An ongoing, never-ending dance?

Dr. Nick Zonneveld, reflections and observations of the 'The politics of 'the region' in policy transformations' conference, June 30th, Utrecht

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At this conference, I approached the sessions and discussions through a lens of organization studies and broad prosperity. Throughout the day, one central puzzle kept returning to my mind: **when should we zoom in, and when should we zoom out**? In other words, **what should be organized at which scale**?

Across the sessions, we saw many different regional networks addressing major societal challenges, including energy transition, health and social care, education, and many others. In each case, actors came together to work collaboratively in addressing complex problems.

Across all these contributions, I observed a great deal of what at first glance appeared to be chaos. Or perhaps not chaos, but rather a growing awareness of what we still do not know, and of the mechanisms that may be at work. I would like to highlight five forms of this productive uncertainty.

1. What is place in the first place?
There is still considerable conceptual ambiguity. What exactly do we mean by place? What constitutes a region? What makes a region a region, and *would we even recognize one if we saw it*?

Alongside this conceptual uncertainty, there is also administrative uncertainty. We work with many different regional classifications and boundaries. Is this diversity a strength or a weakness? Should we strive for greater uniformity, or should regions remain tailored to the specific issue at hand? Government often benefits from standardization, whereas practice may require flexibility and context-specific arrangements.

2. Where is the organization in this discussion?
Many of today's conversations focused on regions and networks, but *organizations themselves sometimes seemed to disappear from view*. Regions bring together organizations of very different sizes and capacities: hospitals, health insurers, municipalities, general practitioner practices, and many others.

One example that stayed with me was an alderman who wanted to meet with the director of a health insurer, but instead ended up speaking with an account manager – and was genuinely disappointed. This illustrates that organizations are not monolithic actors; they participate through individuals occupying different roles and levels of authority.

Organizations also participate in *multiple* networks simultaneously. Is this an indication of overload, or is it perfectly fine, provided that different people represent the organization in different networks? And does an executive board need a complete overview of all the networks in which its organization participates? These organizational questions deserve much more attention.

3. To what extent is a region dynamic?
Perhaps we should think of regions as *living organisms*. Some regions merge, others split into sub-regions. Actors enter and leave, they come and go. Boundaries evolve over time.

Should we see this dynamism as an inherent characteristic of networks, something we should embrace, or is there a need for greater steering and stability? This raises important questions about how much fluidity regions can accommodate while remaining effective.

4. How do regions interact with one another?
Drawing a boundary around one region inevitably has consequences elsewhere. The formation or strengthening of one region may create fragmentation in another.

This reminded me of Walter Leutz's Third Law of Integration*: "Your integration is my fragmentation."* Regional governance is therefore never confined to a single region; it always has implications beyond its own borders.

5. Are regions a gateway to practice – or more?
To what extent are regions genuinely helping practice, and to what extent are they primarily a way of *structuring a highly complex reality from above*?

Are we creating regions as top-down governance arrangements, or do they emerge from bottom-up collaboration among practitioners? And perhaps most importantly: to what extent does practice itself actually benefit from these regional structures?

To conclude
Today's conference has made an important contribution to addressing the questions above. It has enriched our theoretical understanding of regions and place, while also helping us identify possible underlying mechanisms that shape regional governance.

Looking ahead, I believe an important direction for future research is to focus even more explicitly on the actors themselves. How do individuals and organizations actively shape, sustain, and activate regions? Regions do not simply exist; they are continuously created and recreated through the actions and interactions of those who participate in them.

So, let me end where I began: Is there such a thing as an optimal way of organizing societal challenges at exactly the right scale? Or are we witnessing an *ongoing, never-ending dance between scaling up and scaling down*? Perhaps it is not about finding the perfect scale at all. Perhaps it is about learning to navigate what is, inevitably, *a constant suboptimal situation*.