000 in his 'Beleidsnota', his action plan for the coming legislature. He saw the opportunities of the introduction of such a measure because it was simple, demand-oriented, budgetary controllable, and effective because the range of application could be restricted to small and middle-sized enterprises. He succeded to convince the social partners to postpone the measure '*Meertewerkstellingssteun*' and to shift its funds to the new support measure for training.
The policy idea was further elaborated and operationalized by the administration[17], in close cooperation with two members of the Ministerial cabinet and in an open and frequent collaboration with the relevant socio-economic actors of VESOC[18], the forum for the tripartite dialogue between Government, trade unions and employers. Quite early in the process, the choice was made to implement the measure as an administrative simple 'e-gov' application. Most of the problems during the elaboration process derived from European jurisdiction about the permitted aid levels. One had to decide under what regulation the governmental initiative would be notificated, because this choice determined not only the size of the support (the value of the vouchers and the amount of the subsidy), but also the benefiting group, as some regulations excluded sectors from governmental aid. After all, the measure was brought under the '*de minimis*' regulation[19].

It took half a year to get an agreement in principle on a draft of a Governmental Decision. At the end of this elaboration process (mid-July), the SERV[20], the Social and Economic Advisory Council, pro-actively[21] advised negative on some modalities of the regulation. The Council amended the draft proposal of the Governmental decision, and pressed the Minister to delete the selectivity of the measure (only for SME's) in order to include the larger enterprises. One could conclude that the peak organisation of the larger enterprises finally carried the day, although one could also say (as will be described in the following paragraph) that all social partners won by this decision. The Minister agreed to follow this advice, leading to an adaptation of the Governmental Decision. This adjusted version was –in principle- formally approved by the Government at the end of July. After this decision, the implementation of the measure was further prepared[22], leading to a final adoption of the Governmental Decision in December and to the approval of the Ministerial Decision, dealing with all the operational details. The measure was made public in the beginning of February 2002.[23]

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[16] One believed that a support for investments in human capital had more positive externalities for Flanders.
[17] The administration particularly focused on the technical feasibility, the European admissibility and the operational details of the executive process.
[18] The Flemish Economic and Social Deliberative Committee
[19] Commission notice nr. 69/2001 on the *de minimis rule for state aid* (Official Journal L 10, 13.01.2001), which meant that the transport sector and part of the food industry were excluded from the measure.
[20] Composed on the basis of parity by representatives from the employers and representatives from the trade unions.
[21] Normally, an Advisory Council advises a proposal after a formal request by a Minister, following the formal approvement in principle by the Government.
[22] The administration worked –assisted by an 'internal' IT-consultant- hard on the e-side of the measure and called for private companies to press and distribute the vouchers.
[23] The measure started, although the executive machinery (the e-transaction) was not ready at that moment, leading to heavy manual case-load for the administration during the first months.

Shortly before the start, some industrial sectors noticed that they were excluded from support and started to exert pressure on the administration and the Ministerial cabinet. Pressure was also mediated through members of Parliament, who put very specific questions to the Minister about the reason for excluding sectors X and Y. One year later, the Governmental decision was modified to include the formerly excluded policy sectors. Two years later, the benefiting group of the measure once again broadened, and some employers from the not-for-profit sector were admitted in the system.

2.3. The Personal Assistance Budget system (PAB-system)

The personal assistance budget system was intended to augment the independence and the freedom of choice of persons with a disability. The system grants a person with a disability a budget from the Government which he can use to pay someone for the provision of necessary assistance during daily activities. The disabled person thus becomes a kind of employer. The great advantage is that the person with a disability can choose by who, when, where and how he is assisted. This freedom of choice did not exist before, since the Flemish welfare sector for disabled people nearly completely consisted of professional caring organisations, who obviously did not supply the same freedom of choice or could not deliver the tailor-made services of the PAB-system. Under the new system, disabled people can receive annual budgets varying from 7.500 EUR to 35.000 EUR.

Although the PAB-measure was implemented only in 2001, it had a history going back to the mid nineties. After discussions in the Flemish Parliament on a draft of decree, an experiment[24] with assistance budgets was set up for 15 persons in 1997. This piloting was a response to pressure from *Independent Living Flanders*, an association of physically disabled persons, demanding the legal recognition of the personal assistance budget. In 1998, the Parliament discussed the results of that experiment intensively. In the Parliamentary Committee for welfare, several hearing-sessions were organized with participants of the experiment and with stakeholders from the field (associations and caring organisations). One decided not only to continue the experiment, but also to broaden its scope, and hence to include people with mental and sensorial disabilities in the experiment, what was claimed by the associations of these interests. After the elections of 1999 and with a new coalition Government (without the Christian-Democrats), a new draft of decree was submitted. The Decree introducing the PAB system was voted in July 2000. The Governmental Decision dealing with the operational matters followed in December of that year. It had been elaborated by civil servants of the Flemish Fund, a public institution, in close collaboration with the ministerial cabinet. In 2001 a budget of € 7.8 million was assigned for a total of maximum 400 PAB users ('budget holders').
At the moment 650 persons with a disability have a budget that can be used for assistance in housekeeping activities, physical assistance, assistance during free time activities, practical assistance on school or on the workplace, transport, etc. It is interesting to note that aid from family members can be paid with the budget and that the Government subsidizes associations of budget holders[25] who support their clients with administrative affairs and who protect their interests. For our research-goal, it is important to mention that one of these associations is the former '*Independent Living Flanders*', who transformed in *BOL* (Association of Budget Holders Independent Living). The societal action-group thus succeded in becoming involved in the execution of the policy it lobbied for.

The policy formation process of this case differs from the other cases as Parliament and politicians were leading this process and made decisions on target-group, activities eligible for subsidy and permitted assistants (aid by family members was permitted). Civil servants worked hard on the implementation of these general lines, being confronted with multiple problems (difficulties with definitions[26], with the design of instruments to measure the need of assistance, with the design of decision-rules to judge the budget-requests and to determine the amount of budget).

2.4. The spatial executive plan of the urban region Aalst

In 1996, the Flemish Region created a new planning code. The most important objective of this planning decree was to provide the legal basis for *structure plans* on the regional as well as on the provincial and local levels, resulting in an integrated system of spatial planning, in which spatial vision and actions smoothly flow over. The regional plan '*Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen'* (Spatial structure plan for Flanders) was adopted in 1998 and became operational in 2000. This regional structure plan delineates the general lines for the spatial organisation of Flanders. The leading principle is the choice that Flanders has to be as well an open as an urban region, a principle that has been

[24] Some say the choice for an experiment reflected the unwillingness of the Minister at the time and of the Flemish Fund.

[25] Budget Holders Organisations are organisations authorized by the Flemish government to prepare future PA users and to provide advice to PA users. 2 / 3 of the members and of the board members have to be persons with a disability who have a budget.

[26] Some operational interpretation problems still exist. One example of these definition/interpretation-problems: What activities fall under assistance in leisure time? Can a disabled person with a PAB pay the plane ticket of his assistant? The answer is yes.

translated in different numeric targets –and thus different policies- for the societal functions 'living' and 'industry' both in rural and urban areas (Ministerie van de Vlaamse gemeenschap, 2002).

The wish to pursue specific policies for rural and urban areas implies that the areas surrounding the cities have to be demarcated precisely. Via what are called '*demarcation processes*' one not only wanted to mark the urban area, it was also foreseen that the demarcation processes –through the elaboration of spatial executive plans- dealt with the land use[27] in that area and even with the land lay-out and -eventually- with the land management. All this required a process in which 1) a thorough analysis was made of the characteristics and opportunities of the area, and 2) in which -based on this analysis- a kind of spatial vision was elaborated for the area, a vision that had to be operationalised through specific actions.
For all the areas, the authority to demarcate was assigned to a specific administrative section of the Flemish administration (division of spatial planning), who had to set up, steer and guide planning processes for each area. Interesting to mention is that the regional structure plan for Flanders ordered the Flemish policy makers to work together with the local authorities of the areas and with other relevant administrations[28].

Aalst was one of the cities in which the urban area had to be demarcated from the rural or other urban areas and it was even the first area to be demarcated[29]. For the civil servants, this kind of work was completely new, since they were used to handle 'files' at their desk and since they did not have that much personal contacts with societal actors, local governments or citizens. Before the start, the administration made some remarkable choices about the design of the process. First of all they hired two external bureaus to assist them with the process: one professional planning office to do most of the analysis and writings and a professional communication office to design and guide the communication and interaction process between the participating actors and between those actors and the citizens of that area. Secondly, they tried to construct a broad *ad-hoc* network, bringing together all relevant stakeholders. They even invited civil society actors as the farmers organisation, trade unions, environmental organisations, associations of local employers, … . Although not every actor showed up or participated thorougly, the invitation reflected the good intentions of the Flemish Community.

From January 1998 until the May 2000, this *ad-hoc* or project network engaged in an intensive '*open plannings- proces*, comprising 28 formal meetings between the central actors. Once one had made an analysis of needs and possibilities of the region and had formulated a vision for the area, an open forum for citizens was held. Following the choice of transforming an open fertile[30] plane called *Siesegemkouter* into an industrial park, the open forum resulted in huge protest and in critical questions from neighbouring citizens, farmers and green associations, all of which put heavy pressure on the local authority.

During the process, elections took place at the regional and the local level. The regional elections of 1999 led to a coalition-shift at the Flemish level, in which the Liberals, Greens and flemish nationalists replaced the christian democrats in the Government as partners of the Socialists (SP-a). The portfolio of Spatial planning went to a liberal Minister. As his party (VLD) came to power for the first time, the new Minister -without governing experience- had to learn about his competences. Regarding the demarcation-processes, he was confronted with a new type of policy-making, the value of which he had to be convinced of. With regards to the demarcation of Aalst, he entered the scene when the open planning-process was in its final phase. Hence, the process suffered at least somewhat from this discontinuity in authority.

The '*planningsprocess'* suffered even more from the local elections. As the project group -after two years of studies and debates- agreed on a proposal of demarcation that afterwards was send to all actors (local authorities, other administrations, …) for advice and consent, the local Councils had to take a decisive position on a demarcation-proposal in april 2000. However, being afraid to loose votes, most politicians did not want to make explicit choices just before the elections, resulting in a delayed advice of the central municipalities, Aalst and Denderleeuw.[31] Moreover, one of the central actors (the Province of East-Flanders) surprisingly rejected the proposal[32], taking position against the intended change of use of the plane *Siesegemkouter*. This resulted in a breakdown of the process.

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[27] Designating what parts of the area will be designed for what societal activity: living, working, producing, …
[28] Governmental decision of 11 mei 2001
[29] This process had to result in 5700 additional housing facilities and in the creation of 70 hectare industry parks.
[30] Partly used for agriculture.
[31] Fortunately for the continuation of the process, the local coalition in Aalst (SPA-VLD) did not change after the elections of May 2000.
[32] It was said that this was due to a bad representation by an official, who did not give feedback to his deputies and his council.

The *open planningsmethod* was not prolongated after this negative advice, exept from one plenary session with all stakeholders in the autumn of 2001. In this session the stakeholders could make comments on a pre-proposal of Spatial Executive Plan that –although it was nearly the translation of the demarcation-process- was unilaterally developed by the administration. After this session, the Flemish administration continued to work on a proposal of a spatial executive plan. Confronted with the first spatial executive plan ever, one had to solve several time-consuming jurisdictional and definitional 'problems'. In February 2002, the ministerial cabinet 'asked' the administration to alter some elements of the compromise, since it believed that some sites could be developed in an other and better or more intensive way. Regarding the specific plane *Siesegemkouter*, it wanted to enlarge the space for the business-park and wanted to start as soon as possible with the development of the whole plane, while the process-compromise had proposed a phased and smaller transformation. All this reflected the demands of the city of Aalst, who obviously had contacted the Minister – being from the same party- informally. The administration had to adapt quickly the documents to this new turn as the Minister wanted to arrive at results with this process. The administration answered this request, but not without stating formally that "*the chosen options would do harm to the reached compromise*" and that "*it was not fair to the 'planning partners' to make drastic changes, without informing them or giving them the opportunity to react"*. They argued that without the detailed level of some modalities about the land use and land management of Siesegemkouter, the definitive demarcation-proposal would never have been accepted by the process partners[33].

Once the adaptations were made, the decision-making process at Flemish level started, a phase in which an '*interkabinettenwerkgroep* (IKW)' (a working group of members of ministerial cabinets, with representatives from all coalition-parties) discussed and negotiated the demarcation-line and the executive plan. During this decision-process, other rules, rationalities and interactions dominated the process. None of the members of those IKW's had been present in the demarcation process. Even the civil servants did not fully participate in these meetings. Following the meetings of the IKW, the administration had to adapt the proposal continuously to the successive decisions of the IKW. In June 2002, the spatial executive plan was approved by the Flemish Government, followed by preparations for a public inquiry. In March 2003, the spatial executive plan was formally approved.

3. Analysis of stakeholders, their interests and organization

The following chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the relevant key-actors, their organisation and their interests. We will do this case by case. To facilitate the reading and the comparison of the cases, we have scheduled them in table 1. We make a distinction between internal and external actors.

CASE		Training vouchers	Personal assistance budget	Spatial Executive Plan
INTERNAL ACTORS	PO	Minister(s)	Members of Parliament Government Minister	Minister(s)
	MC	Ministerial cabinet:	Ministerial Cabinet	Ministerial cabinet(s)
	CS	Administration in the Ministry: a team, explicitly composed of differing competencies, leaded by the section-head.	Civil servants of the public agency (the 'Flemish Fund') for disabled persons (with external actors in its board)	Administration in the Ministry: a team of two officials, guided and supported by their section-head
	OPD	▪ Other cabinets/ administrations (employment) ▪ Public training institutes	Other cabinets (coalition-negotiations)	Other cabinets/administrations (Economy + Environmental administrations)
	HP	▪ IT-consultants to build the 'e-gov' application ▪ Professional marketing office, to elaborate the public information campaign	Academic staff to evaluate the PAB-experiment & assist with operationalisation of concepts & procedures	Private offices: planning group + communication office

[33] The modalities made up the compromise, as they concerned the preservation of the environmental value of the plane and the life quality for the neighbouring citizens.

EXTERNAL ACTORS	▪ Employers peak organisations -Large enterprises: VEV -SME's: UNIZO -Not-for-profit sector (VCSPO) -Sectoral organisations ▪ Trade unions: ACV-ACLBV-ABVV ▪ Private training organisations ▪ Private voucher-companies	▪ Caring organisations ▪ Interest groups of disabled people: -physically disabled people -mentally retarded people ▪ Disabled citizens	▪ Municipalities Aalst & Denderleeuw -Local Politicians & local Civil servants (from spatial planning domain) -Officials from other policy domains ▪ Province of East-Flanders -Officials -(Politicians) ▪ Societal actors: (-unions) (employers) -Environmental associations -Farmers organisations -Action committees of citizens

PO: Politicians, MC: Ministerial cabinet, CS: Civil Servants, OPD: Actors from other policy domains, HP: Hired professionals)

Table 1: Internal key-actors & external stakeholders in the cases

3.1. Training vouchers

Above, we stated that this measure was developed by the administration in close collaboration with the Ministerial Cabinet and in open communication with the social partners. Each of the actors will be introduced briefly.

The new Liberal **Minister** for Economy had the clear ambition to change the economic support policy. Given his liberal background, it was no surprise that he wanted to introduce a demand oriented and market-bound[34] system of vouchers. As his party stands for the removal of administrative burdens, the choice for an 'e-gov' apllication was obvious. As a responsible policy-maker working with scarce means, he only wanted to introduce the training vouchers on condition of shifting available means from one measure to another.

During the process, the **Ministerial cabinet** had contacts with all actors, but it is logical that it had –given its liberal disposition- priviliged contacts with the employers. Regarding this consultation role, it is interesting to mention that the Ministerial cabinet of the Minister for Economy is located in the same building of the SERV, which physically facilitates direct contacts between both parties. The Deputy chief of cabinet was strongly involved in the policy formation. It was his ambition to elaborate a good support measure as quick as possible, which would benefit the employers.

The **civil servants** played a major role in the policy process, in the elaboration of the content of the measure, as well as in the (technical) preparation of the implementation. From a budget-maximising orientation, one could say that this measure conflicted with their own interests, being demand-oriented and administratively simple. The officials did not take such a position, as they were convinced that a reorientation of the economic support policy was necessary. Based on their own experiences with the former measures, they were in favour of administratively simple measures that were targeted on the industrial sectors that needed the support the most, the SME's. Looking back at their role, we have to say that they invested a lot of work in this measure. They worked in a team with different competencies (jurisdictional, technical & substantive), led by the section-head. The relation between cabinet and administration was very cooperative. This is due to the fact that most interests of both actors coincided, to the fact that the administration put in a lot of heavy work [35] and accepted the primacy of politics, and to the fact that the cabinet appreciated the rigorous work and the underpinned critical recommendations of the administration.

Despite this close cooperation, a neat task separation existed as the administration did not engage in most of the consultation processes and in the direct negotiations with the social partners. At several times, the officials asked by e-mail for some feedback about the discussions in those formal organs.

Other cabinets played a minor role in the formulation process, although a conflict emerged between two Ministers/cabinets regarding the ownership of the measure and although some pressure was evident from other sectors who questioned that the measure was initially reserved for private training institutes. This conflicted with the interests of other public (several public institutions) or semi-public (universities) actors who also delivered training.

[34] Initially, the vouchers were only intended for training expenses in private training institutes. But the public and semi-public training suppliers managed to change this intention, using their contacts in their cabinets and administrations.

[35] The administration knew that the Minister was sceptical about the capacity of the administration. With this case, they convinced them of their expertise and their loyalty.

Above, we mentioned that the interests of several social partners did not match, but that at the end of the process a jointly negative advice was given to the Government, demanding to delete the selectivity of the measure. Central **societal actors** in the elaboration process were the VEV –'Flemish Economic Association', the powerful organisation of the (larger) Flemish employers-, UNIZO -the peak-organisation for self-employed and SME's- and the (pillarised[36]) trade unions ACV, ABVV, ACLBV. Because the unions acted in common, no further difference will be made between the three unions.

All of these umbrella organisations represent thousands[37] of clients/members and hence can be described as powerful representative organisations in the Flemish polity. Such a position was granted to them at the end of the second world war. All of them have strong secretariats and large study centres.

UNIZO had a lot to win by this measure. As it was clear that SME's invested little in training, government support was needed and welcomed for their clients. UNIZO could only be delighted by the original ideas and draft proposals, since it was the explicit ambition of the Minister, his staff and his administration to focus on SME's. The VEV, by contrast, argued for an open target group, not only for *instrumental reasons* because it had to loose from a selective system, but also *principally* because it represents itself a wide variety of enterprises. The latter implies that it can not defend selective measures to its own member organisations. The trade-unions played a minor role in the process, although they were fully involved. They formulated a joint opinion, in which they stated their appreciation for the measure (as it benefited also the employees), although they did not agree with the choice to broaden the benefiting group to middle-sized companies counting up to 250 employees and disagreed with the choice to exclude the not-for-profit sector from the system. They also demanded a formal information or co-decision regulation at company-level, so that they their influence in the decision of the employers would be guaranteed.

It is thus clear that inherent tensions and conflicting interests existed between the societal actors (partners). It was the Minister himself who tried to broker by suggesting a compromise, preserving the vouchers for enterprises up to 250 employees. This compromise could have been accepted by the VEV, but during mutual negotiations in the Executive Committee of the SERV (the advisory council), it eventually managed to open up the system for all companies. This change resulted from a deal between the social partners, with a clear given and take between them. The VEV gained the broadening of the measure, but did not go as far as to request the abolition of a maximum for the number of vouchers that could be ordered by each company. This meant that in reality the vouchers still would benefit the smaller companies more, as 200 vouchers is a negligible amount for large companies, counting more than 250 employees. The trade unions accepted the abolition of the selectivity, as their concession in this case was coupled to other cases, in which they got concessions from the VEV. It seems that it is difficult in Belgium to restrict a positive good (financial aid) to a select group of benefiters. It is clear that alle representative actors should have their peace of the cake, either in reality or symbolically.

It is also clear that during the policy formation process, only the peak organisations were publicly involved.[38] Just before the launch of the measure, however, some sectoral associations and even individual companies became active, as they found themselves excluded by the *de minimis* conditions of the current regulation. Direct letters were send to the Minister for Economy and the VEV required the extension of the measure to all sectors. Other pressures came from particular companies or self-employed who did not get an accreditation, while competitors got one. Hence, the requirements guarding the quality of the training institutions destabilised the market, damaging and threatening the survival of some smaller enterprises. It is evident that also such situations resulted in huge pressures on Minister, cabinet and administration.

Once the system was succesfully established, the private not-for-profit sector wanted to enter the system. It should be noticed that -although the not-for-profit sector is traditionally extremely important in Belgium and Flanders- the VCSPO[39] was only accepted as a social partner in 2002. As they were not a recognised social partner at the start of the system, they obviously could not influence the decisions. But one year later (mid 2002), they succeded to expand the measure to parts of their sector via an adaptation of the Governmental decision[40]. The traditional economic sector

[36] The ACV is the Christian union, the ABVV the socialist union and the ACLBV the liberal union. Because the unions took one joint stance, no further difference will be made between the three unions.
[37] The VEV represents more than 17.000 enterprises. Unizo has more than 80.000 members.
[38] To be sure, the measure was discussed with sectoral representatives behind closed doors.
[39] The Flemish Centre for Social Profit organisations. It consists of sectoral associations of employers, active in health and welfare policy, socio-cultural policy, education, … .
[40] One could criticize the content of this development, since they are not real market-players and since they are subsidized already by the Government in other ways.

agreed with this on condition that the funds for this operation would come from the budget of other Ministers. For the highly subsidized social profit organizations, Government and social profit organizations came to a specific agreement in which 'development-funds' for employees would be introduced.

As one can see in the table, a minor role in policy-making was given to other external actors. The IT-part that was needed for the executive process was subcontracted to an IT-consultant. Other external actors worth mentioning are the private companies that lobbied for the contract to print and distribute the training vouchers (policy implementation at its operational level). The company that distributed the vouchers in the Walloon region had good contacts in the cabinet and even participated at some preparatory meetings. However, in a competetive tender, they failed to convince the jury (the administration).

3.2. Personal assistance budget system

Particular societal actors put a lot of pressure on members of the Flemish Parliament and on the Minister to get the PAB-system on the policy agenda. Once it was adopted as an experiment, other interests came in to get a share of the cake or to defend their positions, as is proven by the records of the parliamentary sessions. Once again it seems that it is difficult to preserve a specific benefit for a select group and to exclude other institutionalised actors.

The elaboration process of the PAB-regulation differs from the other two cases by its judicial nature and (hence) by the fact that (a variety of) politicians played a dominant role in policy-making. The content of the already existing draft of decree underwent huge changes after the elections of 1999. This is due to a completely new composition of Government, the first time without the Christian-Democrats. This party has a natural association with the '*particulier initiatief*' 'private initiative' in the welfare sector, explaining partly the unwillingness of the former Minister of Welfare to adopt the system without a delaying experimentation. Most of the welfare services are allied in the '*Vlaams Welzijnsverbond*', a peak-organisation of Catholic welfare organisations. It is evident that this particular organisation wanted to defend its own position and prefered to treat disabled people in its services rather than to support a measure that gives disabled people the possibility to stay at home and foresee in their own assistance. It seems obvious that the new –a-clerical- Government wanted to change the traditional policy options of the former Government and chose to put the disabled people at the heart of their policy, not the private welfare services. This was even litterally stipulated in the Governmental agreement:

> *"The policy for disabled people departs from the needs of the people themselves and their entitlements to tailor made care. ... The supply of organisations and services has to assist the disabled as much as possible in order to let them live their own, autonomous live. This implies that there should be a sufficient supply of ambulatory care. A PAB-system can also help to reach this goal." (Coalition agreement, 1999, own translation.)*

For a coalition of Socialists, Greens and Liberals, this choice should not surprise. The Liberal party in particular expressed a strong aversion to the social profit sector at the start of the legislature. Confronted with such a unified political front, the opposition and the strong societal actors could not prevent the implementation of a client-centered system such as the PAB.

The system was operationalised by the ministerial cabinet and the civil servants of the Flemish Fund for the social integration of disabled people (known as the 'Flemish Fund'). The Flemish Fund is an important public body with legal personality, working within the remit of the Flemish Minister for Welfare. It is governed by a 21-member Board of Management. The composition of this board is important, since it consists of representatives from the private (but recognised and subsidized) executive institutions for people with diabilities, of representatives of the associations for people with disabilities, of representatives of the social partners and of two Community officials, representing the Minister. As all interests are represented in the Governing Board of the Flemish Fund, they were constantly informed about the developments in the process. Even the leading figures from Independent Living Flanders -themselves budget holders- are members of that Board.

This configuration clearly complicated the work of the officials of the Fund, as they had to follow the orders from the Minister at one time and the orders of the Board at another time. At a given moment, this configuration even resulted in a conflict between the Minister and (some members) of the Governing board. Reason for this was the leakage by some members of the Governing Board to the press of a ministerial request for advice regarding the payment of familiary assistance. In another policy measure of the same Minister, familiar aid was paid much less, resulting in a problematic inequality. The press wrote that the Minister wanted to ban familiary assistants from the budget system (De Standaard: 'End of the golden familiary assistants'), resulting in huge protests.

3.3. The spatial executive plan of Aalst

Above we already mentioned that the demarcation process was guided by officials and that an *ad-hoc* network was constructed. More specifically, the process was enacted by a project team, consisting of the central actors (politicians & officials from local authorities + officials of the division spatial planning), assisted by the private offices. There also

existed a working group of civil servants, with representatives of other local and regional administrations (environmental sector, public works, …). The whole structure was supervised by a steering group that consisted of politicians and societal actors. This large ad-hoc network was set up to involve all possible stakeholders, reflecting a maximalistic interpretation of the mentioned legal obligations.

For this case, it is difficult to define precisely the interests of all stakeholders, regarding the variety of decisions that had to be made. Some actors had a consistent interest for the whole process, some actors had only clear interests/wishes on certain developments or particular fields, other actors tried to defend their interest in multiple fields, … .
The **Flemish spatial planning administration** had full process-responsibility. The officials had the task to get something out of this process. After the regional elections, they had to deal with the fact that their Minister was also responsible for Economy, that he had a liberal signature and thus wanted to create as much business parks as possible. The stakes for the administration were even bigger, as they had to deliver the goods of the new planning instruments. After the termination of the open planning process, it became clear that the civil servants who had been active in the process had difficulties in coping with what seemed to be some sort of a dual loyalty. On the one hand they had to respect the primacy of their Minister and his ministerial cabinet, on the other hand they wanted to defend or protect as much as possible the agreed compromise from the network, guarding the quality of some specific sites.
The **sectoral interests** (environmental groups, agricultural organisations, sectoral administrations) had specific goals to strive for and one could see that they pursued their interest in every specific site. It was difficult for some of these actors to accept losses in one site in order to gain in other sites. In general, one can state that it is difficult for issue groups or action committees to see the big picture, and for specific interests to enter a bargaining game, where in the total area one had to indulge on some sites, in exchange for gains in other sites.
The **local authorities** had their own goals, but they were obliged to think strategically with the regional authorities, implying some painful decisions in the short run for their citizens, their electorate. They sometimes were able to shift the blame to the regional authorities, but this did not work all the time. One huge problem for the process was the fact that some participating actors did not give feedback to their political authorities, which resulted in embarassing situations.

A last problem with this ad-hoc structure was that the tractor-actor (the Flemish administration) did not have any means by itself to offer, or to promise. The fact that other public actors (such as public works) were not participating in the project, threatened seriously the credibilty and the effectiveness of the network.

4. Channels of involvement

In this paragraph we describe the channels of involvement and of access of the societal actors into the different policy formation processes. For each case, we try to depict the channels and the actors in a separate figure. At the end of the paragraph, a summarising table will facilitate a systematic comparison of the broad variety of channels and styles of participation.

4.1 Training vouchers

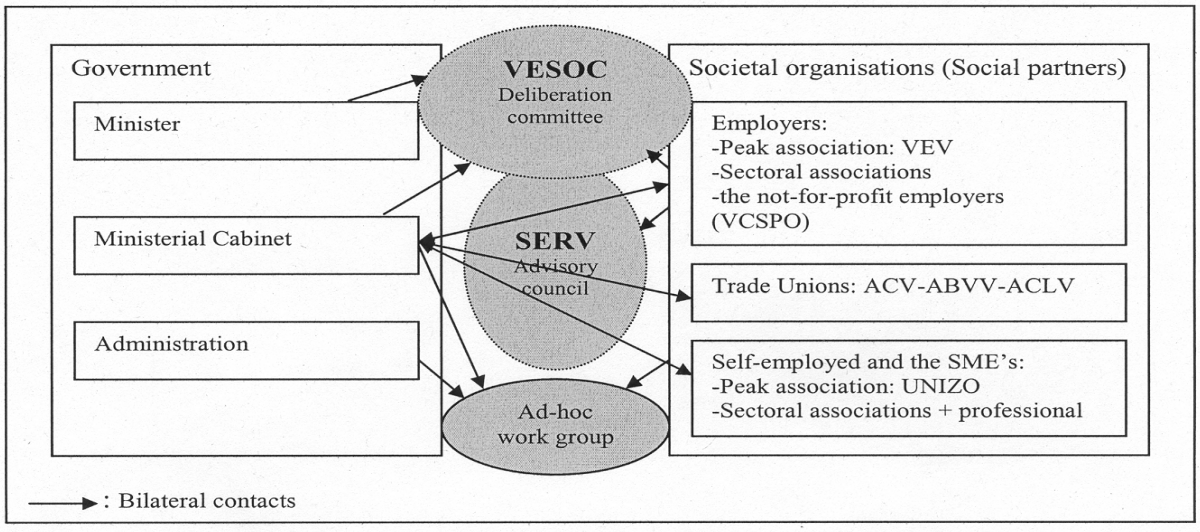

Figure 2: Channels of involvement in the 'Training vouchers' case

As was mentioned in a former section, societal actors were involved from the beginning of the process, as a *joint working group* discovered the existence of a system of training vouchers in the Walloon region. The Minister reached a formal agreement of the social partners on the reorientation of the economic support aid. The measure was further elaborated by cabinet and administration, but the progression in their was systematically debated with the social partners, either *bilateral* or either formal in the deliberative committee *VESOC*. In both ways, the ministerial cabinet was leading the discussions and/or negotiations.

The *SERV* is a public institution that gets a yearly grant. It comprises ten employers' representatives (from the Farmers organisation, UNIZO, Social profit organisations & VEV) and ten representatives from the Flemish trade unions (ABVV, ACV and ACLBV). It is the body where the social partners gather to determine their common viewpoints and to formulate recommendations and advice. Its representative composition provides the SERV with a strong social anchoring. The SERV provides advice concerning all matters with a socio-economic impact for which the Flemish Community or the Flemish Region is authorized. The Council does this on its own initiative, upon the request of the Flemish Parliament, the Flemish Government or a member of the Flemish Government.
Any advice is prepared by a SERV study group, which is composed of experts delegated by the social partners. A SERV employee coordinates the study group: submitting reports, compiling reactions, making draft copies, performing supporting studies, … . The study group reports to the Executive Committee and issues a preliminary advice. The executive committee then discusses and debates –if necessary- and submits the draft advice to the plenary council, which issues the final advice. The full Executive Committee consists of one representative from each of the SERV partners and in an advisory capacity, a general administrator and a deputy general administrator. Each year, a different organisation provides the chairperson. The SERV's partners try to reach a consensus in their advice and recommendations.

4.2.Personal assistance budget

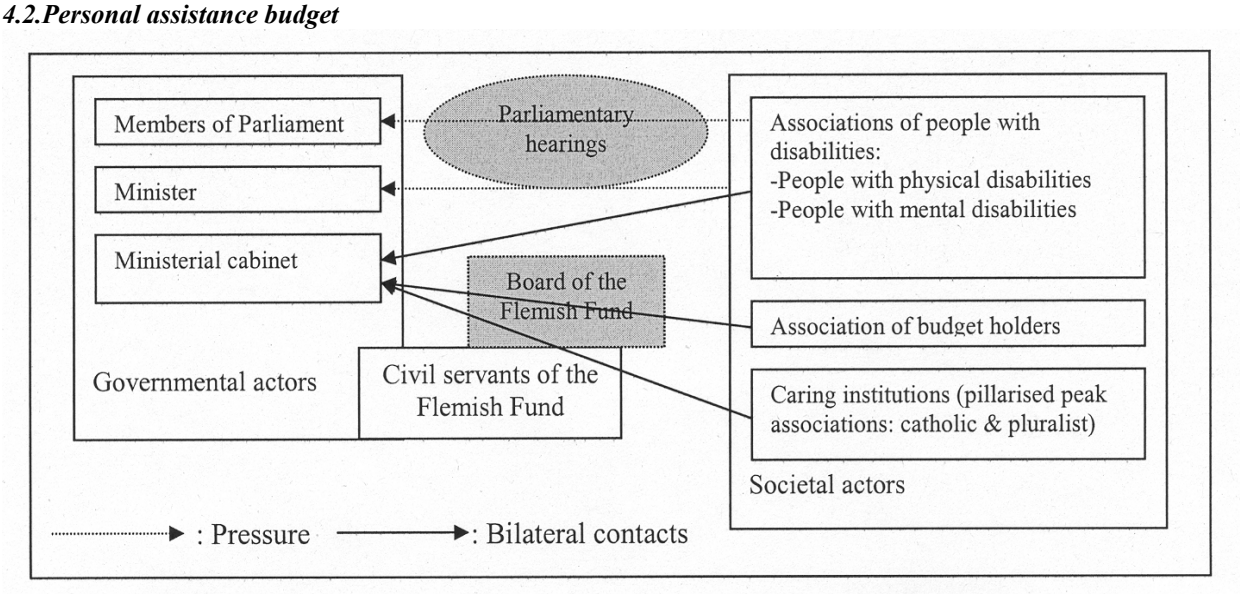

Figure 3: Channels of involvement in the PAB-process

This figure depicts the channels of involvement in the PAB-case. As it was put on the agenda through pressure of some associations of disabled people, *bilateral contacts were the main channel of involvement*. After the academic evaluation of the experiment, some *formal parliamentary hearings* were organised with all relevant stakeholders. All different interests were invited. It is worth mentioning that some of the speakers were member of the Governing Board of the Flemish Fund. Once the Decree was voted, the societal actors were kept informed through their presence in the *Governance Board* of the Flemish Fund. The figure illustrates the difficult position the civil servants of the Flemish Fund had to fulfill in the process: between Minister and societal actors in their Governing Board.

4.3. The demarcation process and the elaboration of the spatial executive plan of Aalst

Reflecting on this quite innovative case, one could conclude that the policy formation process in the spatial planning case consisted of three separated processes. The first one –the planning-process- was characterised by an *open style of participation*, formally institutionalised by a complicated structure. When the process broke down in 2000, the policy formation process was unilaterally continued by the administration and the Minister in a closed way. There were, however, actors who were able to enter in this process, through *bilateral, secret and informal contacts* with the Minister and his cabinet or through contacts with other Ministers or ministerial cabinets. One could say that the open interactivity

was ended and was replaced by the politics and the secrecy of bilateral, informal, party networks. Local authorities with an executive that carried the same color as the Minister lobbied and met the Minister to get their interests in the decision looked after. Societal actors did the same. Afterwards, the third phase or process -the real decision-making process- started at the political level of the Flemish executive with the meetings of the *'inter-kabinetten werkgroep' (*IKW). This process was closed as well, although some actors were able to reach 'their' representative in the negotiations.

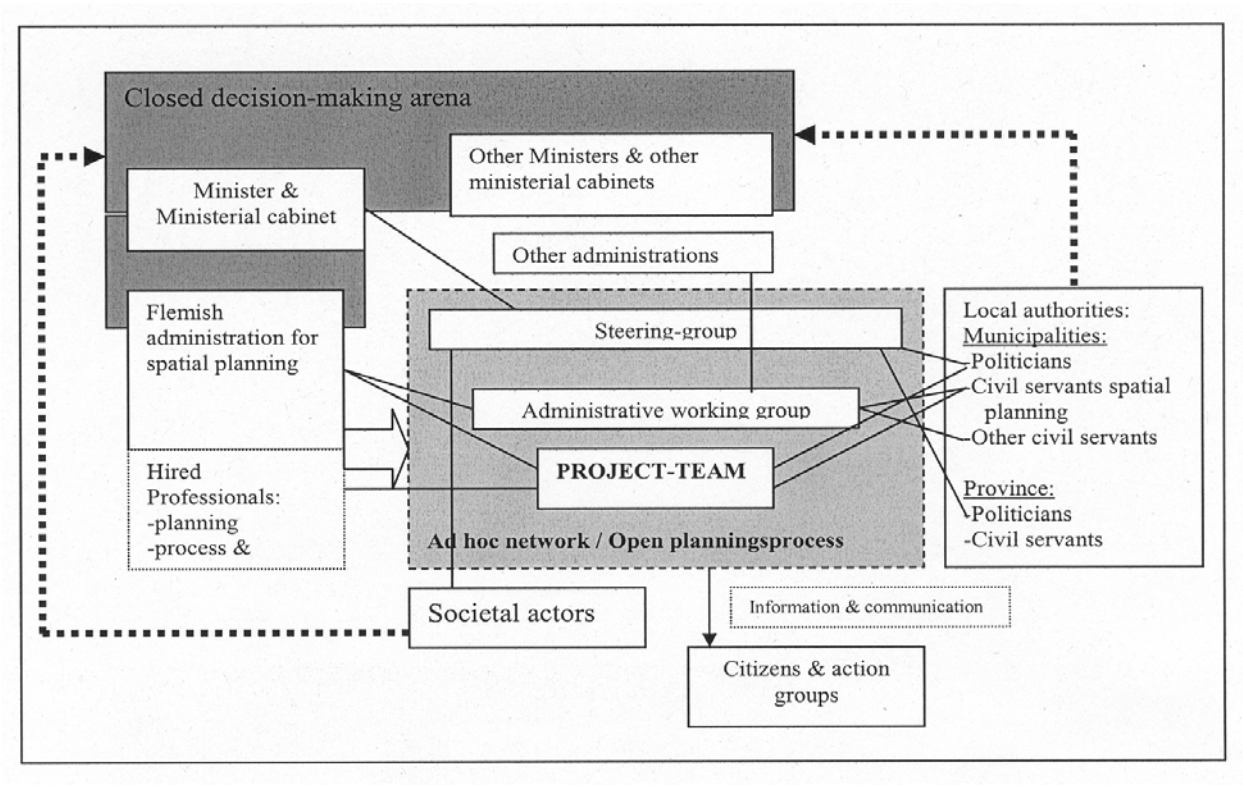

Figure 4: Channels of involvement in the spatial planning-process

4.4. Overview channels of involvement

	Training vouchers	Personal assistance	Spatial planning
Channels of involvement	-Shared think groups -Deliberative Committee -Advisory councils -Bilateral contacts	-Parliamentary hearings -Societal representation in governing boards -Direct representation in the ministerial cabinet -Bilateral contacts	-Ad hoc Governance network -Public hearings -Bilateral contacts -Public inquiry
Degree of formalisation	Informal relations & contacts within formal structures	-Official and formal channels -Informal pressure	Formal structures and procedures
Type of access structure	Permanent & Open	Ad-hoc in Parliament Permanent through Governance Board	Ad-hoc Open in the beginning, closed at the end
Individual group or collective access	Group access	Group access	Mixed Mainly group access, but some instruments offered individual access
Openness of deliberations	Closed, reserved for institutionalized actors	Closed in Government, but open discussions and questions in Parliament	Planning process: open for participating actors Decision-making process: Not open
Criteria for participation	Power & Representativity	-Target group -Representativity	Interests Importance for execution

5. **Conclusions**

This paper analysed three different policy-making processes in the Flemish Community. Although the cases differed in many respects, it is possible to discern some common features of Flemish policy-making and Flemish policy-networks.:

- Societal actors are very powerful and influent in the Flemish Community. In some policy fields, they are institutionalized in policy-making to the extent that they appear as an internal part of the Flemish polity. Particularly the advisory and deliberative bodies are well developed. Yet it is necessary to mention that besides the 'big' interests, other interest groups can play important roles too. The PAB-case for instance proves that intensive and effective pressure can be exerted by certain smaller civil movements or groups of individuals.

- The presence and influence of societal actors in Flemish policy-making has its reverse side, as two of our cases clearly illustrate. With the involvement and participation of society in policy-making, it is difficult to promulgate selective policy measures in Flanders, since every partner involved wants his part of the cake. The professionalisation of policy-making, intended to enhance the effectivity of the measure discords in these cases with the political logic of interactive policy-making.

- If one understands Governance as a way of policy-making in networks or with participation of external actors, one could conclude that Governance is nothing new for Flemish policy-making. Societal actors have been involved in policy-making for a long time, although the patterns of involvement have evolved and/or have been modernized:

  -As some societal actors had 'their party' during the high days of the pillarisation era, relations among societal actors and political parties have changed with the de-pillarisation. This does not mean that there does not exist a preferential relation anymore, but both actors had to change their way of dealing with each-other. The PAB-case reflects this new situation quite well, as the preferential party of the powerful societal organization had been banned to the opposition. Hence, societal actors can not afford themselves anymore to stick to their pillar, nor can political parties in power inform or consult some relevant stakeholders, while neglecting others.

  -The Spatial Planning case is a good example of a policy-making process in a Governance-era: Ad-hoc and loose network-structures, open communication, free participation, … . The case makes entirely clear that this kind of policy-making is not that easy. A constructive and positive attitude is not taken by everyone. Open communication & participation structures give people the opportunity to attack/criticise very punctual policy choices, which can substantially damage the process. It is also known that the opening up of process does raise the expectations of actors for influence and further participation. This was clear in the case on spatial planning, where local authorities gradually wanted to participate to a greater extent and were disappointed when they were not consulted anymore.

- A rich variety of channels of involvement exists in Flanders ranging from Parliamentary commissions, to formal advisory councils, informal/bilateral contacts and preferential relations with political parties. Two channels are of particular importance in the Flemish polity:

  -The direct representation of societal interests in the ministerial cabinets. This was the case in the ministerial cabinet of welfare, where the adviser responsible for the PAB-measure, was the director of one of the hundred particular institutions in the sector. In this way, societal interests get direct access to the policy-making center.

  -The co-optation of societal actors in the boards of executive agencies. The PAB-case made clear that societal actors can also be present in executive bodies –even when these agencies play a proper policy-making role. Through this channel, societal actors can exert a lot of influence on policy-making. It is important to note that this kind of power for non-elected actors has been the cause for a huge administrative reform in the Flemish administration, whereby –with the primacy of politics as leading principle- some agencies were brought closer to the Minister, implying that Governing boards were abolished or transformed to more operational advisory commissions, not supposed to make or discuss policy anymore.

- The cases are good illustrations of the different policy roles of civil servants and members of the ministerial cabinets. They confirm our statement that they are the communication and consultation nodes in the Flemish polity. They consult, deliberate and negotiate with different kinds of actors, while civil servants usually play a minor, more neutral, supportive policy role, fleshing out the operational and judicial details. This implies that they got involved in direct contact with societal actors. Compared to other countries, links between society and bureaucracy are less developed. Civil servants are important and necessary actors in Flemish policy making, but they are not the 'animateurs' of the policy networks. However, one case –the spatial planning one- points very clear at the implications of open policy processes for competences and politico-administrative relations. In this case, the traditional cabinet-role was partly given to civil servants, putting them at the center of policy-making. This required complete new competences of these officials, since they had to steer and animate a network, reach a compromise, negotiate, think strategically, communicate, … . After a while, the cabinet became active and started to play its normal role again, although it had not been present during the '*open planningsproces'*. One could say that such new policy-making structures (an ad-hoc network with civil servants as leading actors) do not match at the moment with existing policy-making culture and traditions. This consultative and decision-making functionality of the ministerial cabinets is sometimes overlooked when one discusses pro's and contra's of the abolition of ministerial cabinets.

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