Daring decisions and representative municipal democracy: an exploration within the new river management in the Netherlands

Conference Paper

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1.   Introduction

River management in the Netherlands has always been focused on strengthening and raising dykes to protect the low-lying polder areas against flooding. This is now generally regarded as insufficient. Climate change will induce higher discharge volumes, and confining the rivers between ever-higher dykes will only augment risks. The river management paradigm has therefore shifted towards 'room for rivers', i.e. to give the rivers more space to drain the excess waters (Van Stokkom *et al*., 2005; Wiering en Arts, 2006).

The great question now is whether the idea of creating more room-for-rivers should be interpreted in a strictly technical and sectoral sense or whether it should also offer opportunities to additional societal aims such as nature development, recreational objectives, cultural revival and economic development. In the former approach, the river management authority searches for sets of measures that are implementable within its institutional domain, e.g. lowering of groynes or removing obstacles in floodplains (see PKB, 2006). In the alternative approach, a much wider set of options is considered, including those that may act as economic drivers to alleviate government budget constraints, such as (flood-adapted) housing along (possibly relocated) dykes. 'Landscape quality' is the usual catchword for this vision.

The landscape quality approach constitutes a case of transition management (Rotmans, 2003), because it requires a wholly new spirit and practice of collaboration of public and private parties, including the river authority, sand and clay excavation corporations, knowledge brokers, real estate developers, nature conservation agencies and last but not least the riverine municipalities, who will not only have to passively adapt their zoning plans to national demands but to involve themselves in the creative search for new 'win-win' opportunities.

Transition management is often driven by informal groups of visionary key actors, and the case study that this paper will present is no exception. One day or another, however, the cross-over has to be made from the visionary phase to include the municipalities in the process. It is on this involvement that the present paper will focus. It is argued that a certain element of 'daring' in the decision-making process is needed in order to mediate between the spirit of transition management and the municipal political climate.

The objective of this paper is to explore the concept of daring decision-making its limitations and potentials for river management in the municipal administrative context. First, this paper will briefly position the concept of daring decision-making in the academic discussion on deliberative and representative concepts of democracy.
Second, the efforts to create a conceptual framework for daring decision making and empirically ground it in qualitative research will be described. In this framework, the

conditions for daring political decision making are further explained. Then a brief description of the project WaalWeelde, being a typical case of transition management, is given. In the last section, the question whether this form of river management is actually stimulating daring municipal decisions, is explored. The discussion will relate some of the empirical findings in the research to elements in the political philosophy of Rousseau, who distinguishes between the *general will* and the *will of all*.

2.   Relating daring decision-making to current concepts of democracy

The theoretical discussion on western democracy centers on 'deliberative' and 'representative' interpretations of democracy. In a most extreme view the representative theory is based on the idea that political elites compete for votes of the public similarly to how shopkeepers compete for customers. The public decides who is allowed to govern, but further political decisions are made within professional, or 'elite', circles. These elite are then supposed to find a balance between short term and particularistic interests versus the long-term and collective goods. These decisions must then be explained to the elected councils and the public. Deliberative democracy theorists argue that the representative interpretation lacks a basic principle of democracy, inspired by the normative claim that citizens should be able to co-determine the specific political decisions that affect their lives (Renn, Webler & Wiedermann, 1995 p.21).

In the Netherlands, this interpretation of democracy has been gaining popularity throughout the 1990's. In general, two basic forms of deliberative democracy can be identified. The first is a *non-selective deliberation* which involves a public participation with possibly all members of society. The second form can be described as a *selective deliberation*, in which specific stakeholders are invited to participate in the decision-making process.

The danger in all forms and styles of democratic decision-making, especially on the municipal level, could be the tendency to solely focus on short term aspects. In an attempt to secure their position, elites might be fixed on keeping the vote of the public and therefore focus their policies on the short term interests of the people. Stakeholders that are invited in the decision-making process might use this phenomenon in order to set the agenda according to their own short-term needs. It is often seen that projects experience difficulties in involving all parties and therefore lack the necessary public legitimacy (van Stokkom, 2006 p.10). But even if projects are focused on long term public good, these majority interests can be effectively blocked by persistent minority groups that vigorously promote and defend their own short term interests. This obviously useful element of checks and balances in a democracy can in some cases have a negative impact on innovative decisions-making.

The Dutch municipal structure is largely composed out of a mixture of representative and deliberative institutional arrangements, in which short-term interests tend to dominate. In the first and primary arrangement the administrator is confronted by a municipal electorate and a municipal council that may often be manipulated to some extent but hardly ever emanates an invitation to visionary, long-term decisions. In the deliberative structure the administrator is confronted with citizens or local interest groups for which basically the same applies. A change in this composition is needed in order to provide a basis for visionary, long-term decisions.

In the case of WaalWeelde, municipal administrators that take part in the project have a key role in the pivotal moment of connecting the visionary transition-arena with the political culture and structure of the municipality. In order to mediate between the transition-arena, with it's long term perspective and experimental character, and the conditions of the political

domain in which short term results and public support are dominant, a certain element of *'daring'* within the democratic context is needed.

The question explored in the paper therefore is: how do municipal administrators manage to bring an element of *'daring democracy'* about river management into this representative and deliberative municipal context, and how may visionary outsiders stimulate daring municipal decisions. The concept of daring democracy refers to daring planning and decision-making, within the bounds of the foundational principles and rules of democracy.

3.   Methods

The first stage of the ongoing research was devoted to understanding the concept of daring decision making, through efforts of linking theory to practice. A conceptual exploration of existing literature could form the basis for an *outsider's* (*'etic'* in anthropological terms) view on daring decision-making. Qualitative empirical research methods were then used to ground these theoretical ideas in the every day practice of municipal administrators and thus combine the *etic* notions with *emic (or insider's)* views.

Through strategic sampling, six reputedly *'daring'* administrators and one civil servant, working outside the context of the WaalWeelde project, were found. Based on open interviews with these administrators of different municipalities in the Netherlands an initial conceptualisation of daring decision making could be formed. In these interviews, administrators could discuss the issues of daring decision-making and its conditions and constraints, in the in the light of their own projects. The political process and the different parties that play an important role were largely described.

The interviews were transcribed and processed with the text analysis programme MAXQDA. In this analysing phase, the specific procedure of grouping coded segments in order to distinguish certain categories is done by myself as well as two others (a fellow social scientist and a philosopher). The categories that were created independently showed an almost complete overlap. With these intensive coding and analysing procedures a first step in forming a model for daring decision making is explored. Expert rounds are being held in order to test it and expand it further.

The model thus constitutes an exploratory but empirically grounded definition of daring decision making as well as a first description of the conditions needed in order to achieve such decisions. A provisional version of the model is presented below.

4.   Conceptualising daring decision-making

The conceptual model for daring decision-making is depicted in two figures. The first will give an insight in what is meant by daring decisions, based on the data that was gathered. It provides us with a grounded definition of the concept. The second figure will give an overview of the conditions that are needed for daring decision-making processes.
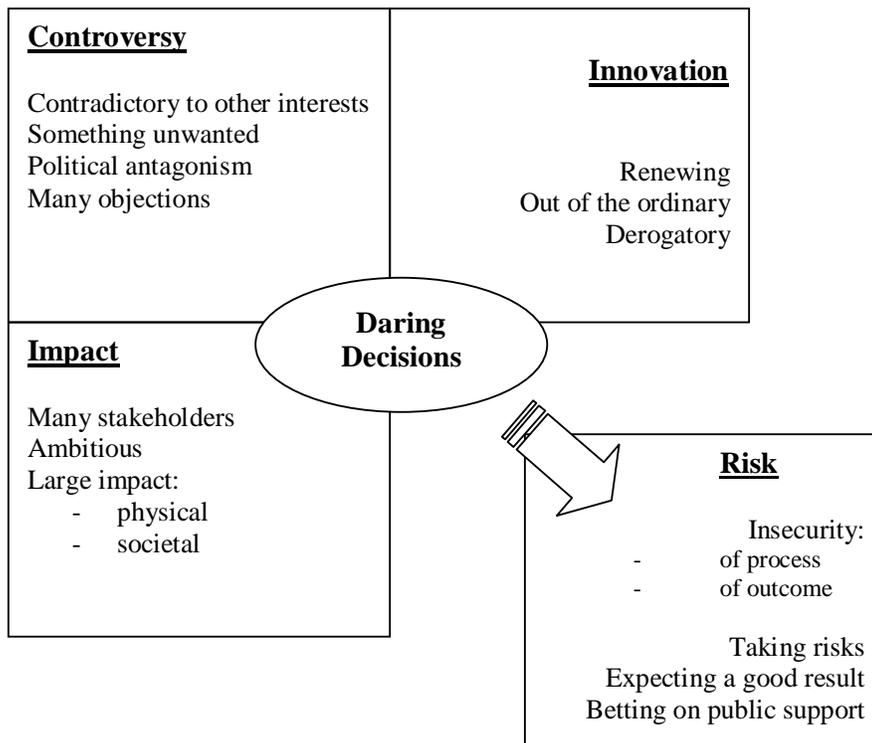
4.1   What is daring decision-making?

> "You see, the every-day expected policy has nothing to do with daring decision-making. But something that changes the course, ambitious...a substantial change...Something that will make you sweat, that is daring decision-making…It contains risk."
>
> (Dutch municipal administrator in interview, July 2007)

In the analysis of the interviews, the answers to the question on defining daring decision-making can be grouped into four major categories that summarise the different elements of daring decisions. These dimensions are provisionally depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1: four elements of daring decision-making

Controversy

Contradictory to other interests
Something unwanted
Political antagonism
Many objections

Innovation

Renewing
Out of the ordinary
Derogatory

Impact

Many stakeholders
Ambitious
Large impact:
- physical
- societal

Daring Decisions

Risk

Insecurity:
- of process
- of outcome

Taking risks
Expecting a good result
Betting on public support

The elements of controversy and innovation are linked to some extend. Daring decisions often are contradictory to other interests, because some or a lot of people will object them or

because they don't fit the political agenda and corresponding budget. This agenda is often focussed on business as usual and ideas or policy proposals that are innovative or derogatory are conflicting with such an agenda:

> 'What you see in daily practice is business as usual. Passports, making sure children can go to school, keeping the streets clean… Everything different from these tasks; that has a perspective of development… that is daring decision-making.'

> (Municipal civil servant, June 2007*)*

It needs to be emphasised that innovative or derogatory ideas can be both positive and negative and therefore daring decision-making is obviously not intrinsically good. The American war in Iraq is a clear case in point.

Another element of daring decisions can be the impact of the project that is proposed. This has to do with the number of people that are involved or affected and the high financial consequences it can have:

> "You should not forget that daring decisions often have a great physical impact! And the question is; who is going to pay for it. Then it is daring decision-making. If the yearly financial budget is always balanced out with all the normal things a municipality has to do, what amount of money do you dare to set aside for such a project?"

> (Municipal civil servant, June 2007)

But it has also to do with the great impact it can have on the society of a municipality or its physical environment. This was for instance described during an interview, in a discussion on the public resistance against the building of a trailer park:

> These are things that nobody wants, I can understand that. And then the council meeting is overcrowded... But you shouldn't be afraid of that, because a lot of people are eventually happy that it will not be built in their street.
> (Municipal administrator, May 2007)

All characteristics mentioned above entail a certain risk in initiating these processes of daring decisions. Risk seems to be the element of denotation in the concept. Daring decisions always have an element of risk, whether they are either controversial, innovative, having a high impact or a combination of the three other elements.

In daring decisions the outcome of the policy-making process is unclear, it is unknown if there is any support, both in politics and in society and it is uncertain if this support will eventually develop. One of the interviewees described it as follows:

> 'You don't know what the outcome will be...and you must have the courage to enter this process and let it go its way. Along the way you try to intervene but you never know how it will work out. We are used to think in timeframes and schematics but in daring decisions you must let these go....'

In this process of a daring decision the administrator has to cope with the insecurity of whether or not he will get support for his ideas. The way to do this seems to be a matter of trust:

> 'If you start walking, then the path you walk on will come to existence as well. My policy now has a strong public support but if I would have asked people for their support when I started it, a few years ago, I probably wouldn't have gotten it. Now I do, because you implement it. It's like the chicken and the egg…'

In another interview this point is even stronger suggested. Trust in your self and in the proposed policy has, in this case, to do with being the representative of the people and therefore representing their best interests.

'…That is the point, because you know what people want. It is just that they don't trust that it is possible to reach what they want in this way. So if you reach it anyway then you will get the public support, I am convinced of that.'

Daring decisions, in the view of individual municipal administrators are decisions that are risky to make, often have an innovative character, with a high impact on society or its environment and therefore bring forth a certain controversy.
Daring decision-making can therefore be, informally, defined as making decisions whilst betting on public and political support.
A more formal definition of the concept, linking the empirical findings to theoretical concepts as they are found in the political philosophy of Rousseau (1968), can be found in the discussion. First an overview of the conditions needed for daring decision-making is given in the following section.

4.2   Conditions for daring decision-making

What is needed in order to bring a daring idea to the table and make sure that it survives the process of decision-making from policy-proposal to implementation? The answers to this question that were received in the interviews were grouped in specific categories that describe the conditions for daring decision making, found in Figure 2.
The figure is still provisional and needs further reflection and research, but can form the basis for further elaboration on best practises for daring decision-making processes in municipal governments.

Figure 2: conditions for daring decision-making
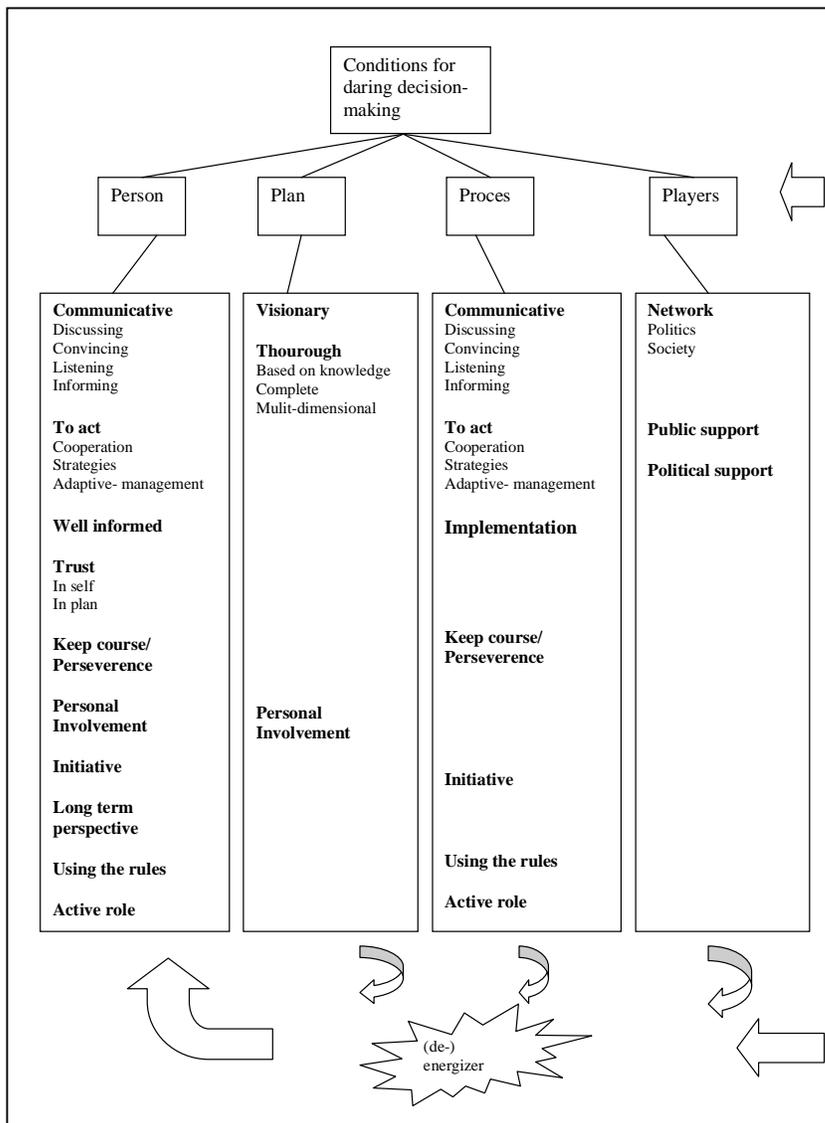
4.2.1 Person, plan process and players

The process of daring decision-making can be categorized into four key-elements. These elements are closely interlinked. The first element is the person that wants to implement the daring idea. The second element is the plan in which this idea is described. The process from policy proposal to implementation is in itself an important element. And the last element can be found in the players that are in the process. The conditions for daring decision-making can be identified accordingly.

One of the most important elements according to the obtained data is the person behind the daring decision. To make a daring decision you need excellent communicative skills not only to inform and convince others of the proposed plans but also to listen and understand the different viewpoints and interests of all parties (players, as they are called here) involved.

In this light a second important skill can be identified. In the interviews it was emphasized that it is important to take action and not just talk about taking action. Therefore the person behind the plan i.e. the administrator must take the initiative in the process of decision-making. A skilled administrator knows how to cooperate with different players in the process and is strategic and adaptive to every situation, but always in such a way that it brings him closer to the ultimate goal. These players are both in the political realm (the municipal council, the provincial or national government) as well as in society (market parties, NGO's and the public).

In order to be successful in this process, the administrator must be very well informed on the subject of the daring decision. The proposed plan must also reflect this knowledge and express a visionary and multi-dimensional strategy. According to the administrators in the interviews it certainly helps when the person behind the plan can express a personal involvement with the plan.

In the process of decision-making the administrator will be confronted with many players. In the confrontation with the public and to some extend the municipal council, in which short-term and minority interests might dominate, the administrator must be able to keep a long term perspective. As it was described in the previous section, trust in the personal capabilities and in the proposed policy as well as the confidence that the policy will eventually receive public support, is very important. In the light of building public support it is essential to implement some small details of the plan in an early stadium in order to show the capability of achieving results.

Using the rules of the game in an attempt to influence the process of decision-making in favor of the proposed policy is a necessary skill in the confrontation with the political players in the process. In this confrontation the administrator must build and use his network both in society and in politics.

It needs to be emphasised that this initial figure is solely based on the interviews with reputedly daring municipal administrators. It is therefore strongly focussed on the administrator as an individual party who, together with a policy proposal, is generating the energy needed in such a process. With this, it lacks to describe processes of daring decisions, based on cooperation, group processes or other entities such as market parties, NGO's or knowledge institutions, that take the initiative and thus can generate the energy that is needed. Furthermore it says little of the relations between the described categories and their mutual influences. These relationships and the possibilities for generating the necessary energy in the decision making process are, for the moment, provisionally marked by the arrows in the figure.

5.   The WaalWeelde project

The new river management paradigm 'room for the river' has become the basis for the latest government proposals on river management policies. So far, possible solutions are searched within the institutional domain of the water management authority. In case of the river Waal these measures boil down to an integral lowering of the existing groynes. This strictly technical approach is effective in creating room for the river, but without any value for landscape quality, which was also one of the main issues of the new river policy.

The project 'WaalWeelde', initiated in the fall of 2006 by a small but visionary group, uses an alternative approach which considers a much wider set of options in a search for a combination of safety measures, enhancement of landscape quality and economic activity. The project creates a 'transition arena' (practically organized in so-called 'clusters' of four municipalities each) in which leaders of neighboring riverine municipalities are working together with a wide range of different stakeholders and interest groups, ranging from nature conservationists to real estate developers. The focus is on public-private cooperation in finding innovative solutions for water management. These clusters are practically supported in their activities by a team of facilitators and receive scientific support, for instance in the form of calculations on the effects of plans on the water flow or information on strategies of participation processes with the public.

The WaalWeelde approach is innovative in many aspects. First of all because of its focus on inter-municipal cooperation in creating innovative plans for river-management. Clusters of neighboring municipalities that have a history of ignoring or even competing with each other are now working together, creating linkages both alongside and across the river.

A strong focus is on economic drivers that can alleviate budget constraints for sustainable solutions, such as adaptive building in floodplains, sand and clay excavation and recreational functions. In these projects the linkages between safety, landscape quality and economic activity can be combined.

In a search for innovative ideas, WaalWeelde aims to work with a bottom up approach. Various stakeholders are being invited to join in the process. Apart form this *selective deliberation*, WaalWeelde tries to involve the public directly in the process. A special focus here is on an experiment of *non-selective deliberation* with an interactive internet forum that is used as a channel through which information about new ideas and possible projects is spread and a public debate about the pros and cons on these projects can be held. In combinations with various public meetings, the internet-experiment aims to be an extension of the transition-arena in order to involve the electorate and council of the different municipalities, in the process.

Furthermore, WaalWeelde is trying to facilitate municipal leaders in the pivotal moment of conveying the ideas and visions of the transition-arena into the municipality. The difficult task of providing information to other parties and discussions with opponents in the municipal council as well as in society is necessary to create susceptibility for the development of innovative ideas and the gaining of both public and political support. One of the strategies here is the so-called council conference in which the councils of different municipalities are being invited to share in the ideas and processes of the WaalWeelde project.

6.   Does this approach help fulfil the conditions for daring decision-making?

Before answering the question whether the WaalWeelde approach is helping to fulfil the conditions for daring decision-making, first an overview of the results of the project until now is given. In the course of one year, WaalWeelde has resulted in a multitude of ideas and plans for spatial developments aimed at combining 'room for the river' with spatial quality. These plans were made on the local and regional level in a cooperation of neighboring municipalities, market parties and interest groups and have both long-term and short-term characteristics. The aim is to implement and realize short term characteristics as soon as possible, in order to create more public involvement and possible support for the long-term measures.

On the national level, a strong campaign in favor of the project has been initiated. The Dutch government has been made aware of the project and the benefits it can have as an alternative for the traditional technical approach. The first steps have been taken in creating policy opportunities in the field of national and international rules and regulations that connect local needs with supra-local demands and can mandate local administrators to initiate daring plans in the municipalities. Efforts are being made to widen the possibilities for exchange of flora and fauna throughout the complete Waal-region in the light of the European Nature-2000 policy. Other efforts are focused on the extending of the permits for experimental building in floodplains from only a few experiment locations to the complete floodplain area of all the participating municipalities alongside the Waal.

With the first Council-Conference on the way and the development of new strategies for using the interactive website as a public forum, the first steps have been made in order to involve the different municipalities in the process.

Overviewing these results, one can easily conclude that a lot has happened in one year. Therefore it can be said that, although the outcome and rate of success are at this time unclear, the project WaalWeelde has a stimulating effect on policy makers and policy making in the area of water-management along the river Waal.

In a first effort to relate the conditions for daring decision-making, as found in the interviews with individual daring administrators, with the practical activities of WaalWeelde in the last year, it appears that most efforts have been focused on what can be found in figure 2 under *Plan*, *Process* and *Players*.

As it was described above, WaalWeelde tries to create thorough plans that are complete, based on existing knowledge and have both a short-term and long-term timeframe. These different time-frames are used in an effort to be able to realize short-term implementation as a part of the decision-making process. Furthermore the project takes many efforts in being communicative towards all the parties in the process. In the efforts to create the above mentioned policy opportunities the element of using the rules is found. With this, the networks in politics and society are being addressed.

When considering the model for conditions of daring decision-making it can be concluded that the personal characteristics of key-figures, in the case of the model this is the public administrator, are of great importance. Remarkably, WaalWeelde has shown very little focus on these personal conditions, found in the model in the first category. It is yet unclear whether in a group process such as WaalWeelde this key-role necessarily falls upon the public administrator, or can also be fulfilled by others that may inspire the process. Although it is hoped that this may be the case, energy and capacity problems may crop up.

7. Discussion

Daring decision-making, in the case of the individual municipal administrator seems risky business. The outcome of the policy-making process is unclear, it is unknown if there is any support, both in politics and in society and it is uncertain if this support will eventually develop. Based on this, daring decision-making can be defined, informally, as making decisions whilst betting on future public- and political support.
Looking at the quotes from the interviews described above, we can possibly deduct that public administrators of the daring type argue that confidence in yourself and the proposed policy as being truly representative of the people's will, is the best way to deal with this insecurity.

Based on the data obtained so far combined with theoretical insights, a first attempt of a more formal definition can be formulated, exploring the philosophical definitions of *the general will* and the *will of all*, as they are found in the work of Rousseau (1968). In his Social Contract, Rousseau distinguishes between the general will, being an intrinsic will in society as a whole and in all its members, and the will of all which is the aggregation of all individual needs. This distinction might also be found in the conflicting relation of short-term versus long-term perspectives in present day society and specifically with the problems of river management. Although every individual citizen will, to some extent, understand and acknowledge the general will (e.g. in the form of a retention area that increases the safety of the river-area), he or she will not be able to make decisions based on this general will (some individual's house might be located exactly in this area). The task to make such decisions in a democracy falls upon the democratically chosen representatives of the people. Municipal administrators must have the long term vision in order to pursue the general will as representative of the people, who are mostly preoccupied with the pursuit of their own short-term, individual interests.

It is assumed in this paper that, in order to bring an element of daring democracy into the municipal decision-making context which consists of both representative and deliberative elements, this long term vision (and in Rousseau's terms: the representation of the general will) is crucial.

Such a statement may raise various questions. How, for instance, does this relate to a process such as WaalWeelde? Can we extend the model for daring decisions based on the individual daring administrators that were interviewed to the practice of WaalWeelde where public administrators find themselves in a process of making plans together with many parties? Is this transition arena, composed out of various stakeholders within society, a possible representation of the general will? And if so, who is responsible for making sure that it does generate plans that strive to achieve the general will? In order to answer these important questions, further research and scientific debate on this matter is needed.

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