

Big dreams and small steps: Understanding regional policy networks and what they achieve

Regional networks have been established across Europe to help improve the delivery of public services. But how effective are these networks at fostering innovation? Nicolette van Gestel and Sanne Grotenbreg present findings from a study of regional networks involved in labour market policy in the Netherlands. They show that despite a variety of partnerships being established, new and bold solutions to complex problems remain scarce.

In many western countries there are high expectations of regional networks in policy areas as diverse as healthcare, energy supply or security. In such regional networks, government is supposed to develop partnerships with private and non-profit parties, to develop solutions to societal problems that have broad support and commitment. Generally speaking, both public and private actors often recognise that they need each other to achieve their goals. But this idea does not generate success by itself. Sometimes actors tend to focus on their own advantage when participating in networks, and are not very efficient nor effective in working together.

In a [recent study](#), we examine regional networks involved in labour market policy. Governments, employers, trade unions, clients and educational organisations are jointly looking for solutions to persistent problems, such as a discrepancy between vacancies and job seekers, and the lack of job opportunities for people with mental or physical disabilities. In other words, they need to solve problems of mismatch and inequality that have increased further during the Covid-19 crisis. Decentralisation and regional co-operation should, in principle, ensure more integrated and efficient public services, but also engender creative solutions that go beyond existing policy frameworks.

We examine five regional networks for labour market policy in the Netherlands. Based on existing knowledge in the field, we distinguish between ‘small’ innovations, such as public organisations that offer services together (the one-stop shop idea) and ‘wide’ innovations, where truly new solutions are developed collaboratively to solve persistent problems.

Such solutions, for example, might be to connect labour market policy with related fields such as healthcare and social policy, to assist outsiders from the labour market with ‘holistic services’ to get a sustainable job. Or, to combine labour market policy with economic and technological innovation and education, to help businesses and workers transfer to new jobs with different job requirements (for instance in energy transition or digital transformation).

What is striking from our research is that such broader and creative innovations are considered important, but in practice mainly small steps are taken. We find that collaboration in regional networks and its impact is still modest, and innovation in the form of small steps is limited to one region and a few local initiatives.

It turns out that decentralisation to regional networks is not a simple shift from top-down policy to a bottom-up approach, often in a context of austerity. Interestingly, the limited results are not due to the unwillingness of actors in the region to cooperate, but to structural barriers they face. Contrary to popular assumptions of a declining nation state, our study points to the need for national government to take even more responsibility to create conditions for regional policy success. Well-thought-out institutional and financial frameworks are needed to increase both small and wide innovation by regional networks. It requires multilevel governance to develop these frameworks and strategic leadership – not least from politicians in different roles.

By identifying barriers and enablers for network innovations in the public sector, we hope our research will, in turn, provide small steps to help facilitate wide innovations that create public value, as well as pointing towards a future research agenda.

For more information, see the authors’ accompanying paper in [Policy & Politics](#). This article is part of a series on strategic management of the transition to public sector co-creation, hosted at the [Policy & Politics blog](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Omar Flores](#) on [Unsplash](#)
