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## **Finding common ground in a world in flux**

Political executive negotiations of meaning during performative  
and symbolic decision-making processes in the infrastructural field

## Introduction

This paper is based on interpretative research concerning the field of practice surrounding public infrastructure development. The specific focus is on the decision-making process concerning potential projects and the practices of political executives collectively striving to construct a common ground as a basis for decision-making. 'Whimsical', 'indecisive' and 'driven by purely electoral motives' are some of the characteristics ascribed to those Ministers, provincial Delegates or municipal Aldermen. Processes of decision-making are generally characterized by the complex interplay of problems, interests, polyphonic interpretations, power struggles and internal as well as external pressures (Flyvbjerg 1998; Teisman 2000). Infrastructural decision-making is problematic because these executives have diverging agendas while simultaneously striving for a common cause. This is a difficult process in itself, but the difficulties are intensified by increasingly dynamic and volatile societal context. Infrastructural decision-making processes often take up many years, and during that time the surrounding world goes through dramatic changes. For instance, budget cuts following a financial crises, changing political winds or the arrival of new political executives following elections or new EU regulations all influence the way the shared story is constructed. How do decision-makers deal with this world in flux?

The microscopic focus on the interactive negotiations during a decision-making process provides insights on how political executives in the infra field cope with the upheaval and turbulence in the wider context. In other words, this paper researches the cultural practice of political-executive decision-making through an ethnographic study of this networked field of public decision-makers concerned with infrastructure development. Within this field, negotiations on the meaning of projects are an essential feature and turbulence and turmoil in wider context are inherently connected with the continuous struggle to influence the social construction of reality. Infrastructural decision-making processes on average have a duration of 15 years (Elverding 2008), enclosing multiple elections and periods of differing social-economical circumstances. According to March, the setting of infrastructural decision-making can be conceptualized as an organized anarchy; a complex situation with ambiguous preferences and unclear rules and a fluid turnover of decision-makers. (1994:199). This idea of organized anarchy seems more and more to reflect the contemporary state of a world in flux. Research on the culture of infrastructural decision-making provides a good opportunity to gain ethnographic insights on the manner how individual actors as well as an entire professional community are coping with turbulence in wider society. For doing so, it is important to reflect on the meaning of 'turbulence' when

looking through a social-constructionist lens focused on the ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty of social phenomena. The perceived social reality full of turmoil is the context in which Aldermen, Provincial Deputies and Ministers collectively strive to create balance and equilibrium in order to ground their actions. The notion of framing and the symbolic power vested in the performative act of decision-making are key elements in the conceptual framework. Moreover, it will be argued that political executives do not only cope with turbulence in wider society. By socially constructing the meaning of phenomena in the world in flux, they also symbolically create or substantiate this turbulence in an ambiguous reality through their performative actions.

## **Conceptual framework and epistemological stance**

The key actors during infrastructural decision-making in practice are the political executives - Aldermen, Delegates and Ministers - and the departmental top officials that advise them. In order to understand political-executive decision-making, it is important to reflect on the diverging roles between politicians and bureaucrats, for the political-executive combines elements of both roles. The politician functions as a sovereign representative of political values and interests in a political arena focused primarily on short-term issues. The bureaucrat is the subordinate 'expert advisor and policy executor', whose major concern is efficiency (t Hart & Wille 2006:124) with a focus on comprehensive, long-term developments. However, this classic Weberian differentiation of roles has been challenged for a long time. There is more an idea of a continuum than a dichotomy between the two perspectives. Key strategic civil servants are often acting in a quite political manner. More importantly, politicians that get elected into a executive function - for instance as a Minister, Provincial Delegate or Alderman - differ from their colleagues in for instance the Parliament or the City Council. Political executives are not only politician but also head of a civil service organization responsible for policy implementation (Hart & Wille 2006).

Policy is potentially a sphere of rational analysis, objectivity, allegiance to truth, and pursuit of the well-being of society as a whole. Politics is the sphere of emotion and passion, irrationality, self-interest, short-sightedness and raw power. (Stone 1997:373). This is the difference between the administrator as head of the administration being responsible for policy implementation - signing legislative agreements with each other and with contractors - and the elected politician struggling to maintain power in the turbulent political arena. These actors cannot focus solely on short-term political struggles, for they also have to engage in long-term decision-making processes. For instance, they have to make decisions about infrastructural projects with a planning horizon of at least 30 years. Even the

decision-making about such large-scale developments can last more than a decade. Therefore, political executives continuously have to balance between their short-term haphazard political reality and the lasting, long-term consequences of their infrastructural plans. While surfing on the turbulent and dynamic waves of social context, these executives attempt to steer the decision-making process in some relatively steady direction. The essence of their role as political-executive is to cope with turbulence, volatility and constant change in order to make a concrete decision that has long-lasting consequences for social and physical reality. This makes the culture of political-executive decision-making - the way of coping with this tension between chaos and order - an interesting topic for the ethnographic study of turbulence in wider society.

The notion of a 'culture of decision-making' that is shared by political executives has not received much attention yet among researchers of processes of decision-making. James March, a key scholar in the field, argues that many scholars on decision-making assume a certain order in decision-making; they have an affection for the idea of order and especially for the notions of reality (there is an objective world), causality (choices affect consequences) and intentionality (decision-making is based on purposeful actors) (1994:176). This positivistic conception of order underestimates the complexity, ambiguity and chaos of actual decision-making. Stone (1997:6) speaks in this sense of 'the rationality project' as an endeavor by scholars from political science, public administration, policy analysis and planning studies; they share a common objective to rescuing public policy and decision-making from the irrationalities and ambiguities of everyday life with the purpose of making policy instead with rational, analytical and scientific methods. This traditionally salient approach towards decision making as a 'clean' process with coherent intentions, rules and rational clear preferences is also recognized by March (1994) Fischer (2003) and Edelman (1993), who states that "the incentive to reduce ambiguity to certainty, multivalent people to egos with fixed ideologies, and the observer's predilections to the essence of rationality pervades everyday discourse and social science practice". Lindblom (1980:26) already clearly explained these two spheres of decision-making, the sphere of rational analysis on the basis of knowledge and the sphere of politics and meaning:

"When we say that policies are decided by analysis, we mean that an investigation of the merits of various possible actions has disclosed reasons for choosing one policy over others. When we say that politics rather than analysis determines policy, we mean that policy is set by the various ways in which people exert control, influence or power over each other."

March sketches the difference between uncertainty and complexity versus ambiguity in a way that is essential to understand the approach of this dissertation compared to more mainstream positivist studies on decision-making. The concept of uncertainty fits the idea of order. There is a real world, but it is not understood in a perfect way thus creating uncertainty, which can also be reduced, for instance by doing research. On the other hand, ambiguity comes forth from the fuzzy interpretation of reality, with multiple meanings and simultaneously opposing interpretations. "Students of ambiguity argue that extra information may not resolve misunderstandings of the world; that the 'real' world may itself be a product of social construction, thus not so much discovered as invented; that interpretations of experience and desires may be fundamentally ambivalent rather than simply uncertain; and that ambiguity may be used to augment understanding through imagination" (March 1994:179). Interestingly, the essential difference between complexity/uncertainty and ambiguity is causing the tension that is found in the dual role of political executives: as an 'executive', an Alderman is engaging with long-term problems in a rational manner, but as an 'politician', the same Alderman is coping with ambiguous reality. Most of the time, researchers and practitioners concerned with decision-making only focus on the executive role, neglecting the constant coping with ambiguity.

This paper follows the idea of March that in order to explore decision arenas within which meaning is obscure, ambiguous and constantly changing, it is necessary to "leave a decision world with coherent intentions, expectations, identities and rules. Decisions are seen as vehicles for constructing meaningful interpretations of fundamentally confusing worlds, not as outcomes produced by a comprehensive environment. Decision-processes sometimes become means for evading or alleviating ambiguity, sometimes means for embracing or enhancing it"(March 1994:179). Shifting the focus on rationality and order towards ambiguity and meaning, this paper is written from an interpretative perspective. There is a central question for understanding research committed to the interpretative turn: "What if our language does not simply mirror or picture the world but instead profoundly shapes our view of it in the first place?" (Fischer & Forester 1993). Our research adheres to the tradition of interpretative policy analysis and thereby assume that people can never have a direct 'window' on reality; they will always need to interactively give meaning to reality through language, stories and discourses when making decisions, policies or plans (Fischer & Forester 1993; Fischer 2003). Uncertainty and complexity are notions that imply a fundamental objective reality which researchers try to cope with; they try to decrease uncertainty or cope with complexity in order to uncover or approach this reality. The notion of ambiguity also assumes an existing material reality, but it is not focused on getting

closer to this reality ; ambiguity is about the different ways this reality is understood and negotiated between actors, which shifts the focus from 'uncovering' objective reality towards the social construction of reality through interacting actors. "Whereas physical objects have no intrinsic meaning structures, human actors actively construct their social worlds. They do so by assigning meaning to events and actions, both physical and social. Human experience, as such, is enveloped in a non-material social, cultural and personal realm of thought and meanings" (Fischer 2003:48).

The culture of decision-making concerns the way in which actors in a field cope with a complex, uncertain and especially ambiguous reality and even how they interactively construct the meaning of an infrastructural venture . "The idea behind the 'social construction of reality' is not that there is no reality apart from social meanings, but that we can know reality only after we give it meaning through framing categories and giving names" (Stone 1997:375). When acknowledging this view on social reality, the meaning of 'turbulence' needs to be reflected upon. Underneath the order that is visible during formal meetings and front-stage documents, there is always a turbulent ambiguous and chaotic world. Behind the mask of order and continuity, turbulence is always there; it only becomes more visible when the mask of rationality is no longer capable of holding up an perception of order. The provisional meaning that is negotiated between decision-makers is no longer tenable in the face of contextual changes that cannot be ignored - in other words, in the face of turbulence. Political executive decision-makers have to renegotiate the meaning of a venture in order to create a 'fit' with the new image of wide society. This is the culture of political-executive decision-making: to cope with turbulence and find common ground and durability in a world in flux. They have to frame reality in a certain way and substantiate this 'framed reality' through institutionalized performative ritual instances of symbolic decision-making.

### **Framing and the symbolic power of decision-making**

The notion of framing is extensively elaborated within social movement studies (Benford & Snow 2000), communication sciences (Entman 2004) and policy analysis (Schon & Rein 1994). Frames shape how actors perceive reality, and framing is an active processual phenomenon implying agency and struggle at the level of reality construction (Benford and Snow 2000: 614). A frame can be considered as the interpretative scheme of actors, the answer to the question "what factors shape players' perspectives, preferences and stands on the issue at hand?"(Allison 1999:298). Allison explains that these factors include parochial priorities and perceptions based on the position in an organization, department or regional locality. March (1994) conceptualizes the certain disposition of decision makers to interpret

new experiences in ways that make them consistent with prior beliefs. While a frame is a mental model (between an actors' ears), the act of framing is interactive (between the noses of actors) (De Wulf et al. 2009). Political executives frame reality in such a way that it corresponds with their interests, by telling a story that highlights certain aspects of an issue while neglecting other aspects deemed of less importance.

Most simply put, the act of framing entails the strategic projection of an actor's frame on reality during social interaction. Decision-makers can frame social reality without even trying to convince or persuade the other executives they have to deal with. In fact, all actors frame social reality all the time and all in persuasive ways that resonates with their own audience (Fiss & Zajac 2006). Therefore, the notion of framing is useful to conceptualize a negotiated or even contested view on the construction of social reality, which will ultimately be the resultant of the pulling and hauling between different frames supported by different decision-makers. A social-constructionist perspective respecting ambiguity assumes that the views of actors cannot be 'tested' in correspondence to a tangible reality; it is impossible to 'prove' whether one idea or frame is more correct than the other. The question then becomes how deliberating actors with diverging interpretations and interest find common ground. In order to answer this question, it is useful to discuss the concept of a collaborative action frame (Gamson 1992; Benford & Snow 2000), a concept that has been thoroughly elaborated upon within the realm of social movement studies. A collective action frame is a common story which ultimately guides the action – in this case decision-making – of a group of actors with diverging worldviews and interests. According to Gamson (1992:111), "collective action frames are not merely aggregations of individual attitudes and perceptions but also the outcome of negotiating shared meaning". The development of a collective action frame can be seen as a dynamic of contesting framing efforts, in which all actors are involved in the politics of signification (Benford&Snow 2000:625). The 'frame disputes' (Goffman 1974) that emerge when negotiating a collective action frame are of central concern in the case of political-executive decision-making. An ultimate decision can be based upon a collective action frame created by actors who are simultaneously collaborating and contesting each other (Benford & Snow 2000). The negotiation of a joint frame acceptable to all participants strengthens the emerging image of decision-making as a 'puzzling' process in which all actors create pieces of one complex, shape-shifting jigsaw puzzle that emerges through their negotiations. No actor can fully control in advance what the puzzle is going to look like when all actors agree that it is finally finished.

Political-executive decision-making is about contested negotiation, about strategic struggle to establish a fragile and shifting equilibrium between meaning makers, about bargains and trade-offs and the creation of an legitimate common denominator that is embodied in the form of a decision. This view on decision-making gives another meaning to experience of turmoil, turbulence and upheaval. Looking through the lens of social-construction of reality through frame negotiations, the world is always in flux. The experience of 'order' or 'common reality' is only a temporary outcome of a dynamic and fragile balance and 'turbulence in wider society' might be an indicator of an extraordinary change in the collective action frame on a higher level of a layered social reality. Political executives are keen on these changes in the collective stories in wider society and they all try to influence the negotiated collective action frame to their benefit in the light of these contextual changes. When again using the jigsaw puzzle metaphor, a collective action frame concerning a certain decision is on its turn a piece of the large puzzle of social reality. This large puzzle is not static but constantly changing, and the political executive have to make sure that their 'piece' has a good fit with the emerging larger puzzle. The dynamic character of a social reality in flux can create the experience of fluidity and it undermines the feeling of progress, of direction over the course of development of society. However, it is exactly the symbolic character of decision-making and especially of the ritual symbolic performance of officially institutionalized decision-making moments that is essential in the social construction of reality (March 1994). The ritual and performative act of deciding can create a certain anchor of meaning, a temporary 'freeze' in the flux of meaning negotiation. This conceptualization with the symbolic ritual of decision-making corresponds with Nelson Goodman's philosophic notion of stipulation - of taking something as a given for subsequent construction of reality (in Bruner 1986:97). The act of decision-making is the act of transforming a collectively negotiated story into a stipulation. However, this temporary island in the turbulent context is only a equilibrium based on conflicting worldviews that can be overturned again during subsequent negotiations of meaning.

In the infrastructural practice, these institutionalized moments of the symbolic act of 'deciding' are so essential that the negotiation of a collective action frame becomes much more intense when such moments are approaching. The focus is placed from the order towards the disorder and turbulence in society - towards the emerging contours of the larger socially constructed 'jigsaw puzzle'. The symbolic moment of stipulation will be the basis for the further negotiations of meaning between political executives. Therefore, they want to make sure that they did everything to influence the collective story

to their benefit. They not only cope with turbulence, but they try to use it for their own advantage during the negotiation of meaning.

## **Negotiating the meaning of the A1 Zone spatial development program**

The casus discussed in this paper concerns the decision-making on the A1 highway, a potential project bidding for Ministerial funding. This highway runs from Amsterdam in the west towards the German border in the East of the Netherlands. A significant feature of this A1 highway is the large amount of freight trucks, coming mainly from the Port of Rotterdam and heading for Germany. The freight trucks often form colons, leaving only one lane accessible for private passenger cars. One potential way to deal with this problem is to add another lane, which is a solution that is strongly favored by regional political-executives, albeit that every executive has his own view about the detailed planning of the project. In order to receive funding, regional political executives must all support one common story which also receives commitment of the Ministry of Infrastructure. Moreover, this common story must take in account and anticipate changes and fluctuations in the surrounding political, economic and legal realm in order to convince different audiences of the plausibility and the legitimacy of the proposed infrastructural development. The thick description of collective decision-making on infrastructural development functions as a window to study turbulence in society as a whole by focusing on political executives coping with a dynamic and volatile environment while puzzling for a common story as a bedrock for decision-making.

The empirical case study of this paper is based on 35 in-depth interviews with Provincial Deputies, Aldermen and other relevant actors in the decision-making arena. Furthermore, it is based on document analysis and participant observation of meetings – and all informal talk surrounding the meetings - during which the shared story was deliberated. This study takes on a narrative approach, regarding stories as building-blocks for meaning (Czarniawska 2004; Brown 2008; Bruner 1990). These interviews, observations and documents inform me as a researcher about the stories that are told by different political executives and the way these actors construct a shared story while simultaneously taking in account events and shifts in the surroundings world. The conceptual framework based framing and moments of symbolic decision making makes it necessary to combine individual in-depth interviews with observations of symbolic decision-making moments. When focusing only on interviews, the actual negotiation and creation of an collective frame cannot be studied. When only observing the decision-

makers during such symbolic moments of deciding, it is impossible to recognize opposing frames and understand the subtlety of the negotiations between these political executives.

The empirical case story in this paper reflects on the frame negotiations during the final meeting between political executives. During this symbolic meeting, the contents of the reconnaissance report are discussed; this report will ground the discussion about possible funding between the regional executives and the Minister of Infrastructure. I was participant observer during this meeting and I also witnessed several other meetings in preparation of this final one. Moreover, I interviewed all political executives and top professionals involved - four Aldermen, two provincial Delegates and three Ministerial top professionals filling in for the Minister who was not present herself. Most of the interviews with these decision-makers were held shortly after the meeting, so I had a chance to ask them to share their personal reflections on that specific meeting. The case story in this paper will follow the course of the agenda of the meeting and will zoom in on the framing contest behind every agenda point. The focus will be on the way the political executives construct collective decision-making frames that anticipate on the turmoil and turbulence of the wider society.

In order to appreciate the importance of constructing a collective strategy text in this empirical case study, it is necessary to briefly explain the Dutch system of strategic infrastructural decision-making. The country is divided in several sub regions called *Landsdelen*, and each *Landsdeel* meets with the Minister of Infrastructure twice a year to decide about potential infrastructural projects. There is never enough budget to finance all the plans of all executives, so the Ministry has to select projects, distribute funds and prioritize between all the plans within the various *Landsdelen*. This system results in a implicit competitive atmosphere between all the strategy practitioners (in this case political executives) - between and within *Landsdelen* - trying to find funding for their favorite projects. Paradoxically, it is important for the competing executives within one *Landsdeel* to stand united against the Minister. As one respondent explains, "the greatest gift for the Minister is a divided region, because he or she does not have to make a decision then but only has to tell the regional executives to first find a common ground". A collectively constructed strategy text, which is supported by all regional strategy practitioners increases the chance that a potential project is rewarded funding by the Minister. This is exactly because of the fierce competition for priority; if executives in a certain *Landsdeel* construct a sound common story - in the form of a collective action frame and embodied in a strategy text - it is easier for the Minister to defend the strategic decision to prioritize the funding of that project in the face of the many projects that are presented before the Minister.

## Case story: the final meeting as symbolic instance

In order to better understand the construction of a collective action frame - a collective story - in this particular venture, it is interesting to explain the historical context of this infra-spatial venture. It then becomes clear that the A1 zone spatial undertaking as such is already a result of politicians telling their framing stories. From the beginning of the 1990, they had been framing the A1 highway as the main transport corridor for the main ports of Amsterdam and Rotterdam towards the east of Europe. Although regional politicians always try to steer National investments in their direction, there was a turbulent event in the wider context that seemed to legitimize their claim. In 1989 the Berlin Wall had fallen, creating the possibility for new transport and trade routes from Northern-European harbors towards the developing Eastern European countries.

However, the Ministry of Infrastructure has not been convinced of the urgency of broadening the A1, because there are (not yet) significant urgent traffic congestion problems according to the official national norms. Therefore, in order to keep the capacity project on the agenda for potential funding, the regional administrators Therefore, they tried to frame their problem in many different ways in order to receive national support and subsequent funding. They framed the A1 as the most beautiful designed highway running through the most natural area of the country, therefore calling it the 'business card of the Netherlands'. When this triggered no enthusiastic response, they decide to frame the A1 as a regional backbone for integral spatial development instead of a international axis; hence the A1 Zone program, which could be valuable in itself but which could also be regarded as a next attempt to frame the A1 highway broadening. From that perspective, the broadening of the A1 has become the main building block within the spatial plan stimulating economic growth in the zone surrounding the highway. This way, the broadening of the A1 was still 'on the table' as a sub-element of this encompassing spatial venture

### **Final Steer group Meeting: opening and agenda**

From the opening of the meeting, it immediately becomes clear what the goal of the meeting is: to find common ground in order to make it possible to make a decision that is acceptable for all during the coming BO MIRT meeting; this is a bi-annual meeting between The Hague and the *landsdelen*, which is a key moment of symbolic meaning making. The chairman repeats the whole process of the last two years, legitimizing and building up towards the topics of discussion of today's agenda. The chairman of

the A1 Zone, the Delegate of Mobility Affairs of Overijssel Province, is also chairman of the meeting. He stresses that this meeting is indeed only meant to discuss the contents of the planning document and that it is not meant to negotiate about funding and possible financial constructions. However, it is clear that all parties do want to discuss the potential for funding the program, even though no binding decisions can be made. The chairman takes the opportunity to frame the meeting in a positive and ambitious manner. He mentions some quotes from the Cabinet Agreement that has just been released, for instance that the budget of the Ministry of Infrastructure is increased with 500 million Euro, which is remarkable in a time of fierce budget cuts in reply to the economic crisis. He also states that the nano-technology cluster in the Twente region is explicitly mentioned as an example of an innovative driver of the New Economy. By making these statements, the chairman sketches the contours of a wider context with dynamics that increase the priority of the A1 highway broadening which has been his key political objective for more than eight years as a Provincial Delegate.

Before the meeting starts, the other regional political executives want to stress that they are concerned about another contextual dynamic that is encroaching *Landsdeel Oost*, namely the National Program of High-frequency Railways. In short, this program is about the possibility for passengers in the Randstad, the most densely inhabited, social-economic heartland of the Netherlands, to take an intercity train every ten minutes. In order to make this possible, freight trains would have to be redirected from the Randstad towards the East of the country. *Landsdeel Oost* would experience an enormous increase of transport trains riding a railroad track running right through many towns and cities. The political executives of the Eastern provinces frame this plan as a clear example of the constant primacy of the Randstad, which gets all the benefits, and in turn the neglect of East, which carries the burden of this increased mobility. The top policy advisors present at the meeting, representing the ministers of Infrastructure and Spatial Planning, reply that this railway program is an autonomous development that cannot be discussed during deliberations about the A1 Zone. However, the struggle between the Randstad and the East, or the Core versus the Periphery is one of the key currents of contextual turbulence that is running through the A1 Zone decision-making process. On a deeper level, this struggle can be regarded as a form of symbolic resistance against the tendency to centralize and strengthen core areas to the cost of the peripheral areas.

**Existing plans are leading: collaborative synergy or empty shell**

The chairman starts with the first topic of the meeting: the draft planning document mentioning the core spatial principles of the A1 Zone. His colleague, the Provincial Delegate responsible for Spatial Planning in the Overijssel Province, takes the initiative by stating that it is essential that so-called existing policies and plans are respected. In his view, the comprehensive Regional Spatial Vision framework, designed by Overijssel Province, should be regarded as the backbone framework of the A1 Zone. On their turn, the united Aldermen of the City Region of Stedendriehoek want their existing structural vision integrally incorporated into the A1 Zone. Aldermen of Twente, the other City Region in the Zone, have not yet established a clear common frame for developments in their region. It is clear however that the existing spatial concept of the Innovation Triangle, sponsored by the urban core cities in the region, is also leading in the A1 Zone. The Innovation Triangle program consists of a synergetic combination between the Tech campus of Twente University, the nearby juridical-financial centre and the planned airport development. This sub-program of the A1 Zone is framed as a potential Silicon Valley remake and is regarded as the best chance to 'glocalize' Twente Region in order to stimulate its economy.

It seems that all Aldermen want their own plans and vision of their environment to influence the plot of the strategy text to some extent, or at least want to make sure that their plans remain possible within the collective decision frame. Especially the Aldermen of rural communities are indeed very cautious to make sure that the A1 Zone plan does not limit their future possibilities for commercial or residential developments. The frameworks of the Province and City Regions, and therefore also the A1 Zone framework, are based on the principle that all key commercial or residential developments are to be located in the cities. The rural areas in the zone, between the urban cores in both City Regions, should remain green and attractive for recreational purposes; therefore, rural areas must refrain from large spatial developments. At the meeting, the chairman of Stedendriehoek delivers the message that the Aldermen of smaller towns feel threatened by these 'limits to growth', especially because of the long-term macro trend of 'shrinkage' in peripheral Dutch areas. Towns are losing their productive citizens who search for better economic opportunities in the Randstad, and no Alderman wants to represent a ghost town. Therefore all of them want to attract investments within their borders, even if it means that the green, recreational spaces might not be realized.

The representing National top officials, especially those of the Ministry of Spatial Planning, are disappointed about the rigorous attempts of regional political executives of different levels that are only thinking about their own plans and not about the A1 Zone as a whole. They frame the Zone as 'empty',

as a label put on a basket of already existing projects without added value. The National representatives stress that there were no choices and no sacrifices made by regional political executives; developments in the countryside are not being limited and urban clustering is a spatial phenomenon that has already been going on for some time. Why would it be necessary to use National funding in order to support developments that are already taking place, while at the same time the green rural area is not protected? In the end, the principle that existing plans are leading is accepted by the Ministries, but only after they have clearly remarked that this decision does not mean that the National Government will ratify all these regional spatial policy frames; those plans do not bind or oblige The Hague in any way. This whole discussion about protecting existing frameworks demonstrates how the turbulence in wider society penetrates the decision-making process. Dreams of becoming an international hub of innovation and growth in a globalized world and nightmares of being marginalized by losing an already shrinking population to the economic core areas in the country are both based on perceived long-term social-economic changes.

### **No A1 Zone without A1 broadening**

The meeting continues with a more specified discussion about the notion of Urban Clustering as the core principle of the A1 Zone (albeit a notion contested by rural towns). This notion automatically has consequences for infrastructural developments. By clustering developments in the cities, these become the economic and social-cultural drivers for the region as a whole, while simultaneously focusing most traffic movements within and between the cities and not criss-cross through the whole region. This will increase the use of public transport within the cities and will keep the countryside green and open and attractive. According to Eastern political executives, urban clustering is only possible when the regional traffic is stimulated to use the A1 highway instead of secondary roads. They stress that the A1 highway should be broadened in order to be able to facilitate urban clustering. They fear that without adding another lane to the highway, the already existing traffic jams will increase even more. In a sense, the concept of urban clustering provides the link between the A1 Zone and the A1 highway; if the A1 Zone is accepted, then the broadening of the A1 is imperative.

The representatives of the Ministry of Infrastructure are not convinced by this argumentation. They stress that the regional executives are responsible for regional mobility and that the highway is a concern for the National Government. Therefore, the National policy framework for prioritizing infrastructure investment – the so-called NOMO norms – are leading. According to these norms, the A1

highway is not yet regarded as problematic in comparison with the much more congested highways in the Randstad area. This is also why the Ministry of Infrastructure did not really mind to accept existing regional frameworks as leading for the A1 Zone. Within that precondition, the NOMO norms – also an already existing frame – would also be leading when discussing the possibility for A1 broadening. The regional politicians reply that the NOMO norms are inherently more favorable towards investments in the Randstad. Also, the extraordinary number of cargo trucks on the A1, often forming colons blocking an entire lane of the highway, is not accounted for by these national norms.

The representatives of the Finance Ministry are not sensitive for the critique on the NOMO norms, but they do pick up on the framing of the A1 highway as key regional traffic artery. The notion of concentrating regional traffic streams onto the national highway system opens the door for an interesting scheme for splitting the costs between The Hague and the East. The A1 Zone plan legitimizes the idea of regional executives co-financing the broadening of the A1 highway because of the fact that regional traffic – which is supposed to mainly use regional roads – instead uses the national highway in an extraordinary intensive manner. The A1 might not be a NOMO priority, but if regional executives want to invest in the National infrastructure to facilitate their own regional plans, they are more than welcome in this time of crisis and budget cuts. Because of the economic situation, there is a stricter selection of projects that receive National funding even though the Ministry of Infrastructure is not the biggest victim of retrenchment. Therefore regional executives try to lure national investments by promising to match National funds with regional funds. This is only possible with a credible story that legitimates regional co-funding, otherwise rich regions would draw all national funds towards them, thereby further diminishing the positions of weaker regions. This option of Regional executives partly paying for developments out of their own budget proves to be an important facilitator of consensus between all parties, as will become clear later in the meeting

The closing remarks of the A1 Zone agenda topic are also concerned with the economical crisis situation which has been the main issue during the elections which ultimately led to a Cabinet Agreement. The Provincial Delegate for Spatial Planning stresses that the special position of Twente as nanotech cluster should be reflected in the A1 Zone plan even more strongly than it already is. He also stresses that the National ecological investments program, which was supposed to be a source of funding for the A1 Zone, is cancelled in the new Government Agreement. He explicitly states that there are many essential changes in the context of the A1 Zone decision-making process. He recommends that this turbulence in society should be accounted for during the decision-making process and ultimately

should be reflected in the A1 Zone planning document that is grounding negotiations between The Hague and the East.

On her turn, the Alderman of the city of Enschede - the largest city in the Twente region - wants to conclude the discussion about the A1 Zone by stating that, although existing frameworks are leading, these frameworks can always change by means of the democratic process. She also points to the plans of the newly elected Government and tries to frame the A1 Zone according to new ideas and policies. Although the Government has clearly decided to focus on the Randstad as core investment area, there will be a limited number of Top Regions appointed throughout the rest of the country. The Alderman is convinced that Twente, with its Innovation Triangle concept and nano-technological specialization, should be appointed as such a Top Region that can form a local hub in a globalized economy. Since the A1 highway is the only fast connection between 'Top Region' Twente and the Randstad, it would only be logical to broaden the highway in order to shorten the traveling time between the two areas. These examples demonstrate that the long-term trends in society, such as the centralizing focus on the Randstad as global hub, or sudden turbulent changes, such as new elections that are dominated by retrenchments necessary to cope with the worldwide crisis, have much influence on the negotiations between political executives constructing a common story.

### **Environmental Quality as insignificant topic**

The next topic on the agenda concerns the so-called Manual for Environmental Quality. This manual is created for the purpose of inspiring public planning professionals to use new ways to create and maintain a highly qualitative environment. During the presentation of the manual, the public manager responsible for this sub-project repeatedly stresses that this manual does not have the authoritative status of a policy. It does not conflict with the existing environmental vision of Overijssel Province or any other existing frameworks, for it is only an inspirational document. The framing of the manual for Environmental Quality as just a casual, unimportant booklet is completed by the Chairman of the meeting who states that it is a nice document to read on a rainy Sunday afternoon. This statement infuriates the representative of the Ministry of Spatial Planning that has been sponsoring the creation of the Manual from the beginning of the A1 Zone program. However, the other political executives present at the meeting are also not impressed by the Manual. As it is not a authoritative, binding document and as it holds no financial promises for them, they do not treat the Manual as a serious topic for discussion.

Especially the Overijssel Provincial Delegates are framing the Manual as a trivial document and this has much to do with specific turbulent events that recently happened in a wider context. First of all, it is important to stress that the relation between the Ministry of Spatial Ordering and Provincial organizations in the Netherlands can be tense because they are both concerned with designing regional frames for spatial development. They often have to negotiate in order to get the National and Provincial spatial vision in line with each other. A few days before the meeting, it has been decided that the Ministry of Spatial Ordering will merge with the Ministry of Infrastructure. This merger had been in the air for some years, but it was always envisioned as an merger of equals. In the view of the spatial planners, this merger would finally make sure that infrastructural investments were to be incorporated into grand planning schemes instead of following their own sectoral dynamics (often conflicting with more integral spatial designs ). However, because of the economic crisis, Liberal and Conservative political parties had come into power. These parties regard infrastructural investments as a powerful economic stimulus and they often regard spatial plans as barriers for timely decision-making about new roads. After the merger of both Ministries, spatial planning would only become a marginal department of the new Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment that is expected to be quite 'asphalt-minded'. Moreover, as a consequence of the merger, many competencies and responsibilities previously allocated to the Ministry of Spatial Planning will now shift towards the Provinces. It should be clear that these external events have consequences for the relation between the Ministry of Spatial Planning and Overijssel Province in the A1 Zone decision-making process. By ridiculing the Manual of Environmental Quality, the Provincial Delegates are sending the message that they no longer listen to the Ministry and that their own Regional Spatial Vision should be regarded as the legitimate backbone of the A1 Zone.

### **Widening the A1 Highway: the key issue of the meeting**

This steer group meeting is officially focused on according the Reconnaissance Report on the A1 Zone as a plan that is acceptable for the main political executives involved. The purpose of the meeting is not to negotiate the conditions necessary to fund the A1 highway broadening. However, as was already clear from the start of the meeting, the regional executives want to probe the representatives from The Hague; which arguments could tempt the Minister of Infrastructure to allocate funding to the A1 during the coming bilateral meeting with *Landsdeel* East? The congestion problems and the perceived inapplicability of the National NOMO norms have already been discussed. A new argument that is put forward by the chairman, who has switched from a neutral role into a 'selling' role, is the fact that in the

original design of the highway, the possibility to add a third lane has been anticipated. The central reserve of the highway is exactly large enough to add two extra lanes. Therefore, no extra terrain has to be appropriated and no new green areas have to become asphalted. Relative to other highway broadenings the A1 would be a cheap one, also because the environmentalist pressure groups are not expected to protest this relatively nature-friendly solution. The low cost are attractive in an age of deflated budgets; for relatively small costs, the Minister can increase the capacity of an important highway. Moreover, the Regional political executives are willing to pre-finance the construction of the highway. They know that the budget for infrastructural developments ranging from 2012 to 2020 is already allocated. For the policy record, the A1 highway broadening could be allocated within the budget ranging from 2020 to 2028 but in reality construction could start years earlier through pre-finance by the Overijssel Province. The Province holds a large cash reserve, received after the privatization of the NUON energy company which was partly owned by Overijssel Province. The region would finance the construction itself and would be compensated through National funding sometime in the future.

The representatives of the Ministry of Infrastructure again stress that the National NOMO norms do not prioritize the A1 highway. Furthermore, they bring the message that hard rain is going to fall and that investments will only be focused on the economic cornerstones of the country - for instance the mainports of Rotterdam Harbor and Schiphol Airport - all situated in the Randstad. The global crises can only be faced when the key factors that drive Dutch international economic success are even more strengthened; fragmented investments in peripheral economic areas will not secure the countries' position in the globalized economy. And indeed all budgets until 2020 are already allocated and Landsdeel East is not the only region that is already claiming a part of the 2020-2028 budget. Many political executives throughout the country are willing to pre-finance development, but earlier experiences of the Ministry concerning pre-finance have not been very positive. The promise of pre-finance is not tempting enough for the Minister. However, there is one significant element of the A1 zone plan that is very interesting for the Minister from a cost distribution perspective. The notion of clustering development and concentrating regional traffic streams onto the national highway system opens the door for an interesting scheme for splitting the costs between The Hague and the East. In other words, the A1 Zone plan legitimizes the idea of the Province not only pre-financing but actually co-financing the broadening of the A1 highway, because of the fact that regional automobilists use the national highway in an extraordinary intensive manner.

In the end, the A1 Zone program based on comprehensive regional spatial planning does increase the chances for finally broadening the A1 Highway after years of deliberation. However, the logic behind the common story is quite different between beginning and end of the decision-making process. In 2008, the crisis was not yet peaking and the approach of integrating spatial and infrastructural development in comprehensive and large programs was still salient. However, in 2010 the Ministry of Infrastructure is solely focusing on building as much roads as possible for as little money as possible in order to stimulate economic growth. It is not the spatial quality of the A1 Zone that is tempting the Minister to prioritize the A1 broadening project. Only the fact that the A1 Zone report demonstrates the intense use of the A1 by regional automobilists makes the report useful for legitimizing a substantive own investment by the regional partners in the East, mostly paid for by Overijssel Province. The A1 highway broadening project is framed as easy to construct and cheap, just as the new Minister likes it in these times of crisis.

The final collective action frame of the A1 Zone, the common story agreed on during the meeting, can be regarded as the largest common denominator that is acceptable to all key partners. No real choices are made, no party really bleeds for all existing plans are honored and no future limits to growth are established. Still the discursive conditions for further negotiations between the Eastern political executives and the Minister of Infrastructure about the funding of the highway are sufficiently met. This collective action frame fits perfectly in the new salient National discourse of crisis, budget cuts, in which there is no money to invest in integral programs but substantial regional contributions and cost sharing are certainly welcome to harness the position of the Netherlands in the turbulent globalizing economy. These are times of tight budgets, of fierce competition between regional politicians struggling for funds while at the same time the National budget is already spent. It is a time of centralization, of strengthening the core instead of stimulating glocalization, and the policies of the Ministry of Infrastructure focus on laying asphalt for economic stimulation instead of an integral approach respecting the need for nature-development and recreation.

Indeed the negotiations with the Minister that take place a couple of weeks after the steer group meeting are grounded on the collective story developed by the A1 Zone partners. The Minister of Infrastructure gladly accepts the A1 Zone report and stresses the usefulness of the plan for regional executives. However, she stresses that the A1 highway is not yet a problem in terms of congestion according to National norms. She does recognizing the regional importance of the road and states that if the regional executives are willing to invest a very substantial amount of money in the highway, the

Minister might be willing to match their efforts. The regional executives answer that they are disappointed that the imperfect National norms are applied to the A1 highway. However, they will consult with their constituents the willingness of co-financing A1 broadening and are prepared to discuss their offer with the Minister at their next bi-lateral meeting. This is the signal for concrete financial negotiations to commence between the Hague and the East; the dream of a three-lane highway to the East is still alive and realization of that dream is slowly coming closer.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to research the culture of political-executive decision-making in the field of infrastructure development and specifically the manner in which political executives cope with turbulence during their search for a decision. Essential for understanding this culture is the way in which these decision-makers negotiate the meaning of an infrastructure project. They all attempt to frame reality according to their own agenda and interest and the turbulence and turmoil in wider society feeds this continuous struggle for meaning. This image corresponds with the statement of Stone who argues that "political reasoning is always conducted as part of a struggle to control which images of the world govern policy. These images of the world frame the concrete decision-making processes into a certain direction and it is therefore always strategic" (1997:379). In the back of the minds of political executives, the distribution of costs and the story that is necessary to legitimize the funding decision are always prominent. It is necessary to use this social constructionist perspective in order to understand the coping of a community as a whole with the world in flux for within this perspective, flux is an essential feature of social reality which is a result of many actors who are struggling for meaning on many levels. Decision-makers negotiate about the meaning of a venture, which becomes 'reality' through the symbolic aspect of the ultimate decision.

When looking at the negotiation of meaning between political executives during symbolic instances of decision-making, it becomes clear that political-executives are not only coping with contextual turbulence; they are also creating and substantiating meaning for the turmoil that surrounds them. According to March, the outcome of any decision, the actual result, embodied in a symbolic act, is also influencing the wider negotiation of meaning (1994:109). A decision-making process is not only framed by meaning of wider context and thus by turbulence, but at the same time the act of decision-making is also framing the meaning of larger trends in society. Returning to the jig-saw metaphor, the collective decision for large infrastructure developments is not only a 'piece' that has to 'fit' into the

larger puzzle of social reality; the puzzle of social reality as a whole is also emerging out of these pieces, which are not only reactive to but also constitutive of the world in flux. The wider context and symbolic instances of decision-making are mutually constitutive for each other.

Decision-making processes about concrete infrastructural projects are also instances of meaning making in a broader context through the symbolic significance of a negotiated decision made by powerful actors. These processes are opportunities or platforms for symbolic actions by administrators and function as vehicles for the enactment of meaning in society. There is a dialectical relation between the leading images of the world, reflected in salient policy frames or dominant discourses, and the concrete decision-making processes in an infrastructural arena: while the images steer decision-making, the symbolic act of deciding is also influencing which world images are leading in society (March 1994). While administrators in their rational policy persona are focused on logical instrumental decision-making on a concrete infrastructural project, the political reasoning of administrators is focused on meaning making in society as a whole; they do this by using decision-making processes as symbolic opportunities to influence the social construction of reality in the broader political realm. This tension between the rational focus to create efficient and effective concrete projects and the political focus on the wider context is an essential insight.

There is a dialectical relation between the leading images of the world, reflected in salient policy frames or dominant discourses, and the concrete decision-making processes in an infrastructural arena: while the images steer decision-making, the symbolic act of deciding is also influencing which world images are leading in society (March 1994). While political-executives in their rational administrative persona are focused on logical instrumental decision-making on a concrete infrastructural project, the political reasoning of administrators is focused on meaning making in society as a whole; they do this by using decision-making processes as symbolic opportunities to influence the social construction of reality in the broader political realm. Decision-making processes about concrete infrastructural projects are also instances of meaning making in a broader context through the symbolic significance of a negotiated decision made by powerful actors. In a sense, decision-making is a performative process, which entails that the practices of decision-making actualize or bring into being the world that is presumed at the outset of decision-making (Callon 2006; Kornberger & Clegg 2011). For instance, consider the case that the consensual story legitimating a decision assumes that the Randstad will remain the economic motor and that therefore infrastructural investments will be allocated in that region. This decision and the subsequent investments will actually bring into being the assumption that influenced the decision in the

first place. In other words, through allocating infrastructural developments in the Randstad, the assumption that this region will be an economic motor will become true. In the same sense, the perception of crisis and turmoil and the proposed reactions on that state of reality are also performative in nature, as the practices flowing from this perception of reality substantiate the actual state of crisis and turmoil.

Decision-making processes are opportunities or platforms for symbolic actions by political-executives and function as vehicles for the enactment of meaning in society. For instance, the general phenomenon of globalization is given meaning by stressing the tension between core and periphery, which can be further specified by framing the tension between the Randstad and the East in the Dutch context. Moreover, these symbolic moments of contest demonstrate the legitimacy and power of political executives in the larger political arena and towards their audience. Considering the notion of performativity, one could say that a decision-making process does not only actualize the world that is presumed in the consensual story. It also actualizes the identity, role and position of the political executives involved in the decision. Politicians that are regarded as the winners during decision-making gain in power and prestige and so does the worldview of which they are the proponents. Infrastructural decision-making is often not about which road to build but more about the question who is powerful or whose view on reality becomes actualized. This tension between the rational focus on the creation of efficient and effective infrastructure and the political focus on the wider context is an essential insight. The perspective of meaning making through negotiations between framing actors, which is the result of this ethnographic study, contrasts with more positivist rational analytic lenses that have dominated mainstream research on planning and decision-making. Besides shedding light on how individual actors as well as communities cope with turbulence, it also demonstrates that - through the performative dimension of decision-making - these agents also collectively create meaning for this world of flux. The contextual discourses of crisis and turmoil that influence decision-making processes are in turn the result of a myriad of symbolic moments of decision all over the world.

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