Multistakeholder Partnerships at the Regional Level

*Developing a Sustainable Perspective for a Former Airfield*

[casestudy]

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1 Introduction

In order to reach for sustainable development fundamental changes are needed in our societies. The challenge is to develop strategies through which society can combine economic and social development with the reduction of pressure on the environment. Obviously, such strategies exceed the capacity of individual actors. Therefore, collaboration has emerged as a central concept in many strategies. Collaboration and partnerships are also long-standing themes within the Greening of Industry Network – in itself a platform for multi-stakeholder debate and collaboration. The 1998 Conference in Rome already addressed the theme of Partnership and Leadership, and subsequent conferences have touched upon related themes.

Although it is widely recognized as a necessity the design of effective collaborative settings is still much debated and proofs to be difficult to realize in practice. There is still much uncertainty about the workings and outcomes of collaborative strategies and partnerships. In a background paper for the Multi-Stakeholder Workshop on Partnerships and UN-Civil Society Relations earlier this year Carmen Malena concluded that there is little common understanding regarding the meaning of partnerships and that partnerships are a poorly defined concept (Malena 2004). Reporting on experiences can help bringing more clarity. This paper is intended to contribute to that.

Where sustainable development needs a multi-stakeholder setting to get concrete form, regional initiatives deserve wide attention. It is at this level that partnerships are most easily formed. Partners often know each other already, sometimes they can build on previous collaboration and they share an interest in their immediate surroundings. This paper documents a regional initiative to develop a sustainable perspective for a military airfield that is going to be closed next year (airforce base Twenthe in the Netherlands). The airfield lies in the middle of an area with nature reserves, some farming, and some estates and is located relatively close to urban areas. The presence of the airfield prevented many developments from happening, especially urbanization. Many people fear that with the airfield gone, industrial developments and urbanization will destroy the unique characteristics.

During the past year several initiatives have been launched for the future development of the former airfield. One initiative is aiming at creating a sustainable perspective for the total area, that is the airfield with its surroundings, and to preserve it unique characteristics. In this paper I report on the current developments regarding this initiative. During the process I have acted as one of the advisers. After identifying some of the presumed merits of collaboration, I describe the case in somewhat more detail. As I will show, the
partnership that is being formed is not entirely successful. Based on the experiences in this case I end by identifying some of the success factors for effective multi-stakeholder partnerships.

2 Multistakeholder Partnerships for Sustainable Development

Sustainable development implies a continuous learning process through which the different parties learn how to deal with increasingly complex issues, in interaction with an increasingly wide range of stakeholders. The commission Brundtland (1987) already characterized it as “a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs”. Sustainable development, therefore, is a learning process – the result of societal balancing by actors coming together to collaboratively decide on what strategies to follow (cf. SER 2002). Via multi-actor processes visions of the future and more sustainable structures can be developed and discussed (Roome and Cahill, 2001). Collaboration is, therefore, an important means to this end.

In defining collaboration I follow Gray (1989): “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible”. Collaboration therefore involves actors from different positions.

Partnerships are a specific form of collaboration, namely those in which actors share a common goal. As I have stated, actors cannot be expected to align their actions naturally. Some form of ‘guidance’ or leadership is necessary. Partnership, thus, needs leadership. Too strong a leadership may destroy the activity of other network members though. While coordination and leadership secure efficient implementation of network actions, they may suppress the creation of new ideas, the natural re-formation of the network, and the emergence of sub-networks. Effective partnerships for sustainable development are able to combine both the freedom necessary for creative ideas and the leadership to get these ideas materialized.

Many people subscribe to the necessity of renewed and intensified collaboration. The strategies of many parties are increasingly focused on building partnerships. Companies, governments and NGOs are looking for new ways for coordination and joint action. There is an international trend towards dialogue and consultation, collaboration and the formation of new partnerships (cf. De Bruijn and Tukker 2002). For instance: policy programs based on collaboration instead of confrontation is a worldwide trend (De Bruijn and Norberg-Bohm, 2005). The basic rationale for these programs is that compliance to regulation is not the right answer to the challenge of sustainability. Rather, environmental policy must focus on how to use the creativity of all the actors involved beyond the level that has been stimulated by command-and-control strategies.

Industry itself also is becoming increasingly aware that the expectations and demands of stakeholders define to a certain extent what actions are needed by an organisation and what responsibilities are to be included. In the words of Björn Stigson (President
of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development): “By cooperating with a wide range of stakeholders, we can concur toward common objectives for sustainable development, and make tangible progress toward achieving them” (Stigson, 2001). Stakeholder relations are, thus, a crucial element for firms in their search of becoming more sustainable. An organisation can only through the dialogue with society at large (employees, governments, customers, NGOs, etc.) establish the balance between its corporate governance and public governance.

In addition, many NGOs have also changed their strategy from confrontation towards dialogue and collaboration. A famous example is Greenpeace. By actively collaborating with industry and intervening in industrial processes Greenpeace has played an important role in the development of Greenfreeze, a more sustainable refrigerator (Stafforden Hartman 2001).

As these actors realize, the challenges in sustainable development exceed the capacity of individual actors. A sustainable environment can not be created by one party by itself. By bringing people together in new partnerships, outside of normal patterns and institutional contexts new and creative ideas can be developed (Hartman et al 2002). Processes of sustainable development may start with small and creative ideas that later on may grow to become an alternative to unsustainable patterns. For this creativeness to happen, there is a need for partnerships in which new and unconventional ideas are explored. Creating a context in which a wealth of possible solutions is developed, therefore, is an important element in the quest for sustainable development. A major element is such a context is the unconventional mixing of actors. By exposing actors with the ideas of others, by facilitating them to come up with unconventional ideas, the realization of sustainable development comes one step closer.

Collaboration and the formation of partnerships is not easy though. For one, because actors may enter the partnership with diverging motives and expectations. It is a mixed motive game (Van Ham and Koppenjan 2002). Aligning these motives and expectations is a big part of the puzzle. Working on sustainable development, therefore, asks for a strategy on the process of collaboration next to vision on the content. An important risk in this respect is that the attention for process pushes away the content. The actors involved might get trapped in negotiating how to come to decisions instead of focusing on reaching creative solutions. Participation and collaboration then become goals instead of means to an end. In practice it is, therefore, not obvious that collaboration leads to the transformational changes necessary for sustainable development. Often, partnerships end up in incremental changes (cf. De Bruijn and Tukker 2002),

In sum: Collaboration and partnerships are not easy answer to the challenges of sustainable development. Partnerships do not materialize by itself en their results are often modest at best. There is an urgent need to learn how to build more effective partnerships, especially at the local and regional level. In this paper I focus on a specific case in which collaboration and the formation of a partnership stood central.
3 The casestudy: the region of Twente in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is one of the smallest European countries but has the highest population density. Its economy includes a comparatively large amount of industry, intensive farming, and a fast growing infrastructure. There is much competition for physical space among businesses, households, agriculture, traffic and natural areas. The space available per citizen has decreased with more than 80% during the last century. And for the last 30 years the built environment has increased with 50%. Open space fritter away and landscapes become sloppy.

The region of Twente is located in the east part of the country, near Germany. The region and the province Overijssel of which it is part, often identify themselves as the ‘garden of the Netherlands’. Some major rural and natural areas can be found here. Especially Twente is famous for its scenic and small-scale landscape. The process of parcelling out has not been as widespread as in other regions in the Netherlands. As a result, rural areas typically consist of rather small fields, bordered by small forests with rills running through it. In many places water-mills, original farm houses, old manorial estates, country seats, city parks and natural areas can still be found. A special feature of the landscape is formed by the so-called essen and marken.

Essen are curves in the landscape and are the result of heightening farmlands by layers of humus (manure and sods of peat) for many centuries. Some essen date back more than 1000 years with as a result the es being more than a meter high. Around the essen stood the farms. Due to an increasing number of farms, the need developed to come to agreements on the common land between the essen. This lead to the development of the marken: a community of farmers that governed the common grounds. Some of the marken date back to 700 A.D. Although the Dutch society has changed tremendously, the remains of the essen and marken can still be found today, in the landscape as well as in the behaviour of people. Around the ‘essen’ and ‘marken’ some original farms and farm houses can also still be found.

In Twente many country seats and parks still exist that once belonged to the families that owned the textile industries. The popular perception Twente cultivates this image: a scenic landscape with a rich variation in flora and fauna, original farm yard, rills, small bushes, many historic cultural elements and a close fit between the urban and the rural areas. The pictures below illustrate this idealistic view.
The reality is a bit different though. Twente has a very high population density (over 400 per square km). Nowadays over 300,000 people live in the three major cities Enschede, Hengelo and Almelo. These cities have been growing fast during the last decades (the urban area has been doubled in the last 30 years) which has had its impact on the landscape. Open space between the cities and villages is becoming scarcer. The picture below is, therefore, probably more accurate than the pictures above: some rather isolated green areas amidst advancing cities and infrastructure

![Lonnekerpark](image)

*Lonnekerpark*

The case I describe concerns one of the remaining places where the original landscape is still more or less recognizable. The total size of the area is around 4000 hectares. It consists of woody old estates, partly owned by private people and partly owned by nature conservation groups, some small-scale farming, and curved landscapes with many rills and essen. With old and renewed farmhouses and farmlands still standing at their original places, some (informal) networks and structures still exist that remind of the old marken. For a large part the area is part of the Main Ecological Structure of the Netherlands; a structure that tries to connect major natural areas. Around the airfield many protected species can be found, in flora as well as in fauna. Its main quality is the coherence that is still present between the different parts of the area. The area is restricted by the cities of Enschede, Hengelo and Oldenzaal, see the picture below. It is, therefore, an important area for recreation (sports, hiking, biking).

In the middle of the area the airfield is located. It consists of a military airbase where several F16 squadrons have their home base and a very small civil airport that has existed in the shadow of the military base. It could only survive given that all the necessary facilities (landing strips, radar) were already there.
**Threats**

Like in other natural areas there are many threads, some hidden and some urgent ones. One thread concerns the position of the farmers. They have a hard time surviving. New (European) environmental legislation and the globalisation of the agricultural market are mainly to be blamed for this. As a result, the small farms in the area are having difficulties to stay competitive. If the farmers disappear, that will be a major set-back for the landscape as the maintenance of the traditional farmland will become much harder to organise. And, in addition, of course there are the ‘normal’ threads of the development of new infrastructure and urban expansion.

The most actual and urgent thread, though, is the closing down of the airforce base. With it comes available a large area that needs to be given a new destination. Now that the noisy F16s will be gone soon, there is an opportunity for new housing or new industrial activities. Up till now this was legally not possible given the level of noise in large parts of the area.

**Collaborating for a sustainable future**

During the past year different scenarios are being developed for the area by the cities and their political parties, by the chamber of commerce, by commercial parties. I have been rather closely involved with the plans that have been developed by the major owners of the area: inhabitants, farmers, nature conservation groups and waterworks.\(^1\) The basic principle of their plans is to maintain the unique characteristics of the area. They oppose large-scale development of transport facilities, a civil airport, farming, natural estates, business activities or housing. They opt for small-scale developments, fitting the original characteristics of the small-scale landscape of Twente. In short: a careful combination of

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\(^1\) The partnership that they have formed has asked Saxion University for some assistance. As a result several students and student groups have developed scenarios and different destinations for the area. The description in this paper is for some part based on their reports.
new developments and the maintenance of the unique qualities of the landscape and cultural history. Obviously, none of the owners can realise this scenario without the support of many others. That is why they decided to join forces.

4 A partnership for Lonneker Park

There are many stakeholders involved in the area. Three main groups can be distinguished:

1. Initiators/owners:
The first group consists of the most direct stakeholders: the actors that own parts of the area. The main actor groups are the inhabitants, the farmers in the area, nature conservation groups and the waterworks that have large water basins near the area. As stated, these actors have formed a formal partnership. With the partnership they aim:
- to preserve the landscape;
- to reach a balance between farming, the natural estates, recreation and other activities;
- to create a sound economic base for these activities;
- to develop an institution that can govern the area.
The emphasis in their plans is the preservation of the qualities of the area. The terrain of the airbase itself should be destined for green activities, for instance natural estates with some extensive recreation. The farmers can keep on farming but they will have to develop new activities such as nature conservation and some recreation as well. There is no room for large-scale industrial activities, but small-scale commercial activities (farm shops, some small offices) are possible.
The partnership has initiated a symposium in which all relevant actors were invited to join in and it is now actively lobbying its plans.

2. Governments:
Many different governments and governmental agencies play a role: the cities of Enschede, Hengelo, and Oldenzaal, the province of Overijssel, the Waterboard, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food, the Ministry of Defence. Most of them have a vision on the area that is more or less consistent with the aims of the first group. They too value the natural qualities of the area. They are less outspoken though and keep themselves somewhat aloof. Officially they leave the initiative to the other actors, especially the current owners of the civil part of the airfield. The exception is the Ministry of Defence, the current owner of the military airbase. The Ministry is going to sell its property and it wants to make a good price. As the prices of land are much higher if a commercial development is possible (housing, industrial estate), Minister Kamp of Defence has said that a green scenario is naive.

3. Other stakeholders
The third group of stakeholders mostly represent commercial interests: Chamber of Commerce, industrial associations, project developers. A consortium lead by the Chamber of Commerce has developed its own scenario. The consortium actively lobbies for maintaining the civil airport after the closure of the military part. As the current commer-
cial activities are marginal (a few charters each week), it would mean expanding the airport substantially. That would involve some industrial development nearby too.

What scenario is going to be chosen? The public debate is still going on. Most citizens seem to favor the green scenario as some polls indicate but many people are quite indifferent too. A most likely outcome is hard to predict with some certainty. There are two main scenarios on the table: keeping the area green or transforming the airfield into a commercial airport. A completely green scenario is not very likely. It would involve quite some investments, for instance for re-developing the area of the airfield itself, helping the farmers to re-orientate their businesses and to establish an institution for the park. Up till now there is no real budget available and the partnership has not been powerful enough to secure funds. The commercial development of the airfield is also not very likely. With good connections to international airports nearby (within an hour travel time) there is no real need for a well-developed airport in Twente. Also this scenario would imply some major investments. Given the uncertain demand for commercial air services it is not likely that enough investors will be ready to invest.

What seems to be the most likely scenario is that there will be no major choice being made. The development of activities is left partly to societal actors and to ‘coincidence’, of course within certain boundaries. Those boundaries will ensure the preservation of the most obvious qualities, but there won’t be any guarantees for the area as a whole. What I identified as the main quality (the coherence / balance in the area) will than most likely be lost and become fragmented.

At the conference an update on the latest developments will be given.

5 Reflection

Sustainable development needs partnerships, that is beyond discussion. Designing effective partnerships, that is the real issue. Although in the case of transforming the military airbase the final word is not out yet, there are legitimate concerns that the partnership consisting of the owners will not be successful in realizing a sustainable future for the area in the end.

What can we learn from this case? Without striving for a complete scientific evaluation, I identify several critical conditions for effective partnerships:

- *A sense of urgency*
  It needs to be obvious that joint action is needed, and it is needed now. The actors involved need to conscious that they need the partnership to realize their own goals. In the case of Lonneker Park the closure of the airbase provides this sense of urgency. While there were plans already for a long time to promote the area as a kind of park, it wasn’t until the announcement of the closure that the plans really materialized. This created the context in which farmers, scientists, inhabitants, nature organizations were ready to collaborate.
- **Willingness to collaborate**
  Actors need to be ready to collaborate; to listen to other actors and to make compromises. This means that you have to accept that other perspectives to a situation are possible. In the case of Lonneker Park this means that both the farmers and the nature conservation organizations were ready to enter the partnership. Where formerly, they didn’t have always the best relationship, now the actors realize that they need each other.

- **Right set-up of the partnership**
  All the relevant actors should be engaged. Is this the case for Lonneker Park? For sure, some main players are at the table. The fact that the partnership has not been able to engage the business community is now backfiring. Maybe, the partnership would have never come to a concrete plan if they had entered, but now it sees itself confronted by a competing scenario drawn up by the business community.

- **Level of trust**
  When actors are forming a partnership, there needs to be a basic level of trust. Especially when creative ideas are being formulated, actors have to trust that also ‘crazy’ ideas can be worthwhile to consider and that actors do not just preach for their own good. Trust can only be build through personal contact. In the case of Lonneker Park trust was build by the initiators who visited all others, at their meetings or even at home.

- **A joint vision**
  Some joint vision of the future is important. Actors need to know what it is they are striving for. Especially in cases like this, when there is an urgent thread, the partnership cannot be based solely on the idea to fight an unwanted future. The partnership should instead be ready to formulate appealing visions. As I already indicated, forming a partnership is a mixed motive game. If there is no energy put into formulating a joint vision, the partnership runs the risk that in the end no one is ready to implement the ideas that the partnership comes up with. Was there a strong vision for Lonneker Park. At least there was some common ground. When it came to the basic features of the park, there was general agreement what they should be like. In order to get political and financial support, a more elaborate vision is needed. I think it is fair to say that the plans of the partnership are not concrete and convincing enough yet to be embraced widely.

- **Leadership**
  I already identified leadership as the counterpart of partnership. Although listening to all partners is necessary and the actors have to learn from the perspectives of others, it is critical there the collaboration takes place with a clear sense of direction. As it is unlikely that all the parties involved will align their strategies in such a way that a clear sense of direction develops, there is a need for leadership. This leadership has to be of a special form in the case of sustainable development. Hartman et al (1999) call this a collaborative leadership that they define as “the process to initiate, facilitate and sustain collaborative initiatives among stakeholders for addressing environmental sustainability issues”. This leadership also has to look at the process next to the content. The collaborative leadership has to ensure that the right parties are involved, that the collaboration is constantly
fuelled and that the partnership makes enough progress. Was/is the leadership strong enough in the case of Lonneker Park? Not really, I am afraid. Although some actors are clearly trying to lead the way, overall there is too little attention for the process of collaborating. The focus is mostly on the content. But where I identified earlier the risk of the process oppressing the content, here it is more like the opposite: the partnership is more concerned with the content and the partnership itself is lacking enough attention. The partnership would have valued more attention for the organization itself, division of roles, taking care of finances, etc.

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