

**Planned regional development: the creation of learning regions**  
The case of Greenport Venlo

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**Introduction**

The increased complexity of our information, knowledge and network society requires new ways of working, and Communities of Practice are emerging in response to this need (Wenger (1998), Bood & Koenders (2003), Kersten & Kranendonk, 2002). At regional level, complex problems and challenges require new approaches to regional development. Emergent development strategies at this level include the creation of learning regions (Boekema, 2006). Social learning and knowledge exchange are the new keywords at both societal and regional level. Communities of practice evolve from instruments of social learning and dedicated networking into planning instruments that are applicable for innovative regional development as well. Methodological input contributes to new types of regional planning approach for dealing with complexity and turning knowledge environments into social learning capabilities. Such approaches have been tested and refined in the case of Greenport Venlo.

In this paper, new ways of working in business and management, regional development and governmental steering (phases, levels, changes and growth perspectives) will be identified and described using both theoretical and empirical evidence from the case of Greenport Venlo.

**Theoretical background**

*Phases in perspectives on management*

From a theoretical perspective, trends in management theory fall into clear periods. For each period in management theory, numerous books and articles contributed to the development of the paradigm, while one particular book can be seen as a landmark. There is an overarching trend, however: towards an increasing engagement of a diversity of individual participants in the management process, with management aiming at coordinating the contributions of individual and collective learning and excellence to the organization.

*Phases in regional development*

The various phases in regional development practice (Hospers (2006), Hubner (2006), Boekema (2007)) and governmental policy have also thrown up a growing set of instruments for generating different kinds of regional development. In the past, several regional planning techniques have been developed, with the aim of stimulating economic welfare and growth. In this paper, we describe the phases which can be distinguished in regional policy and rural development policy in the Netherlands, and in European regional development strategies.

*Phases in governmental steering*

Phases in governmental steering policies show a shift from top down planning (government) to cooperative steering for decentralized instruments (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000). These phases reflect the paradigm changes and the practice in regional development. Regional development through governmental policymaking started with top-down blueprint steering in which central governments designed the content, procedures and financing of the plans. These were imposed on the regions on the assumption that 'central government knows what is best for you'. The next phase focused more on hierarchy, and regional authorities claimed a say in the plan development and implementation. Decentralization was the next step: now the central and regional authorities worked together through delegation of governmental responsibility. Regions began to design their own development horizon, and to implement policies, tolerated by central government, which kept at a distance. This then led to the emergence of new kinds of regional cooperation, in which central government only creates the conditions for planning and development, while regions are 'self-steering'.

*Summary – the originating of learning regions*

Business management, regional development and governmental development are increasingly interdependent and interconnected. Every new phase in methodology reflects the growing complexity of regional development or organizational management. Easy development goals can be reached with easy

management instruments. Complex development goals need complex instruments, in order not only to tackle the goals themselves, but also to influence environmental conditions.

The concept of area-based environmental and regional policy has grown out of the complex character of problems like sustainability and spatial quality, the growing recognition of the interrelated nature of contemporary societal problems, and the integrative opportunities offered by the regional scale (Termeer and Kranendonk, 2008). This is confirmed by the literature on regional innovation. Boschma (2008) opines that the literature is full of claims that regions are drivers of innovation and growth. To underpin his argument, he mentions the launch of concepts such as industrial districts, clusters, innovative milieus, regional innovation systems, and learning regions. Against this background, organization for rural innovation is changing from government initiatives to networked partnerships of regional and local government, business and civil society actors (Termeer, Kranendonk, 2008). Boekema's analysis (Boekema 2006) revealed that successful learning regions have formed networks of collaboration between government, knowledge institutes and private companies at regional level. In such networks, new importance is given to the exchange of opinions, knowledge, identities and aspirations.

### **Regional development: the case of Greenport Venlo**

*Greenport Venlo* can be seen as a reorganization and redesign of the regional cooperation structure. This structure was set up under the Regiodialoog (regional dialogue) North Limburg (Mansfeld (2003), Termeer (2006)), and now poses management problems, due to an enormous amount of spin-off. Recently developed projects include *New Mixed Farming*, *the Greenport Greenhouse*, *C2C horticulture area development in California*, *Innovation Center on Food and Health*, *KnowHouse (a new regional knowledge broker)* and *the InnovaTower*. Those projects need to be related to new regional ambitions as *Floriade 2012 and Regions of Knowledge (KP7)*, and to be embedded in newly connected organizational, spatial and economical structures. This requires an innovative regional design incorporating new insights on governmental and political organization and the politics of regional development (regional management), marketing and communication (regional branding) and regional knowledge and information management.

In Greenport Venlo, a CoP has been formed in which the regional stakeholders join forces with specialists (practitioners and scientists) to discover how to tackle regional problems and challenges. These can be subdivided into six transition challenges:

- 1) Greenport Venlo is a regional development strategy, a regional movement and an organizational structure, focused on the creation of new added value in the horticulture and food production chain, strengthening the quality of life, developing new perspectives on regional learning, and providing an excellent basis of infrastructure and other conditions for regional sustainable growth.
- 2) The process of establishing Greenport Venlo is itself an innovation. This is monitored and evaluated to develop new indicators for reflection and the measurement of progress and results.
- 3) Greenport Venlo seeks and implements new forms of regional management, in which new governmental strategies and new organizational design is implemented on regional and local scale to facilitate the process of transition. The goal is to create an organizational environment (strong networks, CoPs) with new functions (as knowledge manager, network manager, in master roles) in which new developments, innovative concepts and projects can be explored experimentally, implemented and embedded in regional structures and characteristics.
- 4) Greenport Venlo develops a regional branding strategy, with the new stories and images needed to implement the transition in the region. The active participation and engagement of the inhabitants is necessary for a successful transition. Activities focus on introducing new communication tools and techniques which will contribute to development of regional communication strategies.
- 5) In Greenport Venlo, a regional knowledge management strategy will be developed, containing a vision and a strategy for becoming a learning region. It will be focused on creating very concrete information management and exchange techniques on the one hand and new transdisciplinary regional knowledge on the other. Together, this knowledge will be applied within existing projects like InnovaTower (regional innovation and knowledge center), the focal point for agricultural and food innovations and the appliance of sustainable regional development strategies in the region. This leads to a change of role for knowledge institutes, researchers and academics, and new ways of generating knowledge.
- 6) Greenport Venlo will create a new regional design which will inspire and contribute to the interactive spatial planning process to realize the sustainable development (C2C) of the regional (metropolitan) landscape in which innovative projects like the *New Mixed Farming* and the *Floriade* will be designed. Various levels will be distinguished.

These transitional challenges seem to be crucial for a successful regional transition towards sustainable agriculture in this 'learning' and 'experimental' region.

## Conclusions

The main conclusion of this article is that learning regions can be designed by using and combining theories, strategies, instruments and developments from management, government steering, learning and regional planning, and that conditional steering is needed to facilitate regional learning processes.

Among new management paradigms, new approaches to regional planning and changes in governmental regional development, learning regions are among the newest instruments for managing regional change. While relatively simple aims such as the realization of investment projects can be managed with instruments belonging to older paradigms, learning regions can address complex problems and opportunities, complex relations between a range of participants, and complex financial interdependencies. The role of government in learning regions ranges from active participation (especially for local government) to permissive control and conditional steering from a distance (for national government). Besides development activities, the government has the important task of maintaining rules and regulations, which may at times hamper the self steering of the learning region.

Management initiatives to create a learning region cannot be taken in the regions, where there is no experience with such development processes. Attempts to create a learning region from scratch are unlikely to succeed. Nor will governments with no experience in community development be able to support the process of evolution from an area to a learning region. Learning regions require new ways of working, organizing and cooperating, knowledge exchange, and an understanding of the theory and practice of creating and steering a regional CoP. The management instruments and knowledge used to facilitate the growth of a CoP can be applied to upgrade a region to the learning status. But a region is much wider than a networking community, and a CoP alone will not suffice. Learning is not an end in itself, and the success of a learning region in furthering regional development must be judged by its results in terms of empowerment and development.

Environmental conditions, spatial planning and complying with global trends have become the more manageable aspects of regional change processes. Besides innovative process planning, innovative planning of content-related issues is needed as well. It is increasingly the content-driven aspects that generate innovations. Process management is important, but is subservient to the development outcome. Regions have to scout for development potential on a more global scale, and not just copy best practices from elsewhere. Competitiveness and the link with local cultural possibilities are important for getting real results from project development. New expertise is needed to translate these international trends into the reality of the learning region and to start up the necessary adaptation by local participants.

An important point is the need for new kinds of interpersonal competence to cope with growing complexity and the increased technical challenges in advanced management. To function in a learning region or a CoP demands special skills from participants. Farmers become entrepreneurs; interested citizens become high tech professionals. In some cases, participants need high levels of education, capital and professionalism in order to take a leading role in the process. Changes from outside the region bring about changes in internal management and business operations. Participants gain new colleagues, partners and representatives; they need a lifestyle that includes networking capabilities and embedded cooperation. All this demands high standards of interpersonal competence on adaptability and learning.

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