Who does influence decision making in our cities?

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Ladies and gentlemen
Who does influence decision making in our cities?

There is a very wise Dutch saying which applies to this question:

"One fool can ask more than a thousand wise men can answer".

Also, I might add, only a fool will try to answer such a question.

And to make things worse: in the programme leaflet an reference is made to my all time political science hero, Robert Dahl and his classical text: "Who Governs?"

Dahl was wise enough to answer his question for just one city, New Haven, Connecticut, and he used 384 words.

I am supposed to answer this question in 20 minutes, for not one but for the European cities.
I must clearly be a fool, if not an idiot, to try and do so.

And now I have diagnosed myself as a fool, let's act like one:
I will not try to answer the question but, very much like the proverbial fool, just ask a few extra questions on which a bunch of wise young Rumanians may test their intellectual capacities.

Who does influence decision making in our cities? The academically correct answer would probably be: "**It depends**." Not very exciting, I grant you that. And the logical follow-up question would be:
"On what does it depend?"

And a more philosophical follow-up question is also interesting:
"Why do you want to know this; what's the relevance?"

Let's try and work with these questions.

If we try to present an overview of those who influence decision making in our cities the following actors seem to appear everywhere in Europe:

First three politically correct answers:
The citizens, who, by exercising their right to vote, determine the composition of local councils.
The elected politicians, who, by using their electoral mandate, form local governments and majority platforms.
The local executives, who, by using their leading position and skills, formulate and implement concrete policies.

Next, somewhat more contested:
The local civil servants, who, by using their superior knowledge impose their views and agenda's on the politicians, who continue to believe that they are in control.

The media, who, claiming to have a special responsibility to critically follow the local government, can break or make a politician. Who can have an enormous influence on the political agenda.

Or, even more frightening, the local economic elite, who can use its financial and economic power as an implicit blackmail instrument.

These are some of the key players and there is nothing new about this: Dahl has vividly described these actors in New Haven

And, since he was a democratic optimist when he wrote "Who Governs", he added as a source of hope yet another actor: the civil society, or, as he preferred to call it: pluralist society.
In a way, he paved the ground for modern day theories of governance, by stressing the dependence of the local government on fruitful cooperation with civil society organisations.

And this brings us to the most modern answer to our question: Decision making is predominantly determined in networks of interdependent partners, or shareholders, among which the local government.

But this only makes the circle round: which partners, in which division of power, under which circumstances? It brings us back to the second question: **on what conditions does this functioning of policy networks depend?**

One of these conditions had already been mentioned: the **pluralist** nature of local society. In his later work Dahl has focused on this condition and this brought him to much more critical analyses of democracy in the western world. Pluralism is not a guaranteed condition. Often certain categories of society do not enter into the pluralist dynamics. The struggle for political equality by the black

community in the United States during the sixties is just one example of this. Maybe the present day struggle of immigrant groups to become respected partners in our societies is a more up to date example. Think about the Moroccan communities in our country, or maybe also about the Roma communities in Central Europe.

Network-based forms of local governance only function well under the condition of pluralism. Or, to use a more modern word, under the condition of a vital civil society.

Another logical condition is obviously the scope of local decision making: how much **autonomy** is granted to local governance? The official ideology in most of our systems is decentralist, stressing the need to have a well-developed layer of local governance. But how decentral is practice? There are many examples of efforts of national governments to limit and curtail local governments, to reshape them into implementing agencies for national policies.

There are many more conditions but I want to finish this issue with mentioning just two more:

The first is the **financial capacity** of local government. A strongly autonomous local government without an adequate budget is probably worse off than a more dependent local government with ample means. The first is impotent, unable to perform, the latter can at least perform its obligatory tasks and can hope to use the margins of discretion to give it an added local relevance.

The final condition I want to mention is the **legitimacy** of local government. Is the local political system a respected and trusted source of public well being? Or is it seen as incapable, not representative, out off touch with local society and its citizens? Or is it seen as a corrupted continuation of the old power structure during the communist period?

But were does all this bring us? Are we closer now to answering the question about the influence on local policy making? Not much, I would say.

We now know, with a little bit more precision, that it is probably impossible to formulate a general answer to this question.
We also know that each city may have a different combination of actors and conditions.
So why do we bother? If it is all contingent, dependent on sets of actors and sets of conditions, why don't we then accept it as something as unpredictable as the weather in the Netherlands?

This brings us to the most relevant question: why do we want to know who is most influential in local decision making?

Obviously there is the interest of <u>the opportunistic actor</u> who wants to determine his strategies;
The lobbyist, who wants to select his targets;
The political activist who wants to decide who his opponents and allies might be;
Or the businessman, the contractor, who wants to have an overview of all interested parties involved.

A legitimate purpose, nothing wrong with that. Political science can be of use for political strategists.

But I want to select a different angle.
<u>What does this overview of decision making actors mean for the quality of our local democracy?</u>

Since the emergence of network theories and, somewhat later, theories of governance, the issue of democracy is high on the agenda again.
Most commentators agree that there is at least a tension between the empirical developments around decision making and the norms and practices of our democratic system, based on the principles of representation.

I will outline a few of the consequences of this tension.

1. If decision making is done in <u>horizontal networks</u>, in which the position of <u>politics is not necessary dominant</u>, what does this mean for the primacy of politics in the public domain? And what consequences will this have for the popular respect for politics?
   Already we witness how the electorate distances itself from traditional politics. One can see this in the relatively low turnout figures for local elections and in the survey data which show a constant decrease of trust in politicians.
   To formulate it sharply: When politicians act in accordance with the principles of network governance, they have to release their claim on a dominant position. They will have to accept the outcomes of network decision making, <u>because of the qualities of the process, not because of the quality of the decision.</u>

   Will the public understand and accept this? Difficult, difficult ……
   How easy will it be for populists to crucify traditional politics as having lost touch with the citizens? Will the media be willing to accept this as normal practice or use it as an easy object of criticism.
   The answer for this is not simple: it will require forms of political communication in which the changed, more modest position of politics is clearly described, <u>without falling into forms of political defeatism</u>. Not an easy task, but the way in which president Obama seems to operate offers a perspective: he is able to mix vision and hope with realism and looking for partnerships.

2. If substantial power is exercised by non elected actors, how can our system of accountability be maintained?
One of the typical aspects of network governance is that the real decision makers are dependent on each other. No one is able to decide without substantial cooperation of at least a substantial part of the network of interested actors.

This implies that a decision nowadays has no longer a clear "owner". It is created in a group process of give and take. It can occur that no one is completely happy with the result, but most of them just satisfied.
This leaves us with a "lonely decision", unloved by its parents, accepted for its usability, without a true believer who wants to defend it.

But this defence is the essence of the control function of the representative body.
So not only is the council marginalised in the process of decision making, as I described before.
Even more than that: the process of accountability might be reduced to a bloodless unemotional exchange of views about the quality of the decision making process, without anyone defending the end result full heartedly.

3. The third tension concerns the roles of the public key actors in decision making.
If decision making is deviating substantially from the normative model of representative democracy, what behavioural consequences should this have for the traditional actors: executives, elected councillors and civil servants? Will new behavioural norms and codes be necessary?

Let's look at some possibilities.

To my opinion the changes needed for the executive are substantial but not impossible. They have to adapt their behaviour to the realities of decision making in horizontal networks. Play a more modest role and carefully use their resources.
This is not new for local executives; it is what they already often do. As experienced and full-time public managers, mayors and aldermen are accustomed to the realities of "negotiated results". Of accepting the limitations of local public governance and of the need of cooperation with private partners. So this networking and these dependencies are not new to them.
But what will have to change is the way in which they communicate on this. More focus on the diversity of interests at stake, more attention for the balancing between values and options, more appreciation of the dilemmatic nature of many local problems and of the complexities of dealing with these so-called "wicked problems".

A change of style and communication. Not without problems, but at the same time not undoable.

Most problematic is the situation of the <u>elected councillors</u>. For them, the shift from substance to process may be very hard to make. A local politician is elected on a substantial platform, formulating choices and decisions to be made. Voters are not very much interested in the quality of the process of decision making. They want to see that their councillors produce the results which they promised during the elections.

So a more modest attitude, focussing on the process of societal cooperation may be the right answer to the decision making circumstances of this time. It is, however, certainly not an answer to the desires of their electorate.

There is much reason for pessimism here. In my research throughout Europe, I have often seen that local councillors are rather unwilling to accept these realities of network decision making. And as a consequence, may of them are rather unwilling to participate in experiments with new forms of democracy, more suited to the realities of today.

Also the uncertainty about a possible new role for elected politicians gives reasons for pessimism. This new role will have to be defined on the crossroads of leadership, representation and responsiveness. It will be quite a challenge to find a balance
-        between leadership and the unable to dominate the public domain,
-        or between representation and the decision making in semi-closed networks,
-        or between responsiveness and compromise.

It is like planning to go to Rome, ending in Florence and defending it by saying that is was a nice trip.

The new kind of leadership which has to be invented by local politicians has to be
(1)   substantial, promising concrete results, but at the same time realistic, recognising the difficulties of getting these results.
(2)   It will have to be oriented on a proper process of decision making, without boring the electorate with lengthy negotiations,
(3)   The new leadership will have to present strong visions of a better future, while at the same time being open to the existence of challenging other visions and the possibilities of cooperation.
(4)   And most of all, a local leader will have to be open and inviting to societal cooperation, to an active civil society, even at the costs of

not being able to fully realise the official goals of his or her political party.

AND ALL OF THIS WHITOUT LOOSING CREDIBILITY.

A difficult task for the political amateurs that local councillors often are. But may I, once more, point to Barack Obama and the way he is balancing these counteracting dimensions of leadership.

The last category, maybe the most relevant one for the audience present here, is that of the civil servants. Will they have to adopt new behavioural codes, new roles in decision making?
To my observation civil servants in Europe show a divided face in this.

It is clear that an important segment of the European local civil servants have already made huge steps in redefining their role.
In many local democratic experiments that I have studied, it were civil servants who initiated these experiments or, at least, played a huge role in implementing them.
Also quite a lot of local civil servants play the role of broker between interests in a very creative way. In doing so they can contribute substantially to the quality and success of network decision making.

But we have to be realistic. There is still this other face of the civil service, the face of bureaucracy, of fear of change and fear of the uncertainties implicit in network decision making. It is this fears which brings civil servants to seeking security in procedure and in an uncreative interpretation of loyalty. In doing so, they put the full burden of responsibility for public decision making on the shoulders of politicians, without at the same time helping them with challenging, controversial advice, counter opinions and contours of possible societal compromise. And that is how a creative civil servant should interpret loyalty: not as a stifling exercise in obedience, but as creative advising, using discussion rather than conformity as the most important tool of argumentation.

It is my hope that your stay here in Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, may stimulate you all in looking for your own interpretation of this role of public broker, innovator, and of creative assistant to a changing political leadership.