Meta-governance and developing integrative territorial strategies: the case of MIRT territorial agendas in the Randstad (Netherlands)

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the role of meta-governance in developing integrative territorial strategies at regional level. Evidence is drawn from analysing three cases in the Randstad (Netherlands) of regional strategy making within the context of the long-term central government investment programme on infrastructure and spatial development, in short: MIRT. A novelty of the MIRT programme as opposed to its predecessor, the MIT programme (without the ‘R’ of *ruimte*, or territory), is that it asks for developing a territorial agenda as a basis for further project implementation. The territorial agenda is developed in order to provide a strategic framework to assess which programmes and projects should be taken up. The agendas are drawn up cooperatively by central and lower tier government in each region. They constitute the underpinning with respect to central government investments in new programmes and projects. They are also meant to stimulate the coherence between the different policy fields and between central and regional policy. So the general idea is that decisions about (central) government investments and the multilevel negotiations which lead to these decisions need a territorial argumentative basis.

Meta-governance is seen as the ‘governance of governance’, or the ‘regulation of self-regulation’ (Jessop, 2004). The purpose of meta-governance is to create some form of coordination, coherence and integration in the fragmented structures of network governance without completely undermining the autonomy, engagement and self-regulation in governance networks (Sørensen, 2006). In so doing the concept of meta-governance provides an analytical tool to analyse processes of network governance, which is relevant in the Randstad region where governance arrangements stumble over each other.

In terms of findings we observe amongst others that the MIRT programme creates an institutional context which enables governmental stakeholders to deal effectively with the fragmented governance situation in their part of the Randstad. Also it is effective, in a number of ways, in relating strategy and vision to the concrete implementation of projects and investments. Yet, there are a few drawbacks too, in particular referring to the limited set of involved stakeholders and legitimacy as well as to the difficulty in aligning with other policy programmes and initiatives, especially those of regional and local governments. These
and other findings fuel a further reflection on the possible role of meta-governance in regional integrative strategy making. In particular the reflection will focus on what can be expected from meta-governance in terms of achieving certain levels of 1) policy integration as well as of 2) collaboration, participation and legitimacy.

1. Introduction

Many European countries are confronted with spatial and governance fragmentation, yet still seek ways to optimize regional development. With the growth in global economic integration, it is being recognised increasingly that the skills and resources of a variety of actors – from public, voluntary and private sectors – must be harnessed to bring about successful and sustainable regional development. The necessary governance changes involve a shift from established institutions and instruments towards the deployment of a wider array of relatively novel instruments including cooperative networks, clusters, and partnerships. It is also being recognised that policy-makers operate within a system of multi-level governance and that the interventions of different levels of government, and different actors, may be contradictory or conflicting. There is thus a stronger focus on integrative strategies towards more efficient policy processes and more concise and effective outcomes rather than fully integrated strategies which could be regarded as an ambition that denies the complexity of consensual decision-making in multi-actor context (De Bruijn & Ten Heuvelhof, 2002). Although integrated planning seems an attractive option the concept echoes comprehensive planning approaches which were popular in the 1950s and 1960s and have never completely vanished in spite of critics like Charles Lindblom (1959).

At the regional level making use of and creating territorial capital for a sustainable and competitive development depends to an important extent on regional institutional capacity (Salet & Woltjer, 2009; Healey, 2006). This institutional capacity relates to a wide range of issues but, in general, indicates a public structure’s ability to identify problems and implement policy solutions. In relation to territorial development such capacity refers to a common understanding between public, private and NGO stakeholders about a region’s territorial capital and a strategy to make maximum use of it (Camagni, 2008). Such strategies channel, amongst others, the allocation of funds and create synergies between various interests. Integrative territorial strategies at regional level are both a reflection of and a way to organize such institutional capacity.

Developing and implementing integrative territorial strategies at regional level, however, requires substantial effort and is highly influenced by territorial and institutional settings. Integrative strategies can be understood as an answer to this complexity by delivering a coherent governance package consisting of organisational and management principles, a synergetic thematic focus, appropriate stakeholder involvement, creative financial and
regulative solutions, and effective monitoring and evaluative systems. As a consequence of economic and political changes, traditional bureaucratic approaches to integrated strategies are being rendered obsolete.

Traditional bureaucratic approaches, in particular those related to the comprehensive integrated planning approach (CEC, 1997; Nadin & Stead, 2008), attempted to integrate too many themes and therefore tended to collapse under their own weight. It is in this context possible to hypothesize that a new approach to regional strategies is emerging across Europe, one that involves flexible integration and involvement. Here the strategies concerned are no longer all embracing, but sit alongside each other, each of them covering a select number of themes or territories. Rather than speaking about ‘(fully) integrated’ strategies, we therefore explicitly speak about ‘integrative’ strategies when referring to this relatively new type of policy document. Integrative strategies involve a range of sectoral responsibilities – combining particularly the economy, land-use and social cohesion – which are integrative to varying degrees internally. Each strategy communicates to varying degrees externally with a population of other strategies, and to the wider world of stakeholders. By seeking the optimal balance between vertical and horizontal integration and implementation it may be appropriate for regions to develop several complementary integrative territorial strategies addressing different themes and objectives and different scales. Indeed it is unlikely that there will be one all-encompassing integrated territorial strategy in any region, and the key issue is therefore whether the most influential and interdependent policy components are brought together.

Bringing several strategies (be them integrative or not) together requires an additional coordination framework through which it becomes possible that strategies mutually communicate, inspire and influence one another. Such a framework governs as it were the behaviour of existing governance networks behind a strategy alongside each other. This can be referred to as an aspect of meta-governance. As will be explained below meta-governance is understood as a way of “enhancing coordinated governance in a fragmented political system based on a high degree of autonomy for a plurality of self-governing networks and institutions.” (Sørensen, 2006, p. 100) Meta-governance in this particular sense is understood as a mechanism that enables integration between various existing strategies.

This paper discusses the role of meta-governance in developing integrative territorial strategies. Evidence is drawn from analysing three cases in the Randstad (Netherlands) of regional strategy making within the context of the long-term central government investment programme on infrastructure and spatial development, in short: MIRT. A novelty of the MIRT programme as opposed to its predecessor, the MIT programme (without the ‘R’ of ruimte, or territory), is that it asks for developing a territorial agenda as a basis for further project implementation. In particular the reflection will focus on what can be expected from meta-governance in terms of achieving certain levels of policy integration as well as of
collaboration, participation and legitimacy. In so doing this paper is not so much interested in the extent to which the resulting strategies are being implemented or applied, rather the main interest is in how integrative strategies emerge and are appreciated and how this can be attributed to meta-governance.

The paper unfolds as follows. After briefly introducing the concept of meta-governance the paper discusses three examples of MIRT territorial strategy making, reflects on this practice from the perspective of meta-governance and rounds off with brief conclusions.

2. The concept of meta-governance

Within the context of analysing and characterizing cases of regional integrative strategy making it is important to analyse to what extent and how the game of strategy making is influenced by conditions and regulations imposed by higher levels of government. Whereas it is understood that governance takes place in a self-created negotiation context, this does not mean that higher levels of authority still aim to control these processes by setting limits and boundaries to the scope of decision making. The aim to influence decision making processes in governance networks is referred to as meta-governance.

Meta-governance is seen as the ‘governance of governance’, or the ‘regulation of self-regulation’ (Jessop, 2004). The purpose of meta-governance is to create some form of coordination, coherence and integration in the fragmented structures of network governance without completely undermining the autonomy, engagement and self-regulation in governance networks (Sørensen, 2006). In so doing the concept of meta-governance provides an analytical tool to analyse processes of network governance, which is relevant in the Randstad region where governance arrangements stumble over each other. The concept of meta-governance provides an analytical tool to further analyse processes of network governance. It was Scharpf (1994) who in the light of the apparent limitations of both hierarchical and horizontal networks of power developed an account of social coordination based on the inter-actions which occur between hierarchical structures and networks of self-coordination. In so doing it becomes possible to understand: 1) political hierarchies as arenas within which the negotiations and political struggles associated with governance are played out, without necessarily ascribing a deterministic logic to the exercise of hierarchical power; and 2) how interdependencies between hierarchical intervention and local political coordination are structured. This works in two ways: hierarchical power is realised in and through local political practice, but at the same time effective local coordination capacity is enhanced by virtue of their embeddedness within hierarchical structures.

Whitehead (2003, p. 8) brings forward that “meta-governance differs substantially from the concept of governance. The fundamental difference between governance and meta-
governance is that while the former draws attention to the processes that dislocate political organization from government and the state, the latter focuses explicitly on the practices and procedures that secure governmental influence (…)"

In more operational terms meta-governance translates in the imposing of, for example, deadlines, procedures, guidance or other influencing conditions on the network governance process. Instruments related to meta-governance include contracts, result management, management by (political) objectives, and financial frameworks (see Sehested 2009). Network governance therewith takes place in an institutional context determined by higher tier governmental bodies casting a shadow of hierarchy.

More in general Sørensen (2006, p. 101) identifies four distinct ways in which meta-governance may be exercised. They are:

1. **Hands-off framing of self-governance**, which is shaping of the political, financial and organizational context within which self-governance takes place. This form of meta-governance can be characterized as hands-off because the meta-governor is not in direct contact with the self-governing actors. This also counts for 2.

2. **Hands-off storytelling.** This type of meta-governance is exercised by shaping interests through the formation of the meanings and identities that constitute the self-governing actors. Meta-governance through storytelling represents a forceful means to influence self-governing actors and thus to promote unitary strategies to problem solving.

3. **Hands-on support and facilitation**, which is obtained through offering support and facilitation to self-governing actors. This form of meta-governance is hands-on in the sense that the supportive and facilitating meta-governor interacts directly with the self-governing actors.

4. **Hands-on participation.** This means the participation of the meta-governor in processes of self-governance. Hence, a meta-governor can seek to obtain influence on the outcome of self-governance through direct participation. To do so, however, the meta-governor must give up any authoritative position and participate according to the specific self-constituted rules of the game that exists in a given self-governing environment (Sørensen, 2006, pp. 101-103).

On the basis of the discussion above we may conclude that sovereign rule is being replaced by alternative forms of governing. It is not based on detailed top-down control but on a plurality of indirect ways of influencing and or coordinating the actions of self-governing bodies (Sørensen, 2006).

From the above we thus summarize meta-governance as “a way of enhancing coordinated governance in a fragmented political system based on a high degree of autonomy for a plurality of self-governing networks and institutions.” It is “an indirect form of governing that is exercised by influencing various processes of self-governance.” (Sørensen, 2006, p. 100) and “therefore an indirect means of performing ‘regulation of selfregulation’, both at the
macro level (e.g. Jessop, 2002) of societal governance and at the micro level of network management (Klijn & Edelenbos, 2007)”. (Sehested, 2009, p. 248).

Meta-governance is thus intrinsically linked to network governance, which it aims to coordinate. An important question therefore becomes whether meta-governance compensates for the issues that are often related to network governance, or rather the opposite, actually amplifies them? Among the issues that are associated with the otherwise considered effective network governance rank in particular an inherent lack of democratic legitimacy due amongst others to limits set to participation and collaboration. In this paper, and in line with Sørensen and Torfing (2009), we do not necessarily adhere to this view as there are numerous examples of democratic governance networks. Yet, by adding an additional meta-governance dimension to already existing network governance it seems indeed legitimate to question again whether and if so to what extent this influences the democratic legitimacy, the accessibility to participate in networks and the extent to which third parties can collaborate with existing networks operating under a meta-governance regime?

In this paper we are particularly interested in the question whether meta-governance regimes and the hierarchical conditions that they casts are perceived as positive or negative for the outcome of the regional integrative strategy making process. Positive relates in this context to a higher effectiveness in terms of developing more integrative regional strategies. The negative outcomes refer in particular limits as regards participation, collaboration and democratic legitimacy. Obviously, other types of positive and negative outcomes will be reported duly as well.

3. Evidence from the MIRT territorial agenda

In this section we will first summarize the governance structure in the Netherlands and the Randstad in particular. In order to analyse integrative territorial strategy making at regional level from the perspective of meta-governance some basic insight is necessary as regards the regional governance situation in the Randstad. We then introduce in a more general sense the MIRT programme and the instrument of the MIRT territorial agenda that we chose to analyse as an example of an integrative territorial strategy at regional level. The three MIRT territorial agendas in the Randstad are subsequently discussed and evaluated from the point of view of policy integration as well as of collaboration, participation and legitimacy.

3.1 Governance in the Randstad

The Dutch government structure is a three-tiered, decentralised unitary state, based on self-government of provinces and municipalities. The formal regional government is the province. But there is a long-lasting search for a governance structure which fills the
‘regional gap’ between provinces and the state – especially on the level of the Randstad – and between province and municipalities. This ‘regional gap’ – to be addressed by processes of policy integration – has been discussed for almost half a century. Specifically for the Randstad there has been an on-going restless search for effective forms of regional governance (Salet, 2003, 2006).

Eventually and to put an end to more drastic options and proposals for administrative reform a new law (WGR: Wet Gemeenschappelijke Regelingen) came into force in 2007 which created eight regions where cooperation was enforced between municipalities in the field of spatial planning, housing, traffic and transport, economic affairs and environment. These WGR-plus areas have a number of explicitly defined competences in these domains which ‘normal’ WGR bodies cannot have. The boards of these regions are formed by administrators from municipalities who have to give account of their decisions in their municipal council. These WGR-plus arrangement divide the Randstad in four regions as four out of the eight regions created by national government are located in the Randstad. As all sorts of territorial relationships – especially in the field of transport and infrastructure – are of a higher scale, non-statutory cooperation networks have been developed at the level of what are called the ‘wings of the Randstad’. Within these wings there are numerous cooperations across and between provinces, municipalities, WGR regions (regular cooperative municipal bodies) and WGR-plus regions. Each wing network has its own founding rationale and scope of tasks and activities.

Dutch provinces have always been heavily involved in strategic spatial planning for which the legal instrument of the structure vision is currently the main integrative territorial strategy document. While the provincial level is the formal government level to address regional integrative strategies, other formal and informal government levels also formulate these, i.e. national, wing and WGR-plus level. The wing level is not a formal government level as above we explained that the policy networks that have been created are not statutory. However integrative territorial policy documents at wing level are considered as crucial by the participants: they form the umbrella for the structure visions of the individual government tiers. Within the Randstad also each WGR-plus region provides a regional structure plan, addressing housing, working, mobility, landscape and green spaces. The plan includes concrete policy decisions about projects or amenities of regional importance.

To simplify the administrative structure of the country the coalition government which took office in 2010 intended to abolish the WGR-plus regions and to strengthen governance capacity at the higher Randstad level. This created some turmoil between the Randstad provinces but discussions grinded to a halt when the coalition government collapsed in April 2012. However, we may conclude that regional governance in the Netherlands – at least in the Randstad – is in a state of constant flux. Although there is some sort of consensus about the existence of an administrative gap on the regional level, there is no political and societal
agreement how to fill this void. So while the three level structure of the administrative structure of the country as a whole is quite stable since its establishment in 1848 – apart from a creeping amalgamation of municipalities and the creation in 1985 of one new province encompassing the large polders in the central Lake IJssel – this does not count for the regional level. Over the year there seems to be a disagreement over the question whether administrative reorganisation and integration is a prerequisite for policy integration, especially in the territorial domain and whether the fragmented government structure of the Randstad is worse compared with other European metropolitan regions as claimed by employer organisations (but denied in research; see De Vries & Evers, 2008). At present a Randstad approach seems highly unlikely. If there will be a formal reorganisation of the administration at this moment it is very likely that there will two separate Randstad wings. Whether matters can be resolved on the basis of the laws on the provinces and municipalities remains to be seen. A change of the constitution needs the approval of two consecutive parliaments. As the administrative structure of the country is such a sensitive issue this seems to be beyond comprehension.

3.2 The MIRT programme and territorial agenda

Evidence about the role of meta-governance in integrative territorial strategy making at regional level is drawn from analysing three MIRT territorial agendas in the Randstad as we have explained in the introductory section. The context of these territorial agendas is the long-term central government investment programme on infrastructure, territory and transport, in short: MIRT (Meerjarenprogramma Infrastructuur, Ruimte en Transport). In 2007 as requested by the parliament MIT was broadened to MIRT in which the R stands for Territory (Ruimte). The idea was to bring more coherence in investments in territory, economy, accessibility and quality of life and therefore to contribute to more integrative policies in the territorial domain. The MIRT is an implementation instrument; it links budgets with projects (De Jonge, 2011). Infrastructure projects financed by central government are included in an annual MIRT project book as an annex to the Infrastructure Fund in the central government budget. Through consultation between regional and central government decisions are made in so-called multi-level government meetings on which projects will be financed through the MIRT.

The MIRT programme asks for developing a territorial agenda in order to provide a strategic framework to assess which programmes and projects should be taken up. The agendas are drawn up cooperatively by central and lower tier government in each of the eight MIRT regions in the Netherlands. These territorial agendas aim to provide insight why projects are being pursued and how they contribute to the integrated development of an area. An additional advantage of this approach is that central and lower tier government share the vision as embodied by the agenda. Nevertheless the MIRT territorial agendas serve a confined goal – a basis for decisions on investments in particularly infrastructure – and are based on existing policy. They combine both horizontal and vertical integration and a vision
and investment programme. Participation and involvement from stakeholders is indirect i.e. via statutory planning documents and related processes on which the MIRT agendas are built and which form the points of departure when drawing up these agendas.

The agendas consist of two parts. In the first part the area is characterised and the key developments are described. Partly based on this part the ambitions for the territorial development for the long term (usually until 2030) are formulated and the corresponding objectives are laid down. It deals with living, working, economic activity, mobility, nature, landscape and water and has an integrative ambition. The result is a shared vision. In the second part the territorial issues are concretised and elaborated in possible solutions. These form a breeding ground for possible programmes and projects, which may lead to MIRT explorations. If an issue is not sufficiently elaborated in time, scale and aim, a MIRT research may be taken up if importance and urgency are evident in the long term. To comply with conditions of legitimacy a MIRT exploration needs a broader field of stakeholders than the territorial agenda as it is an elaboration of it.

Practitioners see the territorial agenda both as promising and worrying. Promising because the agenda gives freedom to relate fundamental issues with regard to territory, infrastructure, urban and rural land uses without given requirements about the form and across administrative boundaries. The agenda is seen as a means to frame decisions on the short term. The worries are about the imbalance between the attention for the integrative vision and the focus on the approval of projects and their financing (De Jonge, 2011, p.125).

3.3 Three agendas for the Randstad

Three of the in total eight territorial agendas are located in the Randstad: (1) South Wing/South-Holland, (2) Northwest Netherlands and (3) Utrecht. Only the first one covers one province, the other two each cover two provinces: Northwest Netherlands covers the provinces of North-Holland and Flevoland and the Utrecht agenda covers a minor part of the province of Noord-Holland and, logically, the province of Utrecht.

**Territorial Agenda South Wing/South-Holland**

The agenda covers the whole province of South-Holland but focuses on the South Wing. It was agreed upon in November 2010. The elaboration of the agenda consists of three phases: vision, list of projects and prioritisation of projects. The agenda presents an overview of projects and programmes for the period 2010-2028. The five ambitions for the territorial development are: (1) to promote economy, (2) to intensify cities, (3) to bring landscape close to home, (4) to improve accessibility and (5) to take on water and energy objectives. For each of these ambitions a vision is formulated based on sectoral policy. This results in a map with projects and programmes and the time range in which they have to be implemented (Figure 1). It concludes with a top ten of projects and programmes, which reflects the
importance the region attaches to an integrated approach. Regional participants in the South Wing Platform had a major input in the text of the agenda.

**Figure 1**  
Overview of projects and programmes in the agenda

Source: Rijk and Zuidvleugelpartners, 2010

**Territorial Agenda Northwest Netherlands**

The agenda covers the provinces of North-Holland and Flevoland, while it focuses on the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area. It was agreed upon in November 2009. The main ambition is to strengthen the international competitiveness of the Randstad. The agenda translates this ambition into a vision for the area and presents an overview of projects and programmes for the period until 2040 (Figure 2). The vision is based on a document which had just been elaborated: Development vision North Wing 2040 (*Ontwikkelingsbeeld 2040*). Projects are elaborated on the basis of five challenges: (1) economy, (2) urbanisation, (3) accessibility, (4) nature and landscape and (5) sustainability and climate proof. The four priority areas are Westflank, Zaan-II oevers, Zuider and Almere. The official regional authors of the agenda were the urban region of Amsterdam and the two provinces, but the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area was the actual regional platform organising the regional input.
Territorial Agenda Utrecht

The Utrecht agenda does not follow the provincial borders as such. It covers the province of Utrecht and a part of North-Holland, i.e. the Gooi and Vecht region. In so doing it territorially overlaps with the Territorial Agenda Northwest Netherlands. The agenda was agreed upon in November 2009. It is developed in the context of the aim to strengthen the Randstad area by means of emphasizing diversity. The agenda comes in two parts. Part 1 integrates several national and regional visions and plans into common objectives, an approach and a vision for the Utrecht region. The main ambition is to strengthen the region’s sustainable development.
and economic competitiveness by focusing on 1) housing and urban intensification, 2) improving accessibility and 3) investing in environmental and nature development. The two priority areas are the Utrecht city region and the Amersfoort region. Part 2 provides an overview of the various policy, financial and regulatory issues as well as an complete list of projects and programmes to be addressed in the MIRT multi-level government meeting (Figure 3).

Figure 3  Projects and programmes of the Territorial Agenda Utrecht

Source: Rijk et al., 2009

3.4  Findings and comparison between the three MIRT territorial agendas
Although there are many similarities between the three agendas in the Randstad and they serve the same purpose, there are also differences in aspects such as process architecture and form. We will briefly analyse the main characteristics of the agendas and the MIRT strategy in pursuing horizontal and vertical integration of territorial related policy and implementation. What is the added value, what are positive and negative aspects and which conditions apply when using this strategy? In a separate section we will elaborate on the role of meta-governance in these three agendas.

The added value of policy neutrality
As an instrument for stimulating integrative regional development the MIRT territorial agendas fulfil a specific role amidst a wide array of other formal and informal policy
documents and programmes. Rather than developing new policies, MIRT territorial agendas only combine existing policies. According to respondents it is exactly this condition (‘no new policies’) that makes it possible to develop the agendas and to give them added value over existing policies. From a governance perspective this condition makes it possible to involve only a limited amount of key stakeholders. From a substantive perspective it becomes easier to reach consensus with regard to the overall vision, objectives and ambition of the document.

Interestingly, it is exactly the combining of relevant aspects of existing policies for a given MIRT region that according to the respondents creates added value. The emerging overall impression of scheduled territorial development projects within a given region makes it clear to stakeholders how projects are mutually related and potentially impact upon one another. Also it becomes clear whether the ambition level for the region is realistic given the set of territorial development projects. Reassessing planned projects from a regional perspective enables a stronger focus on the desired regional development.

Yet while this is considered a positive outcome by the respondents, a question that emerges is whether the end result, the MIRT territorial agenda, still can be considered ‘policy neutral’. Even though no new policies are developed the MIRT territorial agendas cast a new perspective on existing policies and in so doing reframe these policies in terms of interrelatedness, added value for the development of the region, priority and urgency. So whereas original policies, programmes, plans and projects are not affected, their status may have changed. By re-assessing and re-ordering existing plans the MIRT territorial agenda can be understood to form a sort of meta-plan and therewith a plan on its own. The question whether this plan still complies with the principle of policy neutrality will be addressed further on.

*Emphasis on vertical integration*
A second aspect which makes the MIRT territorial agenda different from other integrative policy documents is its gestation process in a multi-level government context. Whereas the focus is on the regional level, the process includes stakeholders from all formal and informal government levels: from the municipal level (in the case of larger cities), the supralocal level (i.e. informal and formal cooperation bodies between neighbouring municipalities), to the formal provinces and the national government. The EU level, for example by means of the Operational Programmes, is completely absent in the territorial agendas. Be that as it may, in particular the representation of the national state (which budgets are significantly larger than those of other administrative levels) is considered important by the respondents, since this allows for developing a joint vision on the future of the region that is shared at regional/local as well as the national level.
This vertical multi-level process materializes in the so-called project list that accompanies the MIRT territorial agendas. This project list contains all the relevant territorial development projects for the region in which the national government will be involved financially (projects for which no national involvement is required hardly ever appear on the list.\textsuperscript{1} The list differentiates between projects to be carried out on the short term and on the mid and long term. In case of the latter the project list is still useful as it indicates when, at what moment in time, the negotiations, research and talks around a specific project will start. The result is a relative high level of transparency for all government levels as regards the timing of projects and their role in them. In so doing, according to many of the respondents, the MIRT territorial agenda and the accompanying list of projects create relative tranquillity between the levels of government. This makes the MIRT territorial agendas unique in the Dutch context, as there are only very few integrative territorial strategies which combine the complete stretch from vision to actual projects on the short term.

It has to be emphasised though that the tranquillity between governmental levels is only relative and depends on the extent to which real negotiations between government levels have taken place. In case of general agreements on the ambition of a region there is a common understanding of the structuring of the development of a particular area. In such cases, as a respondent of the national level indicated, the national government is no longer caught by surprise due to provincial requests. It requires thorough and often tough negotiations, however, to reach detailed agreements about which project, when and how will be implemented. It is only then that tranquillity may occur. Visioning alone is not sufficient for that.

\textit{Limited horizontal integration}

In contrast to more standard spatial vision documents the focus of the MIRT territorial agendas is, as indicated above, not primarily on horizontal integration of various (sectoral) policy objectives. Despite of this, horizontal integration does play a role. Driven by the contextual process architecture laid down in the so-called MIRT programme, the MIRT territorial agendas necessarily combine transport and infrastructure development objectives with spatial planning objectives. As indicated this is in contrast to the former MIT programme in which \textit{Ruimte} (i.e. territory) did not play a role and the focus was exclusively on transport and infrastructure projects. As a result of the new programme a minimal degree of horizontal integration is achieved in any case. Often, however, the integrative character of the MIRT territorial agendas is raised above this minimum level.

\textsuperscript{1} There are slight differences between agendas in this respect. In the one of Northwest Netherlands also regional projects without central government leadership are listed, whereas this is not the case in the other two.
Integration between transport and infrastructure objectives on the one hand and territorial development/spatial planning objectives on the other leads to a (more) integrated, or at least co-ordinated, perspective on the desired territorial development. In so doing each of the analysed territorial agendas addresses a variety of issues which goes beyond the infrastructure and territory proper. For example, each of the agendas puts sustainable development at its core. This is subsequently translated in measures in the fields of housing and urban intensification, in improving accessibility and in strengthening the green and blue natural networks. The result would be a sustainable as well as economically viable region. MIRT thus translates also into attention for water related objectives (which is not coincidental as in the Netherlands the execution of infrastructure and water projects are combined in the Rijkswaterstaat organisation, the executive arm of the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment) as well as green and economic development objectives. Issues related to social and employment policy have not become part of the agendas. Yet, when the process goes along and enters the project negotiation phase in which detailed decisions need to be made, in practice it turns out that the focus often narrows to the (expensive) infrastructure projects as these are prioritized by the national funding mechanism, and that other interests, such as nature, quickly get lost in the process.

During the agenda making process the substantive integration of policy objectives, which can be merely understood as co-ordination, also translates into organisational arrangements at each of the involved government levels. The content of the territorial agendas (as well as subsequent MIRT multi-level governmental meetings) is discussed and co-ordinated at each governmental level among representatives from the policy sectors economic affairs, environment and nature development, water and soil, transport and infrastructure and spatial planning (the actual label of departments varies from authority to authority). They meet in sounding boards chaired by representatives of the spatial planning and infrastructure departments. In cases, when less important decisions are on the agenda of the MIRT multi-level government meetings, co-ordination takes place on a lower level of intensity by simply disseminating (mostly by e-mail) the input for the meeting. Sector department representatives may react but are not obliged to do so.

**Navigating territorial borders**

Two of the three analysed MIRT territorial agendas stretch across provincial borders. In the case of Utrecht a small part of the province of North Holland is included, whereas the Northwest Netherlands agenda fully covers two provinces. Cooperation over territorial borders usually adds complexity to the process and does so too in the case of MIRT. In the context of MIRT this has consequences in two directions. One consequence is that a strict separation is made in terms of responsibilities between the vision and the MIRT project list in the territorial agenda. Nevertheless, along borders it remains more difficult to arrive at consensus and concrete projects because in particular the responsibility for investments always rests with one stakeholder along the border, depending on whose side of the border
a project is located, whereas the benefits are shared between two or more stakeholders including those on the other side of the border. A second, more positive consequence, or rather effect, of provincial borders in MIRT areas concerns the horizontal integration not only of policies, but also of provincial stakeholders’ ambitions and agendas. This is in particular true in the case of Northwest Netherlands where the territorial agenda has created a joint frame of reference between the two provinces of North-Holland and Flevoland. In practice, and similar to the vertical integration between stakeholders addressed above, the agenda can be used to keep one another alert and in this sense creates trust between the two provinces.

**Characterising MIRT territorial agendas**

It is possible to differentiate between various types of integrative strategies in terms of focus and objectives. Primary reasons to embark on strategy making can vary from building identity and communicating to the outside world to improving governance arrangements and visioning as such as is shown in Figure 4. Territorial agendas do not include new policy, but integrate and combine existing policy objectives which are laid down in regional and national planning and sectoral policy documents, into one regional territorial agenda. As such the agendas can particularly be understood as the result of a pragmatic attempt to give a clearer perspective on (1) regional policy objectives and challenges and (2) the contribution of individual projects to multiple policy objectives. If we typify the MIRT territorial agenda according to the strategic cycle of strategies, focus is on the relations between vision, governance and plans and projects (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4** The MIRT territorial agenda in the strategic circle (left: strategic circle in general; right: typology of MIRT territorial agenda)

![Diagram of the strategic circle]

### 3.5 Reflection on the three MIRT territorial agendas

**The relation between vision and projects**

When speaking about spatial visions or other visionary policy documents their implementation usually remains a moot point. This is at least in general the case in the Netherlands. Under the current Spatial Planning Act of 2008 this may change, however, as the Act requires spatial visions to include a chapter on its implementation. Whether this will
be sufficient to make spatial visions more applicable and effective in terms of reaching their aims remains to be seen.

Yet, based on our analysis, the MIRT territorial agendas seem to break with this tradition. Coming from the context of the MIT programme, which exclusively focused on the implementation of projects, this is perhaps no surprise. Within this setting the focus is firmly on achieving pragmatic results rather than on creating attractive sweeping storylines about a desired but far away future, such as is often the case when developing visionary documents. In effect, the MIRT territorial agendas never had to answer to wild expectations of a wide and difficult to please range of stakeholders. In all modesty and developed in relative isolation (backed by the MIRT playing rules) they just were expected to pragmatically develop an overall picture of on-going and future projects and combine existing policy consensus across separate domains into one integrative consensus and ambition for a given territory. The starting point of the MIRT territorial agendas therewith is fundamentally different when compared with most informal or statutory spatial visioning documents. In the case of the three agendas that have been reviewed here the approach to start from projects and existing policies and aim to overlay these with a more integrative vision seems to be effective to the extent that projects become better related to each other and to the overall ambition for the region. Yet, it should be noted that in the multi-level government meetings the territorial agendas play a role in the background and merely perform as a frame of reference. There has not been found evidence that the territorial agendas fundamentally changed the routine and priorities in the MIRT programme. For the moment they should be regarded a modest first step in a process of integrating infrastructural and traffic related projects to other relevant territorial issues.

**Formal versus informal**

The issue of formal versus informal addresses both the governance model applied and the type of policy document. If looking at responsibility the question is at stake which platform should represent regional government? In some cases an informal platform was chosen (South Wing organisation and NV Utrecht) whereas in the case of Northwest Netherlands the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area was not one of the official authors of the agenda, but the two provinces and the WGR-plus region of Amsterdam were. Each region should figure out which platform is most effective to deal with an integrative territorial strategy, regardless whether it is a formal or informal platform. In this sense it should be noted that the territorial agendas are not considered as highly political. Alderman or provincial executives do not sleep with the document under their pillows, whereas, figuratively speaking, they might with statutory or non-statutory structure visions such as Utrecht 2040. As indicated, the MIRT programme is primarily regarded an implementation instrument.

The MIRT territorial agenda shows that an informal document can become robust by linking it to the policy in statutory documents as structure visions. These structure visions exist at
the three formal government tiers, but also at informal regional level. Although the MIRT territorial agenda is not a statutory document, the agreements which are made in the multi-level government meetings on the basis of the agenda have a formal status and are binding upon the government tiers in this meeting.

Territory as integration frame
A last point of reflection concerns the fundamental rationale underlying the integrative policy process in the context of MIRT in which a deliberate choice has been made to use territory as such as a frame of integration. Other choices could have been made as well, such as economic development as frame of integration, when revising the former MIT programme. By including territory in the programme and by making the development of a territorial agenda mandatory the former MIT programme now has taken quite a different and new direction.

Inclusiveness with respect to involved stakeholders
The territorial agenda links a multi-level government vision to a central government investment programme. As Figure 4 above has shown, vision and governance dominate when looking at the elements of strategic analysis. Identity and the outside world only have a marginal role in the strategy of the territorial agenda. Yet integrative strategies which precede the MIRT territorial agendas focus more on these concepts.

4. Meta-governance as an enabler and limiter of integration

In terms of findings we observe amongst others that the MIRT programme creates an institutional context which enables governmental stakeholders to deal effectively with the fragmented governance situation in their part of the Randstad. Also it is effective, in a number of ways, in relating strategy and vision to the concrete implementation of projects and investments. Yet, there are a few drawbacks too, in particular referring to the limited set of involved stakeholders and legitimacy as well as to the difficulty in aligning with other policy programmes and initiatives, especially those of regional and local governments. These and other findings fuel a further reflection on the possible role of meta-governance in regional integrative strategy making.

Conditions that make the MIRT territorial agendas possible
There is a number of conditions which enable the territorial agenda to function as it is now. The first one is the abundance of integrative policies which exists at various horizontal levels. A second one is that, because of the previous condition, MIRT territorial agendas are not supposed to formulate new policies (which does not mean that they are entirely policy neutral however). Another condition is the fact that external stakeholders (i.e. private and civic actors and umbrella organisations) have often been involved in policy documents,
feeding into and preceding the MIRT territorial agenda. As a result the territorial agendas do not include political sensitivities which implies that they do not have to be discussed in the individual municipal councils. The legitimation has taken place through the process of the underlying policy documents. These conditions combined thus make that from the perspective of legitimacy there is no need, or so it is assumed, to involve non-government actors in the joint vision of the territorial agenda.

Nevertheless, in particular as regards the democratic legitimacy of MIRT territorial agendas one can put questions marks. The adapted approach of basing the agenda on legitimated policies only at maximum leads to some kind of ‘indirect legitimation’. When, for example, assessing the MIRT territorial agenda in terms of criteria developed by Sørensen and Torfing (2009) to assess the democratic anchorage of governance networks the outcome is all but positive. Sørensen and Torfing “claim a governance network democratically anchored to the extent that it:
1. Is monitored by elected politicians capable of influencing the relatively self-regulated policy processes proceeding within the network;
2. Comprises private business and civil society actors whose performance in the network is critically assessed by the members of the organizations and groups they claim to represent;
3. Is accountable to the citizens affected by the decisions of the network and who are capable of scrutinizing and contesting publicly available accounts of how the network has handled different policy issues;
4. Re-enacts a series of commonly accepted democratic rules and norms ensuring the broad inclusion of relevant and affected actors, procedural fairness and agonistic respect among actors perceiving one another as legitimate adversaries rather than enemies.”

(Sørensen & Torfing, 2009, p. 244).

MIRT territorial agendas being the outcome of the coordinated effort of several governance networks working together, except for the first and perhaps fourth criterion, hardly can fulfil any of these criteria. In this sense, the meta-governance framework provided by the MIRT programme produces rather dramatic results in terms of legitimation and participation. From this perspective the turn that the new MIRT approach will take, with more emphasis on involving a wider set of stakeholders, as indicated above, is well understood.

Results / effectiveness
The process architecture of a strategy determines the result at the end. In the case of the MIRT territorial agenda the balance between horizontal and vertical integration and the integration between vision and projects determines its effectiveness. The basic idea is that there is consensus about a joint vision and about priorities within and between government tiers. When addressing integration different levels of integration can be distinguished. Integration may relate to sectors, actors or territories. An example of an attempt of horizontal integration is the agenda of Northwest Netherlands which clearly outlines the
relations between key projects for each sector and indicates how they contribute to the overall objectives of the agenda.

There are however limits to the results and effectiveness. Examples show that even within one tier of government one of the ministries can withdraw from a joint decision and jeopardize a project. A case in point is the integrated development near Schiphol in Haarlemmermeer West where the minister of Economy, Agriculture and Innovation independently decided for an open air 380 kV high voltage connection and not for an underground connection as was agreed upon and formed a prerequisite for the development of 6,000 houses. The agendas do not lead to (binding) agreements between national or regional stakeholders. A ministry can still decide independently contrary to what has been included in the agenda. This is also true for lower tier administrations, but the impact would be smaller since their budgets are not crucial for carrying out MIRT projects. At the same time it has to be concluded that there are several other policy trajectories that work alongside but are not integrated in the MIRT programme.

In this sense the relation between separate policy processes and arenas may require further attention. Whereas it seems possible to arrive, between a given set of stakeholders, at a consensus or shared vision, their policy efforts may become futile when decisions made in other policy arenas negatively influence them. In this sense the MIRT programme architecture is still too much focused on internal affairs as if it is able to operate within perfect isolation. Future research therefore may focus on the question how links can be created or forged between separate yet mutually influencing policy arenas.

Meta-governance: MIRT process architecture limits and enables integration

The MIRT territorial agendas have proved to result in integrative joint visions. Clearly, the meta-governance regime was helpful in this by allowing full flexibility to the regional partners in terms of how they organised the process of developing the agenda. Given the governance thickness and the variety of formal and informal governance levels each with its own dynamics in each of the regions, the issuing of generic rules would have been counterproductive.

At the same time, however, the process architecture imposed by the national level also limits a full integrative central government investment programme. The way in which infrastructure is budgeted makes it possible to include specific projects in the long-term in the MIRT project book. The framework with rules of the games for the projects in the MIRT project book form a strong body of meta-governance. The steering effect is expressed in the prioritisation of projects, whereby provinces choose projects which are likely to receive national funding.
When looking at other budget lines at national level in other sectors these do hardly allow inclusion at project level in this MIRT project book. This applies for example for the way in which nature conservation is budgeted. A number of grant schemes have been merged into lump sums for provinces. The province is now the hinge between central government and region and responsible for planning, finance and implementation. Time horizons between budget lines differ as well as the way in which investments can be assigned to specific projects. As a result, even if involved stakeholders would like to integrate certain projects, for example related to nature development, the current process architecture makes this impossible.

*Characterising the MIRT meta-governance approach*

Clearly, without the MIRT programme there would not have been any MIRT territorial agenda. As indicated the territorial agendas have added value in a sense that they are integrative, more so than most policies underlying, and form a frame of reference (alongside others) for the further development of a region and establish a clear relation between vision on the one hand and concrete projects on the other which assists in future decision making on projects. Perhaps the biggest achievement of the MIRT approach is that it enables to cut through the up to five different governance layers and forge a consensus that is shared between stakeholders from the national all the way down to the local level. This is a major feat which we have not seen before in the recent governance history of the Randstad area. Obviously, however, the consensus applies to a joint vision and it remains to be seen how and if it will be translated in joint agreement about concrete projects. Nevertheless, from the perspective of integrative strategy making the meta-governance regime laid down by the MIRT programme can be regarded rather successful. However, as indicated above, all this comes at a price of doubtful democratic legitimacy, limited to no inclusiveness of other stakeholders and limited possibilities to join-up with other policy programmes and budget lines operating alongside the MIRT programme.

The overall picture that emerges is one of a meta-governance programme that has operated almost in perfect isolation from other potential relevant policy programmes at both national and regional level and from society at large. Shielded between the safe walls of the MIRT programme it proved possible to embark effectively and efficiently on developing integrative strategies with regard to a limited number of self-defined interests along a set of quite effective self-formulated rules.

Coming back to the four distinct ways in which meta-governance may be exercised in general as identified by Sørensen (2006, p. 101) the MIRT experience with regard to integrative strategy making can be characterised as both a hands-on and hands-off form of meta-governance. Hands-off in a sense that the MIRT programme framed the context in which self-governance could and did take shape. The meta-governor itself, the national ministry, was not involved in shaping the governance rules and network, it only required the
regional stakeholders to develop a shared agenda as a prerequisite for further national investments in infrastructure and potential other projects. The only basic rule that applied was that this agenda should be shared by the ministry itself. And this is where the hands-on element jumps in as each MIRT territorial agenda has been developed in a setting in which regional, local and national stakeholders participated. Whereas the lead was in hands of a regional body, formal or informal, the national level was always represented in meetings as a stakeholder and influenced the outcomes, but in doing so played along the rules as set by the leading regional authority.

5. Conclusion

If anything, it has become clear that there is no such thing as a regional integrative strategy at the level of the Randstad. Rather there are several strategies, some being more integrative than others, at several levels below and above that of the Randstad. Amongst the wide array of integrative territorial strategies the MIRT territorial agendas is just one particular kind of integrative policy. Yet they are notably different from other strategies in a sense that it has been produced within a meta-governance context. A key outcome of the analysis is that this meta-governance framework created conditions which enabled the development of regional integrative strategies in an almost unprecedented effective and efficient way. This is not a small feat within a governance congested region such as the Randstad. Whereas the meta-governance framework put forward by the MIRT programme was reasonably effective, it could only be so because the existing situation in the Randstad already fulfils a number of necessary conditions. Moreover, as has been pointed out, the MIRT programme and probably any meta-governance framework comes with a number of pros and cons. Whereas the framework enabled integrative strategy making in particular in terms of vertical relations between governance levels and relating vision to projects, this comes together with questionable legitimacy, limited participation and handicapped opportunities to join-up with other policy programmes. Although these negative issues are partly compensated by other existing integrative strategies it may in the longer run compromise the applicability of the MIRT territorial agendas.

MIRT territorial agendas are just one out of many other, maybe more exiting, policy documents that fit under the umbrella of integrative territorial strategy making within the Randstad. It certainly will not be the last as many future attempts will be undertaken. Curiously, in about a period of half a century there has only been one policy document that could be regarded a regional integrative strategy for the Randstad as a whole: the Structure Vision Randstad 2040 (Ministerie VROM, 2008). Ironically though, the key message of this vision, which already has become obsolete, is that because of limited functional relationships there is no rationale to speak of one Randstad, but rather that policy strategies should be aimed at the two wings. Whilst the MIRT territorial agendas certainly cannot be
regarded a panacea it remains interesting to further analyse and question the applicability of meta-governance frameworks as facilitators of regional integrative strategy making.

References


