

# The Role of Regional Cooperation in Area Development: The case of Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg

Master Thesis

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## Abstract

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This thesis investigates how regional cooperation can enhance the implementation of area development in the Netherlands by comparing the cases of Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg. These two developments represent different planning regimes: Leidsche Rijn emerged during the centrally coordinated VINEX era, while Rijnenburg unfolds in a fragmented, decentralized governance context shaped by contemporary NOVEX policy. The study adopts a qualitative methodology combining document analysis and stakeholder interviews, guided by an analytical framework focused on conditions, implementation, and steering.

The findings show that regional cooperation, defined as a governance approach in which public and private actors coordinate across administrative boundaries to align goals and resources, was crucial to the success of Leidsche Rijn. In contrast, Rijnenburg struggles to establish such cooperation due to unclear institutional roles, fragmented land ownership, and a lack of shared narrative and steering authority. A key barrier is the unresolved development of the Merwede line, a critical infrastructure condition. Moreover, while national involvement is needed, its precise role remains undefined.

The thesis concludes that regional cooperation is essential but not automatically achieved; it must be actively configured over time. The analytical framework proves useful for assessing regional governance but requires further testing in other cases to validate its broader applicability.

**Key words:** Area development, governance, regional cooperation, Leidsche Rijn, Rijnenburg

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# Summary of research

This thesis examines how regional cooperation can support the implementation of large-scale area development in the Netherlands. It focuses on the changing institutional conditions under which such projects take place. While developments like Leidsche Rijn were implemented during the centrally coordinated VINEX era, current projects such as Rijnenburg must navigate a more fragmented, decentralized planning environment with fewer formal mechanisms for alignment and coordination (Steenbergen, 2022; Buitelaar, 2023).

The central research question is how regional cooperation contributes to the implementation of area development, and what lessons can be drawn from Leidsche Rijn for Rijnenburg. To explore this, the thesis develops a governance framework based on the literature of Verheul et al. ((Verheul et al., 2019), Hooghe and Marks (Hooghe & Marks, 2003) and Stoker ((Stoker, 1998). The framework is based on three core dimensions: conditions (willingness, ability, and commitment), implementation (narratives, actors, and resources), and steering (the ways in which coordination and decision-making are sustained over time). This framework is applied through a comparative case study supported by document analysis and nine semi-structured interviews with public officials, developers, and regional authorities.

The case of Leidsche Rijn illustrates how strong institutional arrangements, formal regional collaboration through the 'Bestuur Regio Utrecht' (BRU), and national policy instruments under the VINEX program enabled coherent and timely implementation. Success was driven by clear spatial narratives, a stable actor network, and secured institutional and financial resources (Verheul et al., 2019; Buitelaar et al., 2025). The presence of strategic public leadership, joint ventures with private developers, and integrated design governance helped sustain momentum throughout the process.

Rijnenburg, by contrast, reflects the challenges of implementation under a decentralized regime. Although willingness is present among all major actors, including the municipality, province, developers, national government, and waterboard, the development lacks a shared governance structure, decisive leadership, and infrastructural certainty. The national government has not yet taken a clear position, and the proposed 'Merwedelijn', a public transport connection viewed as a precondition for development, remains uncertain and unfounded (Respondents 3, 5, 6, 7, 2025; Buitelaar et al., 2025). Fragmented land ownership and minimal public land control further weaken the implementation capacity of the municipality (Steenbergen, 2022).

This study recommends four key institutional interventions to strengthen governance around Rijnenburg and help to set up a temporary regional cooperation. First, the municipality and province should formalize a Note of Principles to align interests and clarify conditions. Second, a dedicated project department, like that of Leidsche Rijn, should be established to coordinate across actors and timelines. Third, the role of market actors should be formalized, recognizing their growing influence in shaping spatial outcomes (Buitelaar et al., 2025). Fourth, the current governance vacuum must be addressed by reaching binding agreements among stakeholders, potentially with the national government stepping in as a co-decision-maker and infrastructure funder.

In line with governance theory (Stoker, 1998; Hooghe and Marks, 2003), this thesis concludes that successful area development now depends less on hierarchy and more on institutional adaptability, actor alignment, and the capacity to build and maintain shared narratives. In an era of decentralization and competing spatial claims, regional cooperation remains indispensable, but must be actively constructed, institutionalized, and continuously steered.

I would like to dedicate this page as a thank you for my mentors, Tom Daamen and Marjolein Spaans, for their guidance, constructive feedback and encouragement throughout the entire graduation project. Your insights and critical reflections helped sharpen my thinking and improve the quality of this work.

I'm also grateful for the interviewees and experts who generously shared their time and experience with me. Your practical perspectives brought the research to life and grounded my findings in real-world dynamics.

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Thank you.

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# 1. Introduction

The Netherlands faces an escalating spatial challenge: how to provide sufficient, affordable, and sustainable housing while simultaneously addressing the pressures of climate adaptation, energy transition, and mobility. This complexity is most visible in area development, a form of integrated spatial planning that seeks to coordinate housing, infrastructure, and public space on a scale. However, as outlined by Steenbergen (2022) and Buitelaar et al. (2025), the implementation of such developments is increasingly constrained by fragmented decision-making, dispersed financial responsibilities, and conflicting stakeholder interests.

Municipalities are now at the forefront of spatial implementation but often lack the land positions, financial means, or institutional tools to act decisively. National coordination has diminished since the dissolution of the Ministry of VROM in 2010, and regional platforms like the Bestuur Regio Utrecht (BRU) have disappeared, leaving behind governance vacuums. These shifts create an institutional mismatch between the scale of the problem and the scale of decision-making authority, making long-term planning more difficult to initiate and sustain (Buitelaar, 2023; Van Steenbergen, 2022).

Against this backdrop, regional cooperation has been suggested as a promising governance response (Allmendinger et al., 2015). Defined in this thesis as the coordination of public and private actors across administrative boundaries to align objectives, pool resources, and steer complex projects, regional cooperation could address many of the structural barriers facing area development today. As Verheul et al. (2019) argue, successful transformation processes depend on the alignment of actors, narratives, and resources. Yet, cooperation alone is not sufficient, the question is how to construct it under decentralized and uncertain conditions, and how it can support implementation over time (Allmendinger et al., 2015).

This thesis investigates the question by examining two major area developments in the Utrecht region: Leidsche Rijn, one of the largest VINEX locations developed in the 1990s and early 2000s under a more centralized regime; and Rijnenburg, a current strategic reserve area whose future remains politically and institutionally uncertain. The study compares these cases not to idealize one over the other, but to learn how institutional arrangements, policy framing, and actor coalitions shape the viability and resilience of cooperation.



Figure 1: Map of Leidsche Rijn (De Volkskrant, 2024)

To do so, the study first explores the changing conditions of spatial governance in the Netherlands, tracing the shift from the VINEX era to the current NOVEX era. It then engages with the evolution of area development practice, from 'area development 1.0', rooted in public landownership and direct control, to 'area development 2.0', characterized by public-private dependence, decentralized responsibilities, and negotiated implementation (Buitelaar, 2023; De Zeeuw et al., 2020).

The core of the thesis is the development and application of an analytical framework to analyse the two cases. Structured around the dimensions of conditions, implementation, and steering, the framework draws on insights from Verheul et al. (2019), Hooghe and Marks (2003), and Stoker (1998), and is tested against expert feedback. By applying this lens to Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg, the study aims to uncover how regional cooperation is constructed, how it supports or constrains implementation, and what institutional interventions may be necessary to move from ambition to realization.

## 1.1 Problem statement: Fragmentation and conflict

As stated in the introduction, Rijnenburg is a striking example of stagnated area development plans. This is due to political disagreements, fragmented land ownership, competing spatial claims and financial discussions. It has become clear that establishing effective regional cooperation is significantly more difficult under the contemporary conditions (Van Steenbergen, 2022).

As Buijze (2013) notes in her case study of Rijnenburg, despite initial enthusiasm and sustainability ambitions, the development process quickly reached a deadlock due to financial disputes, fragmented land ownership, and a lack of alignment between public goals and private interests. Importantly, she highlights that public authorities often retain planning responsibility, while financial risk and implementation fall to fragmented and reluctant private actors. This mismatch has made it difficult to form the kind of collaborative governance arrangements needed for complex, sustainable urban projects (Buijze, 2013).

The case of Rijnenburg thus raises important questions about how area development can be successfully implemented under current institutional conditions. Why was regional cooperation more feasible during the VINEX era than it is now? What lessons can be drawn from Leidsche Rijn to inform a renewed governance approach for Rijnenburg?

As a result of these governance challenges, Rijnenburg struggles to move from ambition to implementation. In this thesis, the concept of implementation refers to the alignment of three key elements, actors, narratives, and resources, that together form the operational foundation for area development (Verheul et al., 2019). A successful implementation ensures that the right stakeholders are involved, that a shared vision guides the process, and that the material and institutional resources are in place to act. In the case of Rijnenburg, the implementation of these three is a major challenge (A. Buijze, 2013; Buitelaar et al., 2024).

Rijnenburg faces some environmental challenges which need to be faced in the narrative of the area development. Mobility wise the area is difficult to connect; the national highways are not easy to cross and are likely not keen on creating extra intersections. In terms of landscape, the area is very low and is close to river IJssel which could overflow in times of heavy rainfall, therefore a significant part of the area is designated as 'room for the river' (Buijze, 2013). In terms of sustainable energy, the municipality of Utrecht allocated the area for the development of windmills and solar panels, from which the construction is expected to start in 2027 (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024b).

The narrative of Rijnenburg currently does not formulate an answer to these challenges. However, the recent minister of housing presented firmly that the development of Rijnenburg should start as soon as possible, even though the municipality of Utrecht has planned the start of the development only in 2035 (Eerenbeemt, 2024; Provincie Utrecht, 2024). Rijnenburg will likely face more challenges in implementation the resources and actors for the development. The erosion of the institutional system has weakened governance capacity. As well as decentralization and fragmented expertise have hindered effective area development, necessitating stronger coordination and integrated approaches to address these complex issues (Buitelaar, 2023).

This thesis addresses these questions by comparing the two cases through the lens of institutional change and regional governance. It aims to identify which governance strategies and cooperative arrangements are most effective for area development today and offers recommendations for overcoming the current impasse in Rijnenburg.

### Research Question

This problem addresses the call for a coordinated approach to the area development of Rijnenburg. This will be done through the lessons from the previous development of Leidsche Rijn. Therefore, the main question of this study is:

*"How can regional cooperation contribute to area development implementation in the Netherlands, with a focus on lessons from Leidsche Rijn for the future development of Rijnenburg?"*

This research question focuses on the role of governance and regional cooperation in advancing effective area development in the Netherlands. It examines the challenges of implementation of the narrative, actors and resources needed to implement area development. By analysing lessons from Leidsche Rijn, the study aims to identify the successes in and lessons from cooperative frameworks. Ultimately it seeks to provide practical recommendations for enhancing area development in Rijnenburg and similar areas facing complex spatial challenges.



## Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg: Comparable Cases of Regional Urban Development

There are two main reasons for the selection of the two cases, the first one is because they are so like each other; both areas are located in the municipality of Utrecht, both are large-scale developments, both cases have similar challenges connecting to the city of centre of Utrecht and both are seen as key projects for fulfilling regional housing and spatial planning goals (Buitelaar et al., 2025; VROM, 2007). The second reason for the case selection is because of the time era the two developments face. Leidsche Rijn originated from an era which was strongly influenced by the national government, a centralized government. Rijnenburg on the other hand faces more decentralized institutional conditions, it faces a fragmentation of decision-making and financial resources (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).

### Case information

Rijnenburg is an area south of Utrecht planned for large-scale urban development. While Leidsche Rijn was projected to include over 30,000 dwellings, Rijnenburg is set to deliver approximately 25,000 homes. Given its location, vulnerable to flooding and bordering the Green Heart, Rijnenburg faces specific environmental challenges (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024).

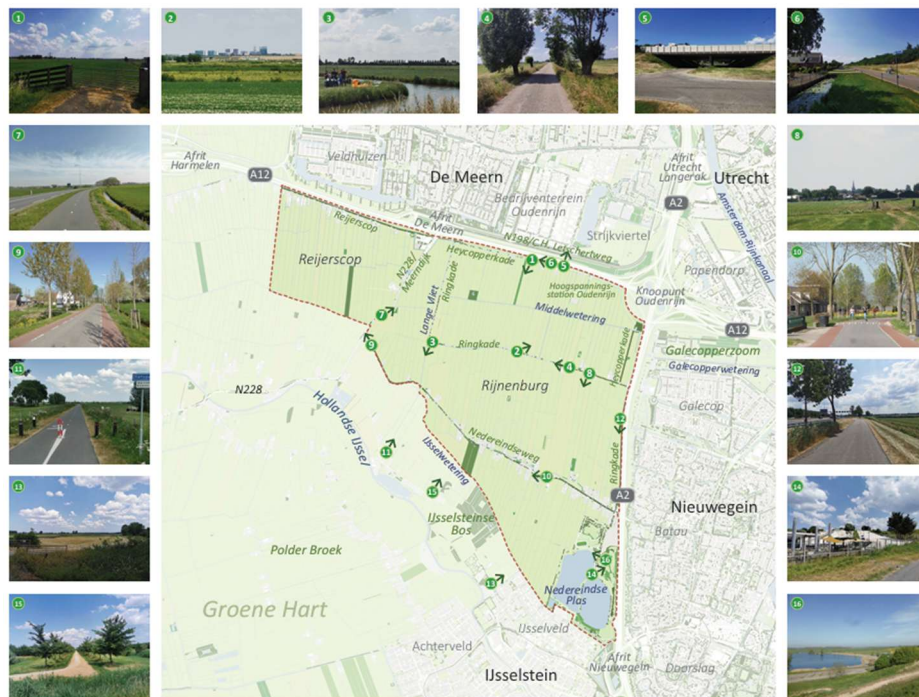


Figure 2: The current situation of Rijnenburg (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024a)

The developments of Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg illustrate how regional cooperation can address complex evolving goals. Leidsche Rijn, developed under the VINEX policy in the 1990s, required close coordination between national, provincial and municipal authorities to address housing needs. Rijnenburg, designated under decentralized policy, brings new challenges as it balances with fragmented power and financial means. Rijnenburg highlights the difficulty of achieving consensus among stakeholders with varying priorities. The ongoing debates over its future as a housing area, renewable energy site or green space demonstrate the need for collaborative governance to respect both local and national goals. This case shows the necessity of flexible regional frameworks capable of managing competing demands (Buitelaar et al., 2025).

Comparing Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg reveals how regional cooperation must adapt to changing policies, shifting from centralization to more inclusive, local planning. The contrast between centralized and decentralized approaches illustrates how national policies shape regional planning effectiveness. These cases ultimately highlight the need for adaptable, collaborative planning structures to address the Netherlands' urban challenges and balance growth with sustainability.

## **1.1 Context:**

### **1.1.1 Identification of problems that remain to be solved**

Area development in the Netherlands faces a growing set of challenges rooted in the fragmentation of governance, the decentralization of responsibilities, and the weakening of institutional coordination mechanisms. Where large-scale urban expansion during the VINEX era benefited from strong national steering and intergovernmental agreements, contemporary development is shaped by multi-actor negotiations, often lacking clear leadership, authority, or alignment (Steenbergen, 2022).

This shift has made the implementation of area development considerably more difficult. One persistent issue is the lack of regional coordination. In spatially contested regions, where housing, climate, mobility, and energy demands compete for land, municipalities often act in isolation. There is no structural mechanism to align their interests or prioritize shared outcomes. This leads to delays, duplication, and in some cases, long-term stagnation (De Zeeuw et al., 2020). At the same time, the distribution of responsibilities and resources has become unbalanced. Municipalities are expected to initiate and guide complex developments, yet they lack the financial capacity or land positions to do so effectively. Following the 2008 financial crisis, many municipalities sold their land holdings and now depend on private actors for implementation. While developers have stepped into this vacuum, often taking on roles as “institutional entrepreneurs” (Buitelaar et al., 2025), their growing influence in shaping planning narratives and outcomes raises questions about democratic accountability and the public interest.

A further complication lies in the absence of binding governance mechanisms. In many current developments, including Rijnenburg, there is no formal structure to assign roles, resolve conflicts, or escalate decisions. This creates governance vacuum zones of responsibility where no actor holds the mandate, capacity, or legitimacy to act. In such situations, even shared ambitions remain difficult to implement. Finally, the formation of regional cooperation itself has become more fragile. As Allmendinger et al. (Allmendinger et al., 2015) note, much of today’s regional governance operates in “soft spaces” with limited formal authority and contested legitimacy. These governance forms may facilitate early dialogue but often lack the institutional weight to coordinate complex implementation over time.

These problems; fragmented coordination, mismatched resources and responsibilities, growing asymmetries between public and private actors, and institutional vacuums, stand at the heart of today’s difficulties in area development (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Buitelaar, 2023; De Zeeuw et al., 2020). They frame the central inquiry of this study: how regional cooperation can be reconfigured to support implementation in the absence of the structural conditions that previously made it possible.

### **1.1.2 Societal and scientific relevance of these problems and of the subject in General**

This study contributes to both academic debates and societal practice in the governance of area development. Scientifically, it engages with literature on planning capacity, decentralization, and multi-actor governance. Stoker (1998) highlights how contemporary governance relies more on interdependent networks than on hierarchical control. In such settings, decision-making is shared across multiple actors, making coordination more complex. Hooghe and Marks (2003) observe that fragmented governance, characterized by overlapping jurisdictions and dispersed responsibilities, can hinder the ability to align interests and steer collective action. This is clearly visible in Rijnenburg, where the involvement of various municipalities, regional authorities, and national actors without a unified framework has complicated progress.

Buitelaar (2023; 2025) argue that in this vacuum, developers increasingly act as “institutional entrepreneurs,” shaping planning agendas through framing and lobbying. This study expands that lens by examining how public institutions respond and what governance conditions support or constrain such dynamics. Steenbergen (2022) stresses the province’s potential role as a regional coordinator, though its influence is often limited by informal structures. Verheul et al. (2019) similarly highlights the need for resilient governance forms that can navigate long-term complexity.

Societally, the relevance is urgent. The Netherlands faces intensifying land-use conflicts across housing, energy, and climate adaptation. Rijnenburg sits at this intersection, revealing how institutional fragmentation can delay or derail necessary development. By comparing Rijnenburg to Leidsche Rijn, this study identifies governance tools and cooperative strategies that can improve implementation under today’s more decentralized conditions, offering insight for future planning frameworks such as NOVEX.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research Questions

This thesis seeks to understand how regional cooperation contributes to the implementation of area development under contemporary governance conditions in the Netherlands. In recent decades, the institutional landscape of spatial planning has undergone significant transformation, marked by decentralisation, changing roles of public and private actors, and a growing reliance on multi-actor governance. Against this backdrop, regional cooperation has emerged as both a strategic necessity and a governance challenge.

The research is guided by the following central question “*How can regional cooperation contribute to area development implementation in the Netherlands, with a focus on lessons from Leidsche Rijn for the future development of Rijnenburg?*”

To answer the main research question, four sub-questions have been created to guide the investigation and structure of the analysis.

1. *How have the institutional conditions, in terms of regional cooperation and area development, developed in the Netherlands since 1990?*

The first sub-question is used to explore the definition and development of regional cooperation in the Netherlands. The literature points out that there has been a significant shift in perspectives since 1990 and today. The question delves into the relevant laws introduced since 1990, their motives and their consequences. Among the consequences of the laws is the development of regional cooperation.

2. *How is area development implemented with the contemporary institutional conditions?*

The second sub-question aims to explore factors behind the implementation of area development. This is more than just the realization of spatial projects in an area-based way. This is about area development as a governance strategy and bridging the gap between plans/ policies and the implementation of area development.

3. *What are the main lessons, regarding regional cooperation, from the area development of Leidsche Rijn?*

The lessons of Leidsche Rijn are suggested to be valuable for the development of Rijnenburg since the two developments are closely linked to each other. The key lessons of the sub-question create a good insight into the past development and give a good start towards the final sub-question.

4. *What are the recommendations for the development of Rijnenburg?*

The fourth sub-question addresses how to move forward. What has been learned from examining these cases and questions and how can the Metropolitan Region of Utrecht improve its contribution to the Rijnenburg case and perhaps on more area development cases.

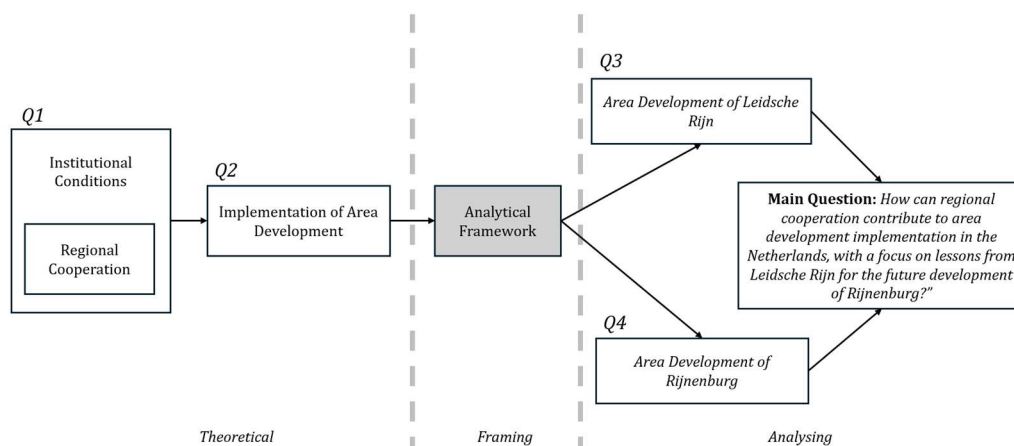


Figure 3: Overview research Design (Own work)

## 2.2 Research Design

Research on regional cooperation in area development has increasingly focused on the changing nature of governance in spatial planning. Scholars such as Buitelaar, De Zeeuw, Steenbergen, and Verheul have shown how area development in the Netherlands has shifted from centralised, policy-driven coordination to more decentralised, negotiated forms of governance. Where past developments like VINEX were characterised by clear national directives and institutional hierarchies, today's projects unfold in fragmented landscapes where responsibilities are distributed across multiple actors and levels of government. This evolving governance context presents new challenges for implementation, especially in large-scale, multi-stakeholder developments.

The goal of this thesis is to understand how regional cooperation can support implementation in area development under these contemporary conditions. While much attention has been paid to spatial strategies and technical planning instruments, there remains a need to better understand the institutional mechanisms that allow, or prevent, implementation to occur. Specifically, this research explores how cooperation is constructed, sustained, or hindered across different governance contexts.

To do so, it is necessary to examine how actors collaborate, what narratives they use, what resources they mobilise, and how formal and informal steering mechanisms are deployed. What is needed is not just a description of outcomes, but insight into the process of implementation itself, how cooperation unfolds over time, and how different institutional settings shape that process.

To answer these questions, this thesis employed a qualitative comparative case study design. This approach enabled an in-depth investigation of governance dynamics in two area development projects: Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg. Both are located in the Utrecht region and share comparable spatial ambition and scale. However, they differ significantly in their institutional context: Leidsche Rijn was shaped under the centralised VINEX framework of the late 1990s, while Rijnenburg is unfolding in a more decentralised and politically fragmented setting. This contrast made them particularly suitable for comparison.

The design follows the principles of multiple case study methodology as defined by Robert K. Yin (2009). Yin's approach is well-suited for exploring "how" and "why" questions, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred, and when multiple sources of evidence are required. He emphasises analytic generalisation, where theoretical concepts guide empirical inquiry. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, this research uses real-world cases to refine and apply a conceptual framework for understanding regional cooperation in area development. The analytical framework developed in this study is structured around three interrelated dimensions: conditions, implementation, and steering.

This structured approach made it possible to trace governance practices over time and to perform a systematic cross-case comparison. Following Yin's replication logic, the two cases were treated as individual empirical experiments designed to explore the occurrence of similar or divergent governance patterns under different institutional configurations.

In addition, the research adopted a process-oriented perspective, focusing not only on outcomes, but on the evolving interactions between actors, institutions, and tools. The aim was to understand how cooperation was initiated, maintained, or blocked, and how alignment in implementation was created, or disrupted, over time.

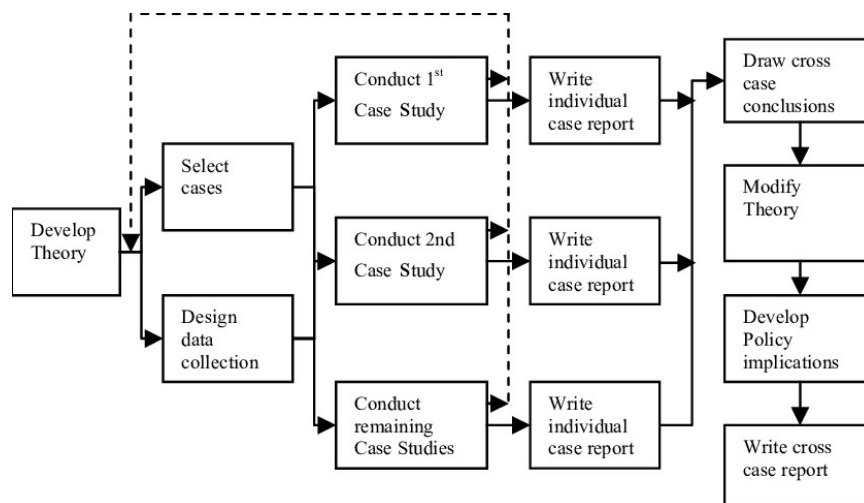


Figure 4: Multiple case study methodology(Yin, 2009)

To further test the validity and practical relevance of the analytical framework, a panel discussion was held with six senior area developers during the final phase of the research. These professionals, selected for their extensive experience with large-scale urban development, were invited to reflect on the models and statements derived from literature. The purpose of the session was to verify whether the analytical framework aligned with practical realities in the field. Their feedback strengthened the conceptual clarity of the framework, confirmed its usefulness as a diagnostic tool, and provided an important form of triangulation, complementing both document analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Together, the combination of comparative case analysis, Yin's theory-informed methodology, a structured analytical framework, and expert validation ensured that this research was both methodologically rigorous and grounded in real-world practice.

## **2.3 Methods**

### **2.3.1 Casestudies of Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg**

According to Yin (2009), a single-case study design is particularly suitable when the case represents a critical, unique, or revelatory example, allowing researchers to gain in-depth insights into complex phenomena. In this study, Leidsche Rijn is strategically chosen as a critical case due to its direct relevance to Rijnenburg in terms of geographic proximity, governance structures, and urban development challenges. Although the development of Rijnenburg has not yet begun, it is anticipated to face similar governance challenges, including fragmented decision-making, financial constraints, and stakeholder conflicts. Therefore, analysing Leidsche Rijn allows the study to extract governance lessons and best practices that can be strategically extrapolated to Rijnenburg.

The choice of Leidsche Rijn is justified by several factors:

- **Comparability:** Both Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg are large-scale urban developments located near Utrecht, intended to meet regional housing and spatial planning needs. This geographic and functional similarity ensures comparability of governance challenges.
- **Policy Context:** Leidsche Rijn was developed under centralized policy, whereas Rijnenburg will operate under decentralized policy, allowing the study to compare governance structures across different policy frameworks.
- **Historical Relevance:** Historically, Rijnenburg was initially planned as an extension of Leidsche Rijn but was later separated due to shifting governance priorities. This historical linkage provides a natural continuity, making Leidsche Rijn an ideal predecessor for informing governance strategies in Rijnenburg.
- **Exemplar Case for Strategic Extrapolation:** As a successful large-scale development, Leidsche Rijn serves as an exemplar case for understanding the role of governance and regional cooperation. By identifying what worked well and what challenges were encountered, the study can form evidence-based governance recommendations applicable to Rijnenburg.

## **2.4 Data Collection**

### **3.4.1 Literature Review**

The literature review formed the theoretical backbone of the study and supported the development of the analytical framework. It was conducted iteratively throughout the research process, beginning with suggested readings from academic supervisors and exploratory discussions with experts in the field. From this starting point, a snowballing technique was used to identify additional relevant literature.

The literature review addressed each of the four sub-questions of the research. For the first sub-question, the review focused on the evolution of regional cooperation in Dutch spatial planning since the 1990s, identifying relevant laws, governance reforms, and shifts in national planning policy. Key references included Allmendinger et al. (2015) on soft spaces and governance, and Spaans (Spaans, 2006) on the Dutch planning system. The second sub-question explored the implementation of area development under contemporary conditions. Here, the work of Steenbergen (2022) was particularly influential, providing insight into governance fragmentation and regional misalignment. The review highlighted how spatial responsibility, financial instruments, and institutional capacity have become increasingly distributed and negotiated. For the third sub-question, focusing on lessons from Leidsche Rijn, the literature review included foundational works such as Van den Hof (2006), which examined public-private cooperation in the

VINEX era. Although academic sources on Leidsche Rijn were relatively limited, the review helped define key analytical themes for the interviews. The final sub-question, concerning recommendations for Rijnenburg, drew again on broader governance literature, including Verheul et al. (2019) on institutional configurations and strategic framing in area development. Together, these sources provided a conceptual lens through which governance practices could be interpreted and compared.

All reviewed literature was catalogued using a structured Excel matrix, where key information was categorized by method, findings, relevance to the study, and future research suggestions. The Zotero reference manager was used to store and organize all references and citations, ensuring traceability and consistency throughout the thesis.

### **3.4.2 Document Analysis**

In addition to academic literature, a comprehensive document analysis was conducted to better understand the policy context, legal frameworks, and planning strategies relevant to the cases of Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg. This included reviewing:

- Regional Investment Agendas (MIRT-verkenningen)
- Policy documents from the Municipality of Utrecht, Province of Utrecht, and the Ministry of BZK
- Strategic visions and spatial frameworks (e.g. NOVEX arrangements)
- Developer position papers (e.g. Appèl voor Rijnenburg)

Documents were sourced through public archives, such as the digital repositories of the Municipality of Utrecht and the Province of Utrecht, and were analysed for content, structure, institutional positioning, and the presence of key narratives. The focus was not only on formal regulations, but also on how these documents constructed meaning, framed cooperation, and assigned roles to actors. This helped identify governance intentions and institutional assumptions embedded in the planning discourse.

### **2.4.1 Respondents: Semi-structured Interviews and a panel discussion**

To complement the literature and document analysis, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with key stakeholders involved in the area developments of Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg. This qualitative method enabled the collection of in-depth, context-specific insights that could not be captured through written sources alone. Interview candidates were selected based on their professional involvement in one or both developments and were identified through expert referrals, public records, and snowball sampling. The final set of interviewees included public officials (from municipal and national levels), private developers, consultants, urban designers, and waterboard representatives. In total, ten respondents were interviewed.

Interview questions were developed in alignment with the themes of the analytical framework introduced in Chapter 4. These questions were refined after the initial rounds of literature and document review to ensure relevance and coherence across both cases. The interviews explored key themes such as governance structures, actor dynamics, institutional roles, spatial narratives, resource mobilisation, and steering strategies. All interviews were recorded (with informed consent), transcribed, and anonymised to protect confidentiality. The transcripts were coded using a hybrid approach: deductive codes based on the framework, and inductive codes emerging organically from the data. This iterative coding process enabled the identification of recurring themes, contradictions, and patterns across interviews.

The interview series reached conceptual saturation after approximately eight interviews. Two additional interviews were conducted to fill gaps in perspective, notably from the waterboard and the provincial level, whose roles in the projects had been underrepresented. The interview data played a central role in validating findings from the literature and document analysis and provided essential insights for the comparative and interpretive parts of the research.

In addition to the interviews, a panel discussion was organised with six senior area development professionals from both public and private sectors. The purpose of this session was to present and critically reflect on the analytical framework developed in this thesis, including the steering quadrant model and the categorisation of governance strategies. Panel participants were invited based on their extensive experience in Dutch area development, and the discussion was structured around a set of statements derived from theory. The aim was to assess to what extent the conceptual models resonated with practical experience in the field. This session not only served to verify the applicability of the framework but also generated valuable practitioner insights that informed the thesis' conclusions and sharpened its practical relevance.

Table 1: List of respondents

Respondent	Organisation	Role	Date
1	Freelance	Academic	25-2-2025
2	Municipality of Utrecht	Program Manager of Leidsche Rijn	28-2-2025
3	BPD	Area Developer of Rijnenburg	8-4-2025
4	BPD	Area Developer of Leidsche Rijn	8-4-2025
5	IMOSS	Urban Planner of Rijnenburg	15-4-2025
6	Municipality of Utrecht	Projectmanager of Rijnenburg	25-4-2025
7	Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning	Regio Director	29-4-2025
8	Province of Utrecht	Projectmanager of Rijnenburg	19-5-2025
9	Waterboard of HDSR	Projectmanager of Rijnenburg	8-5-2025
Panel	RYSE	Six senior area developers	25-4-2025

The consent forms and transcripts of the interviews can be found in appendix, see chapter 11.1.

## 2.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis process combined insights from literature, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. It was structured around the analytical framework developed in this thesis, which focused on three core components of governance: conditions, implementation, and steering. These components served as guiding lenses throughout the analysis phase.

The search for relevant literature began with reading suggestions provided by the thesis supervisors and inputs from exploratory conversations with field experts. This initial list formed the foundation of the theoretical framework. From there, a snowballing method was applied to expand the literature base, continuing until saturation was reached, meaning that additional sources no longer contributed substantially new insights to the research questions.

All reviewed literature was catalogued in a structured Excel spreadsheet, which supported systematic comparison and recall. The spreadsheet contained columns for author, title, year, research method, design, main findings, future research directions, reading suggestions, and relevance to specific sections of the thesis.

This helped organize literature across the different sub-questions and supported thematic synthesis. At the same time, all references were stored in Zotero, a digital reference manager linked to the thesis manuscript to ensure accurate and consistent citation throughout the writing process.

Interview recordings were transcribed and anonymized. These transcripts were then coded, based both on findings from the literature (deductive coding) and on insights emerging from the interviews themselves (inductive or open coding). A preliminary code list was prepared in advance, informed by the analytical framework, and was refined iteratively as more transcripts were analysed.

Towards the end of the research process, the coded data was synthesized to identify key governance patterns, successes, and challenges within the cases of Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg. This included identifying enabling or blocking factors for cooperation, implementation bottlenecks, and strategic gaps. These insights were then translated into lessons learned, which informed the cross-case comparison and helped shape the policy recommendations presented in the concluding chapters.

In sum, the data analysis combined structured coding, thematic synthesis, and cross-case comparison. It built directly on the threefold structure of the analytical framework and was grounded in methodological triangulation between literature, documents, and stakeholder perspectives.

## 2.6 Data Management Plan

Throughout the research process, data management was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and GDPR guidelines, as outlined in the EU General Data Protection Regulation. All qualitative data, collected through interviews and document analysis, was handled securely and with careful attention to privacy and confidentiality. Interview recordings were encrypted and stored temporarily on TU Delft OneDrive, accessible only to the researcher and academic supervisors. Once transcribed, the audio files were permanently deleted, and the transcripts were fully anonymized to remove any personal identifiers. Anonymization included removing names, job titles, and any location-specific references that could link data back to individuals.

All policy documents and planning reports used for the document analysis were systematically archived in a structured folder system on the same secure university storage. These documents were organized thematically to support traceability between data sources and analytical categories.

To prevent data loss, regular backups were maintained using TU Delft's cloud infrastructure, with access restricted to authorized users only. Any sensitive data was password-protected, and all devices used in the research were secured with multi-factor authentication. Upon completion of the study, the anonymized data was prepared for long-term storage in a restricted-access research repository, in line with TU Delft's data stewardship policies. This ensures that the data can be made available for future academic use, under strict conditions, while protecting the confidentiality of participants and the integrity of the research.

The full Data Management Plan, including protocols for data handling, anonymization, and storage, can be found in Appendix A.

## **2.7 Ethical Considerations**

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of TU Delft and the wider academic community. Ethical clearance was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) on 5 May 2025, following review of the research protocol, interview guide, consent procedures, and data management strategy (Appendix B).

All interview participants received informed consent form prior to the interview, outlining the study's aims, voluntary nature, and data handling procedures. Participants explicitly consented to recording and the use of anonymized quotations (Appendix C).

Given the sensitive nature of the Rijnenburg case, particular care was taken to ensure political neutrality and avoid interference in ongoing planning processes. A broad range of stakeholders, including public officials, developers, and regional authorities, were interviewed to ensure balanced representation and minimize bias.

Confidentiality and academic integrity were upheld throughout, with a focus on institutional dynamics rather than individual positions.



### 3. The institutional Conditions

The success of regional cooperation in area development depends largely on the institutional conditions in which it takes place. These conditions, both formal and informal, shape whether actors are willing to cooperate, able to cooperate, and whether that cooperation can be sustained over time (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Stoker, 1998; Verheul et al., 2019).

The Netherlands has a long tradition of state involvement in spatial planning, marked by shifting governance regimes across different eras. In the post-war reconstruction period, urban investments were driven by national urgency and top-down coordination, with clear state leadership and programmatic housing production. This gave way in the 1970s and 1980s to inner-city renewal efforts, where attention turned to upgrading older urban neighbourhoods, often through municipal initiatives supported by national funding. In the 1990s, the VINEX programme marked a high point of coordinated regional planning, combining national steering, intergovernmental agreements, and integrated infrastructure investment. Projects like Leidsche Rijn emerged in this context of strong institutional scaffolding and shared objectives (De Zeeuw et al., 2020; Platform 31, 2022).

Since the 2010s, however, spatial planning has entered a more fragmented phase. The abolition of the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) in 2010 symbolised the end of centralised spatial tradition. Responsibilities shifted to local and regional actors, but without a corresponding increase in their institutional or financial capacity. This decentralisation has created a more complex, multi-actor governance environment, one where regional cooperation is no longer underpinned by national programmes or binding agreements, but must instead be built through negotiation, trust, and institutional improvisation.

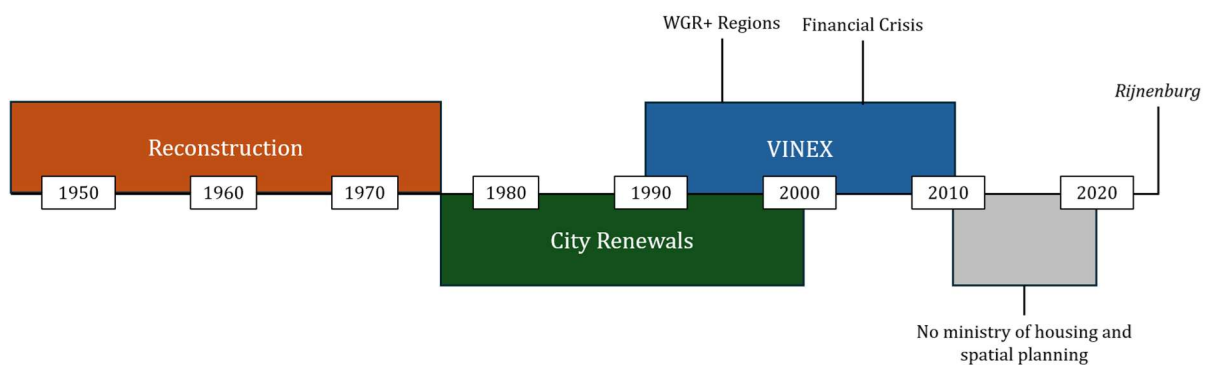


Figure 5: the timeline of urban investments (Platform 31, 2022)

Within this setting, three dimensions are critical to understanding the implementation of area development. First, willingness depends on narrative alignment, shared goals, and perceived mutual benefit. As Verheul et al. (2019) argue, cooperation requires a unifying story that frames the issue in a way that resonates across sectors and scales. Without it, collaboration remains fragile or purely transactional.

Second, ability concerns the legal competences, resources, and mandates actors hold. Steenbergen (2022) notes that cooperation often fails when roles are unclear or fragmented across jurisdictions. Buitelaar et al. (2025) show how developers increasingly act as institutional entrepreneurs in this context, using regulatory ambiguity to push their agendas, sometimes outpacing the capacity of public actors to respond or steer.

Third, sustainability of cooperation requires institutional trust, long-term commitment, and mechanisms for managing interdependence. Allmendinger et al. (2015) warn that many regional collaborations operate in “soft spaces” with little democratic anchoring or continuity, making them vulnerable to political shifts, resource scarcity, or leadership changes.

This chapter examines how these institutional conditions have evolved from the time of Leidsche Rijn in the 1990s to the current situation in Rijnsburg. It highlights how the shift from centralised to decentralised governance has altered the possibilities and constraints of regional cooperation, and what this means for the implementation of complex, multi-actor area development today.

#### 3.1 From Centralization to Decentralization

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Dutch spatial planning was characterized by a centralized model in which the national government played a strong steering role. Under the VINEX policy, the national government selected urban expansion locations (such as Leidsche Rijn), allocated budgets, set clear housing targets, and

entered into binding agreements with local governments. This vertical coordination allowed for streamlined decision-making and relatively fast implementation. Municipalities had clarity on their roles, developers had legal certainty, and intergovernmental alignment was enforced by national policy instruments (De Zeeuw et al., 2020; Van Steenberg, 2022).

However, this centralized model began to unravel in the years following the publication of the *Nota Ruimte* in 2004 and was further weakened by the abolition of key national planning tools. Today, spatial planning is embedded in a decentralized governance landscape in which municipalities and provinces are expected to take the lead, often without strong financial or legal backing from the national government. This institutional reimplementations is reflected in the more recent NOVEX and Omgevingswet frameworks, which emphasize flexibility, local tailoring, and adaptive programming (Buitelaar, 2023; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2022).

While decentralisation has opened opportunities for local initiative, it has also deepened the structural fragmentation of spatial governance in the Netherlands. One of the most critical but underacknowledged shifts is that the responsibility for delivering complex area development has been devolved to municipalities, while the financial instruments and institutional infrastructure once available at the national level have not followed (Buitelaar, 2023).

During the 1990s, the Ministry of VROM operated with a yearly budget of approximately €9.1 billion, to which an additional €1.8 billion was allocated specifically for the development of VINEX locations. Adjusted for inflation, this total investment is equivalent to over €20.3 billion today. Importantly, VROM was not only well-funded, it also possessed a mature bureaucratic organisation with extensive planning expertise, institutional memory, and the authority to align stakeholders across levels of government (Ordering, 2024; Staten-Generaal, 2000; VROM, 2007).

In contrast, today's national government has budgeted roughly €5 billion for new housing, but no dedicated ministry for spatial planning exists, and implementation relies on fragmented municipal initiatives. This gap in institutional support is compounded by a decline in municipal land ownership. During the VINEX period, many municipalities held large public land positions and could generate substantial profits through active land policy. Today, most municipalities have sold off their land portfolios, especially during and after the 2008 financial crisis, leaving them with little capacity to leverage land-based revenues to finance new development (Buitelaar, 2023; Ordering, 2024; Staten-Generaal, 2000; VROM, 2007). As Steenberg (2022) notes, this mismatch between the scale of spatial problems and the scale of institutional authority now constitutes a major barrier to regional cooperation. Municipalities are asked to lead, but without the tools to act. In this context, decentralisation has not empowered local actors, it has exposed them.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Netherlands experienced a paradigm shift from government to governance in spatial planning. This transition was driven by globalization, technological advancements, and societal individualization, leading to more complex spatial interactions and diverse spatial needs. At the same time, the rise of neoliberal ideologies promoted market-driven development and reduced direct government intervention, challenging the traditional hierarchical, top-down planning system. In response, a more flexible, network-based governance model emerged, emphasizing collaboration, negotiation, and stakeholder participation across different levels of government and with private actors (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Spaans, 2006).

This shift marked a departure from the comprehensive national strategies and rigid zoning regulations that characterized the Dutch planning system throughout the 20th century. Instead, governance networks began to play a crucial role in facilitating strategic spatial planning, policy integration, and cross-sectoral cooperation. This new governance model was better suited to address the increasing complexity and uncertainty of spatial developments in a rapidly changing socio-economic and environmental context (Spaans, 2006; Spaans et al., 2013).

### **3.2 From Area Development 1.0 to 2.0**

This shift has led to what scholars and practitioners refer to as Area Development 2.0; a new mode of spatial development that moves beyond the classic public-led approach of the VINEX era (De Zeeuw et al., 2020; Van Steenberg, 2022). While Area Development 1.0 was characterized by:

- A strong public lead (usually the municipality),
- Large-scale land acquisition by public authorities,
- Fixed master plans and sequential project phasing,
- Risk absorption by the state,
- Predictable public-private partnerships,

Area Development 2.0 is defined by:

- A more facilitative or networked public role,
- Fragmented land ownership (often in private hands),
- Flexible and adaptive planning processes,
- Market-driven initiative, with public actors reacting or negotiating,
- Shared or unclear responsibility for financial and legal risk.

In area development 2.0, municipalities act less as planners and more as process managers, mediating between landowners, market actors, and societal interests. Developers, in turn, become more active in shaping visions, framing narratives, and lobbying for favourable zoning or planning decisions (Buitelaar et al., 2025). While this can create space for experimentation and dynamic coalitions, it also increases the complexity and volatility of development processes.

A major consequence of Area Development 2.0 is that implementation becomes less predictable. Without a dominant public actor to set the rules and finance infrastructure upfront, progress often depends on trust, consensus, and coordination across fragmented actors. This raises the stakes for regional cooperation, but, paradoxically, such cooperation is harder to establish under these conditions due to the lack of formal authority or shared incentives (ibid.).

In the context of Rijnenburg, these dynamics are clearly visible. Unlike Leidsche Rijn, which was developed under a centralized model with strong public coordination (1990s), Rijnenburg's (2020s) development is delayed due to diffuse ownership, unclear mandates, and a lack of binding frameworks to align interests and resources (Buitelaar, 2023; VROM, 2007). The following chapter will analyse how these evolving institutional conditions play out in practice across both case studies.

### **3.3 Implications of Changing Institutional Conditions for Regional Cooperation**

The transition from centrally steered spatial planning to a decentralized and networked approach has profound consequences for the formation and functioning of regional cooperation. Under the VINEX-era conditions, regional cooperation was largely institutionalized from above. The national government set the agenda, selected locations, and provided clear financial and legal frameworks. This top-down architecture created a relatively stable environment for municipalities and market actors to collaborate, as roles and responsibilities were predefined, and incentives were aligned (Van Steenbergen, 2022; VROM, 2007).

In contrast, the Area Development 2.0 context places the burden of cooperation on regional actors themselves, often without sufficient guidance or support from higher levels of government (Buitelaar, 2023). This results in several critical shifts in how regional cooperation must be formed:

- 1. From mandated to voluntary cooperation**

Previously, cooperation was often a condition for accessing national subsidies or meeting state-mandated housing targets. Today, regional alliances must emerge voluntarily, based on a shared recognition of mutual interests. This makes the initial formation of cooperation more fragile and dependent on informal leadership, trust, and political willingness rather than formal structures or obligations (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).

- 2. From hierarchical authority to negotiation and consensus-building**

In the absence of a dominant state actor, regional cooperation increasingly relies on horizontal governance: negotiation between equals. While this allows for more inclusive and adaptive decision-making, it also increases the risk of a deadlock, especially when interests diverge or when actors lack the capacity to participate meaningfully (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).

- 3. From public control to multi-actor dependence**

In Area Development 2.0, public authorities no longer control all relevant instruments, especially land and capital. Much of the land may be in private hands, and investment decisions are shaped by market logic rather than public planning goals. This means that forming regional cooperation requires strategic engagement with private actors, who have their own timelines, risk assessments, and return expectations. This complicates the coordination process and challenges public actors to play a more facilitative, rather than directive, role (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).

4. **From predictable funding to financial uncertainty**

With national subsidies less available and municipalities constrained in their investment capacity; regional cooperation now often lacks the financial backbone that previously sustained joint initiatives. This forces regional partners to search for new financial arrangements, such as cost-sharing mechanisms, joint ventures, or land value capture strategies, all of which require trust, legal clarity, and time to negotiate (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).

5. **From formal mandates to informal legitimacy**

As Allmendinger et al. (2015) emphasize, many regional cooperations now operate without formal democratic legitimacy. They are not elected, nor do they have binding legal authority. Their legitimacy must therefore be constructed through inclusion, transparency, and performance, that is, by building trust, demonstrating value, and maintaining open communication with both member municipalities and the broader public.

6. **From long-term vision to short-term pragmatism**

The uncertainty and flexibility of today's planning environment often push regional cooperations toward short-term, incremental agreements rather than long-term strategic commitments. While this allows for adaptability, it may also hinder the creation of robust coalitions around long-term spatial goals (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).

Together, these shifts mean that regional cooperation is both more necessary and more difficult in today's institutional landscape. The need for coordinated planning across municipal boundaries remains as urgent as ever, especially in addressing shared challenges like housing, mobility, and energy. Yet the tools, mandates, and incentives to make such cooperation durable and effective are often lacking or under pressure (Van Steenberg, 2022).

### 3.4 WGR+ Regions: Early attempts at institutionalizing Regional Cooperation

In the early 2000s, the national government attempted to strengthen regional cooperation through the creation of WGR+ regions, a governance arrangement built on the 1985 'Wet Gemeenschappelijke Regeling' (WGR), adapted for urbanized areas. These "plus-regio's" were voluntary collaborations of municipalities in metropolitan regions, intended to coordinate tasks that exceeded individual municipal boundaries, such as mobility, spatial planning, and economic development (Van Steenberg, 2022).

WGR+ regions were created as a compromise structure: they were not democratically elected bodies, but they did have administrative mandates and financial means to coordinate between municipalities. In practice, they aimed to bridge the growing mismatch between the scale of spatial problems and the institutional scale of decision-making (Steenbergen, 2022). Examples include the 'City Regions' Rotterdam, the City Region Arnhem-Nijmegen, and the BRU (Bestuur Regio Utrecht). These regions were often responsible for strategic investment decisions (e.g., regional public transport or housing distribution) and became important players in area development processes (ibid.).

However, the WGR+ regions also illustrated the limits of institutionally weak cooperation. As Steenberg notes, they were often viewed as technocratic, lacked direct democratic legitimacy, and were susceptible to inter-municipal competition. Their decision-making relied on unanimity or consensus, which made them slow and sometimes ineffective, especially when municipalities disagreed on growth ambitions or the allocation of resources (ibid.).

By the mid-2010s, WGR+ regions were gradually dismantled (Bestuurlijke Regio Utrecht, 2015). Their formal regional role diminished, and their tasks were either absorbed by the provinces or fragmented across informal networks. This institutional rollback left a vacuum in regional coordination that has not yet been structurally filled, despite the growing need for regional approaches in complex spatial developments (Buitelaar, 2023). In effect, the dismantling of WGR+ regions illustrates the paradox of the Area Development 2.0 era: while the need for regional coordination is increasing, institutional mechanisms to enable it to have been weakened or removed.

### 3.5 MIRT agenda's: infrastructure planning without area development

A more recent tool for fostering regional cooperation is the MIRT (Meerjarenprogramma Infrastructuur, Ruimte en Transport) agenda. Originally developed as part of the long-term investment program for infrastructure projects, the MIRT has evolved into a more integrated planning instrument and remains primarily public sector orientated. Involving only governmental actors such as the national ministries,

provinces and municipalities and waterboards. The private sector and civil society are not direct partners in the MIRT process (Zonneveld & Spaans, 2014).

The current MIRT process is characterized by the so-called MIRT-Verkenningen (exploratory studies), in which regional coalitions are invited to jointly identify challenges, develop investment strategies, and align spatial ambitions with infrastructure priorities. These agendas are meant to encourage co-production of policy between the Rijk and regional partners (ibid.).

In practice, however, MIRT agendas have also come to reflect the decentralized governance climate of Area Development 2.0. The Rijk no longer selects or directs projects top-down but depends on regional initiative. The expectation is that regions themselves organize their coalitions, develop visions, and propose concrete investment portfolios. The national government only steps in if regional actors demonstrate unity, shared priorities, and co-financing capabilities (De Zeeuw et al., 2020; Van Steenbergen, 2022).

This results in a selective and competitive environment for cooperation: only regions that already function well as a governance coalition, such as the southern Randstad or the MRA (Metropolitan Region of Amsterdam), succeed in gaining support through the MIRT. Others, like the Utrecht region (including Rijnenburg), may struggle due to institutional fragmentation or political disagreement (Van Steenbergen, 2022).

Thus, the MIRT no longer guarantees funding or coordination but acts more like a platform for alignment, conditional on prior regional cooperation. This underscores the core challenge of Area Development 2.0: regional actors must first self-organize before they can access support (Van Steenbergen, 2022). For spatially strategic yet politically fragmented areas like Rijnenburg, this shift could represent a significant institutional barrier to implementation.

### **3.6 Timeline of Institutional and Governance Changes**

The evolution of regional cooperation and governance in the Netherlands since 1990 has been marked by significant institutional changes and policy reforms, reflecting broader shifts in European territorial governance. These changes can be understood through the following timeline in table 1:

*Table on the other page.*

Table 2: Timeline of institutional conditions & regional cooperation

Year	Policy / Event	Impact on Institutional Conditions & Regional Cooperation
1991	VINEX Policy (Fourth Nota Extra)	Institutional high point of centralized planning. The national government designated VINEX-locations (e.g. Leidsche Rijn), supplied funding, and enforced intergovernmental coordination. Created stable conditions for implementation (VROM, 2007).
1995	Formalization of WGR+ Regions	Introduction of intermunicipal cooperation bodies for urbanized regions (e.g. BRU). Intended to support strategic planning and coordination across municipal borders. However, they lacked democratic legitimacy and legal authority, making them vulnerable in the long term (Steenbergen, 2022).
2002	Collapse of the Fifth memorandum spatial planning	Political rejection of comprehensive national planning. Marked a shift toward market-oriented and local decision-making. Set the stage for decentralization (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).
2004	Memorandum 'ruimte'	Introduced "central what must, decentral what can." National government stepped back; planning responsibilities were decentralized to provinces and municipalities. Cooperation became voluntary and more fragmented (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).
2008	Financial Crisis	Land speculation losses weakened municipal budgets and reduced the ability to lead area development. Shift toward facilitative roles and reliance on private initiative (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).
2010	Dismantling of the Ministry of VROM	The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) was dissolved. Spatial policy was absorbed into the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment (I & M), diminishing national spatial vision and reducing political weight for integrated planning (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).
2010–2015	Abolition of WGR+ Regions (e.g. BRU)	Regional cooperation bodies dissolved. Their removal created a governance vacuum for supra-local coordination, especially in high-growth urban areas like Utrecht. Tasks fragmented or returned to provinces (Bestuurlijke Regio Utrecht, 2015; Van Steenbergen, 2022).
2012	Structure vision Infrastructure and Area (SVIR)	Emphasized economic competitiveness and infrastructure, with minimal spatial steering. The state focused on "mainports and brainports," weakening national involvement in integrated area development (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).
2021	MIRT-exploration become conditional	Regions must self-organize and co-finance to qualify for national investment. Fragmented regions face structural disadvantages in accessing support (De Zeeuw et al., 2020; Van Steenbergen, 2022)
2022	Start of NOVEX-program (Spatial Arrangements)	Attempt to reintroduce national coordination. Formalized cooperation in 16 strategic regions but remains soft governance without binding instruments. Requires strong regional self-organization (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2022).
2024	Introduction of the 'Omgevingswet'	Merges multiple environmental and spatial laws. Emphasizes decentralization and flexibility, but increases legal complexity and can hinder integrated, long-term area development (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2024).

These institutional changes illustrate the dynamic and evolving nature of spatial governance in the Netherlands, characterized by cycles of decentralization, deregulation, and recent trends towards re-institutionalization and national oversight (Buitelaar, 2023).

### 3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the institutional evolution of area development in the Netherlands, with particular attention to how decentralisation has reshaped governance responsibilities and capacities. What emerges is a picture of asymmetrical decentralisation, in which legal powers have been devolved to municipalities, but the financial and strategic capacities to act on those powers have not followed at the same scale or pace. Since the 1990s, municipalities have increasingly become the lead actors in implementing spatial policy. This trend was further reinforced after the abolition of the Ministry of VROM in 2010, a key turning point in the Dutch planning system. With the loss of a dedicated national body for spatial development, municipalities could no longer rely on structural co-financing, shared national policy goals, or integrated infrastructure investment frameworks. Instead, spatial governance was expected to emerge from decentralised initiative and inter-municipal coordination.

At the same time, municipalities were hit by the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Faced with shrinking budgets and rising obligations, many were forced to sell off their land positions. During the VINEX era, municipalities held large amounts of land and used active land policy to guide development, capture land value, and fund public infrastructure. Today, this financial instrument has largely disappeared. Most municipalities no longer own land and must instead rely on complex negotiations with private developers, often without leverage.

The result is a paradox: municipalities hold the legal responsibility for delivering complex area developments but lack the land positions and financial resources to fulfil that role effectively. While decentralisation in theory enables flexibility and local ownership, in practice it has exposed municipalities to increased responsibility without the tools to act. As Steenbergen (2022) notes, this creates a fundamental misalignment between the scale of spatial problems, which are often regional or national, and the scale of institutional authority, which is now predominantly local.

This institutional mismatch also complicates regional cooperation. Where once national ministries or regional bodies like the BRU played a guiding role, municipalities are now expected to self-organise across administrative boundaries. Yet without shared funding mechanisms, clear role division, or strong regional platforms, cooperation risks becoming ad hoc, fragile, or even absent. As demonstrated in the case of Rijnenburg, municipalities like Utrecht face high expectations but lack certainty around infrastructure investments (such as the Merwedelijn), national alignment, and private sector coordination. This makes long-term planning difficult and increases the risk of stagnation.

At the same time, this decentralised and resource-scarce landscape also requires a new kind of governance craftsmanship. In the absence of top-down direction, municipalities and regions must learn to build cooperation step by step, through informal coalitions, trust-building, and negotiated alignment. The framework developed in this thesis helps to identify where such cooperation can emerge, and what preconditions, narrative, institutional, and financial, are required to support it. The historical comparison to Leidsche Rijn highlights how far the governance context has shifted, and how much effort will be needed to construct equally robust cooperation under today's decentralised model.

## 4. The Implementation of Area Development

The previous chapter examined the shift in Dutch spatial planning over recent decades, from a centrally steered model to a more fragmented and decentralized governance landscape. This transition has reduced the state's ability to unilaterally guide development, making successful implementation increasingly reliant on regional coalitions, shared interests, and aligned resources.

This chapter builds on that diagnosis by examining how area development can serve as a governance strategy under these conditions. Rather than treating implementation as a technical project phase, the focus here is on how area development becomes possible, through legitimacy, coordination, and resource mobilisation. This perspective aligns with what De Zeeuw (2020) terms *Gebiedsontwikkeling 2.0*: a shift from blueprint planning to adaptive, network-based development. Collaboration, timing, and linking public and private value creation are now central to success. Area development today is not directed from above but shaped through strategic coalitions.

Verheul et al. (2019) offer a helpful framework to understand this, identifying three enabling conditions: narratives (which provide direction and legitimacy), networks (which organise actors), and resources (financial, legal, and institutional capacities). These are not passive inputs but must be actively built and aligned. Buitelaar et al. (2025) extend this analysis by showing how developers act as institutional entrepreneurs, shaping the rules of the game rather than simply following them. Their study of Rijnenburg reveals how private actors use framing, lobbying, and coalition-building to influence outcomes. While this can fill governance gaps, it can also introduce new tensions.

In contested settings like Rijnenburg, implementation depends on three dimensions: willingness (shared ambition), ability (institutional and legal capacity), and sustainability (long-term trust and legitimacy). As Steenbergen (2022) argues, provinces can support this process, but only by engaging flexibly across formal and informal governance arenas.

This chapter explores how regional cooperation enables, or fails to enable, area development. It analyses how shared narratives, actor coalitions, and resources interact under conditions of uncertainty, preparing the ground for the comparative case analysis of Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg that follows.

### 4.1 From spatial concept to governance instrument

Area development in the Netherlands has traditionally functioned not only as a spatial design concept but as a strategic governance approach, one that links urban ambitions to political, institutional, and economic realities. Under the centralized governance model of the VINEX era, area development was largely state-driven. The national government provided spatial direction through policy frameworks such as the fourth Nota and VINEX, and legal tools to support implementation. Municipalities, in turn, played a leading role in project execution, often in close coordination with provincial authorities and regional platforms (Buitelaar, 2023; De Zeeuw et al., 2020). Within this framework, area development was perceived as a relatively linear and technocratic process, one in which approved plans, designated roles, and secured funding would predictably lead to physical realization.

As explored in Chapter 3, this institutional arrangement has undergone a profound transformation. The national government has withdrawn from directive spatial planning, and key instruments have either been dismantled or decentralized (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2022). Concurrently, the formal status of regional governance structures like the WGR+ regions has been eroded, limiting institutional capacity for cross-boundary coordination (Van Steenbergen, 2022). In this new reality, area development can no longer be considered a default instrument of implementation; instead, it is something that must be actively enabled through coordination, alignment, and negotiation.

This institutional shift underpins the emergence of what Friso de Zeeuw (2020) terms '*Gebiedsontwikkeling 2.0*': an approach that replaces vertical steering with adaptive governance, wherein governments act less as directors and more as enablers. This contemporary model is defined by selective intervention, network-based collaboration, and the entrepreneurial behaviour of both public and private actors (De Zeeuw, 2020; Verheul et al., 2019). Governments no longer possess a complete package of legal, financial, and organizational instruments. Instead, their role is to broker interests, facilitate strategic coalitions, and manage uncertainty in a fragmented institutional landscape.

In this context, area development functions as a governance strategy only when certain conditions are in place. As Buitelaar et al. (2025) show in their analysis of Rijnenburg, developers increasingly act as institutional entrepreneurs, working to influence zoning decisions and regulatory frameworks in their favor, often in the absence of proactive public leadership. Planning has thus become an endogenous process, shaped not only by public intent but also by the agency and strategies of market actors. (Buitelaar et al. 2025). This dynamic highlights the importance of institutional capacity and legal flexibility as enablers of cooperation.



Moreover, successful area development requires sound narratives that frame and legitimize intervention (Verheul et al., 2019). These narratives are crucial for mobilizing actor networks and aligning stakeholder perspectives. As Van der Krabben et al. (2023) emphasize, the availability of financial resources, whether through value capture, public investment, or land readjustment, is another key determinant of feasibility. But just as critical is the alignment of non-financial resources, such as political commitment, institutional trust, and organizational continuity.

Steering this complex constellation requires a shift from formal authority to strategic coordination, a point echoed by Allmendinger et al. (2015), who describe emerging governance arrangements as “soft spaces” where boundaries are fluid, and legitimacy is derived from collaborative performance rather than hierarchical control. In this light, implementation should not be seen as a final project phase following planning. Rather, it is a dynamic process of enabling, aligning, and adapting, one that demands the active creation of conditions under which area development becomes operable. It is here that the concept of implementation regains strategic depth, no longer assumed but constantly renegotiated.

The following sections examine these enabling conditions in greater detail, beginning with the role of regional cooperation, and continuing through the mechanisms of narrative formation, actor mobilization, resource alignment, and adaptive steering.

## **4.2 Regional cooperation as precondition**

In contemporary Dutch spatial planning, the implementation of large-scale area development is increasingly hindered by three structural challenges: fragmented decision-making, limited financial capacity at the local level, and conflicting stakeholder interests. As outlined in Chapter 4, these issues are the result of a broader decentralisation trend in which municipalities are tasked with complex planning responsibilities, yet often lack the financial means, land positions, or institutional scaffolding to act effectively.

In this context, regional cooperation can be hypothesised as a governance strategy that may help mitigate these constraints. Defined here as the collaborative coordination of public and private actors across administrative boundaries to align decisions, pool resources, and negotiate shared goals, regional cooperation offers the potential to address implementation barriers that individual municipalities cannot overcome alone. It creates a platform where interests can be balanced, infrastructures synchronised, and investment strategies coordinated beyond the limits of local jurisdictions (Steenbergen, 2022; Verheul et al., 2019).

However, regional cooperation is not a fixed institutional form. It is often informal, negotiated, and dependent on willingness, leadership, and trust, rather than statutory authority. As Buitelaar et al. (2025) argue, in the absence of strong public steering mechanisms, cooperation must often be built from the ground up, relying on institutional entrepreneurship and soft power rather than formal mandates. This makes regional cooperation both promising and fragile: its success hinges on actors’ ability to create shared platforms for decision-making in a governance environment that is increasingly decentralised, and resource constrained.

From a hypothetical perspective, one could argue that if designed with sufficient institutional support and strategic intent, regional cooperation could simultaneously address the three central barriers to implementation. First, it could reduce decision-making fragmentation by embedding planning within a broader spatial logic. Second, it could unlock new financial instruments through collective investment strategies or co-financing arrangements. Third, it could mediate conflicting interests by fostering shared narratives and governance continuity across elections and administrations.

Yet this potential is conditional. Without the creation of robust coordinating structures, clear escalation mechanisms, and a commitment to long-term institutional learning, regional cooperation risks remaining symbolic. It must therefore be treated not as a background condition, but as a core component of implementation itself, an institutional field in which governance is constructed, contested, and stabilised (Allmendinger et al., 2015).

## **4.3 The actors: assembling governance capacity**

Regional cooperation offers the arena within which area development unfolds, but it is the constellation of actors operating within this arena that ultimately shapes the direction and outcome of development. In the context of Gebiedsontwikkeling 2.0, characterized by decentralization and institutional fragmentation (De Zeeuw, 2017), the success of area development hinges on the alignment and coordination of a heterogeneous network of stakeholders. These include public authorities, private developers, financial

institutions, civil society organizations, and planning intermediaries, each with distinct roles, mandates, and resources (Verheul et al., 2019; Steenbergen, 2022).

Public actors, particularly municipalities, continue to bear legal responsibility for spatial planning, zoning, and local infrastructure coordination. However, they frequently lack financial autonomy, land positions, and long-term instruments necessary to act decisively (Buitelaar, 2023). Provincial governments and national ministries may offer strategic frameworks or co-funding through programs such as NOVEX (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2022), but tend to avoid direct operational involvement. As a result, no single actor holds a dominant position, and governance must instead emerge through negotiated alignment, what Verheul et al. (2019) describe as “configurational governance,” wherein cooperation is contingent upon shared narratives, cross-sectoral networks, and strategic resource bundling.

Private actors, developers, housing associations, and institutional investors, have assumed an increasingly central role in initiating and financing area development, especially as public resources have become constrained since the 2008 financial crisis (Heurkens et al., 2020). Their involvement, however, is contingent on favourable conditions: regulatory stability, political support, and economic viability. As Buitelaar et al. (2025) demonstrate, developers are not passive recipients of policy but act as institutional entrepreneurs, seeking to shape land-use rules, influence zoning decisions, and reconfigure institutional settings to serve their development interests. While such agency can catalyse progress, it may also conflict with long-term public interests, especially when rent-seeking behaviours dominate (van der Krabben et al., 2023).

Implementation ultimately depends on the operational capacity of a limited group of public and private actors who possess the legal authority, expertise, and capital to manage key functions such as land policy, infrastructure provision, permitting, and investment coordination. These actors wield power not just through formal mandates but also through institutional memory, strategic networks, and technical competencies (Steenbergen, 2022; De Zeeuw, 2020).

Since the 1990s, the Dutch government has increasingly outsourced policy development and technical planning to external consultants and ad hoc advisory bodies, a trend reinforced by decentralization, New Public Management reforms, and the dismantling of traditional expert institutions (Buitelaar, 2023). This “externalization” of advisory capacity has resulted in knowledge fragmentation, diminished institutional continuity, and weakened internal policy expertise. Consequently, municipalities often depend on external advisors to manage complex planning tasks, coordinate stakeholders, or produce feasibility studies, yet this reliance can hinder coherent policy steering and institutional learning.

The delegation of critical governance tasks to consultants also raises questions of accountability and ownership, particularly in complex, long-term projects where the public interest is diffused and contested. As Steenbergen (2022) notes, the province can act as a stabilizing intermediary in such settings, but only when it commits to sustained engagement and strategic framing.

These dynamics highlight the importance of analysing how authority, capacity, and legitimacy are distributed and enacted in contemporary area development. The next section turns to the concept of steering, examining how governance can be organized and maintained in fragmented, multi-actor settings, where formal power is limited and strategic coordination is essential.

#### **4.4 The narrative: the starting point for action**

In fragmented and decentralized planning contexts, the implementation of area development cannot rely solely on formal authority, regulatory power, or financial incentives. A critical, yet often underappreciated, component in enabling area development is the construction and alignment of a shared narrative. Narratives serve as cognitive frameworks that give meaning to development goals, align diverse interests, and help justify collective action across institutional boundaries. They are, in essence, the starting point for action (De Zeeuw et al., 2020; Verheul et al., 2019).

A narrative in area development is more than a project vision or communication strategy. It is a story about why development is needed, what it aims to achieve, and how it contributes to broader societal goals such as sustainability, housing equity, or regional economic vitality. Narratives help actors frame their roles and responsibilities, reduce uncertainty, and generate the legitimacy needed to mobilize support and investment. As Verheul et al. (2019) argue, a coherent and unifying narrative is essential to establish a common understanding of the problem and to guide collective decision-making.

A key part of that narrative, often taken for granted, is the infrastructure that connects the development to its wider surroundings. Whether through roads, rail, or other forms of mobility, a sound and credible infrastructure strategy is essential to make a development legible, accessible, and attractive to both residents and investors. An area must not only be desirable in abstract terms, it must also be reachable. If an area lacks adequate public transport or road access, its narrative of livability, sustainability, or integration

quickly unravels. In this sense, infrastructure is not just a technical enabler but a narrative cornerstone, proof that the development is feasible, supported, and future-proof.

In practice, area development often involves competing or overlapping narratives. Public authorities may emphasize housing shortages or sustainability transitions, while private actors may frame development in terms of market potential and investment return. Civil society actors may introduce narratives of environmental justice or social inclusion, and regional governments may promote spatial balance or mobility integration. These different framings can coexist, but when they conflict or remain unresolved, they tend to undermine cooperation and stall implementation (Verheul et al., 2019).

The absence of a clear narrative can be particularly problematic in multi-actor environments. Without a shared storyline, actors may struggle to define common goals or may perceive the development as lacking direction or legitimacy. This makes it difficult to coordinate action, secure public support, or attract investment. A weak or fragmented narrative often results in a lack of urgency, uncertainty over priorities, and conflicting expectations about outcomes. In such cases, area development risks remaining an abstract ambition rather than becoming an operational governance strategy (Verheul et al., 2019).

Constructing a narrative is not a purely technical task. It is a political and communicative process that requires leadership, trust-building, and the ability to synthesize diverse perspectives into a compelling storyline. Successful narratives often emerge through iterative dialogue among stakeholders, supported by framing expertise from public officials, advisors, or communication professionals. They are responsive to context, capable of evolving over time, and grounded in both local realities and wider policy agendas (ibid.).

In recent years, the growing emphasis on themes such as climate adaptation, circular economy, and inclusive urban growth has broadened the narrative landscape. This offers opportunities for integration but also increases the complexity of alignment. In such a context, a well-constructed narrative functions as a strategic anchor. It connects long-term objectives to short-term decisions, frames spatial interventions as part of larger societal goals, and helps bridge institutional, political, and professional divides (De Zeeuw et al., 2020).

#### **4.5 The resources: the conditions for making area development feasible**

While a well-functioning governance arena and a sound narrative are essential preconditions for area development, they are not sufficient in themselves. For area development to become operable as a governance strategy, it must be underpinned by a robust implementation of resources. Resources provide actors with the capacity to negotiate, commit, coordinate, and ultimately execute plans. In the context of Gebiedsontwikkeling 2.0, characterized by decentralization, institutional fragmentation, and a diminished public sector role (De Zeeuw, 2020), the availability, accessibility, and strategic alignment of both hard and soft resources plays a decisive role in determining whether area development can progress from vision to realization.

Hard resources refer to the tangible, structural inputs required for spatial development: land ownership and availability, financial capital, legal instruments, zoning rights, and technical infrastructure. Under the VINEX regime, many of these resources were centrally managed. Municipalities frequently held land positions, benefited from generous national subsidies, and implemented spatial plans that were supported by robust statutory frameworks and policy hierarchies (De Zeeuw, 2020). This created a relatively stable and predictable implementation context in which the state absorbed many of the financial and political risks.

However, as shown by van der Krabben et al. (2023), this central control has since eroded. Land is increasingly in private hands, while national investment instruments have either been scaled down or made conditional. Public budgets are limited, and municipalities must now negotiate access to land and co-financing from private parties who often have competing interests. The outcome is an implementation context marked by dependency, negotiation, and mutual incompleteness: no single actor possesses the full range of hard inputs required to drive development independently. These dynamics are particularly visible in fragmented regions or contested development zones such as Rijnenburg, where developers act strategically to align zoning and investment trajectories with market incentives (Buitelaar et al., 2025).

Soft resources, less tangible but equally vital, include knowledge, expertise, institutional trust, administrative capacity, and political commitment (Verheul et al., 2019; Steenbergen, 2022). These resources enable actors to manage complex multi-actor processes, navigate legal uncertainties, and maintain continuity across political and administrative cycles. In decentralized and adaptive planning environments, soft resources become even more important. As Allmendinger et al. (2015) explain, planning increasingly takes place in “soft spaces” with fluid boundaries and informal arrangements, where negotiation and trust substitute for hierarchical control.

Crucially, soft resources often determine the success of implementation, especially when hard resources are fragmented. For example, a skilled area developer, project manager, or provincial broker can

play a pivotal role in aligning interests and sustaining collaboration (Steenbergen, 2022). Conversely, the loss of institutional memory, due to turnover, reorganization, or reliance on external consultants, can destabilize even well-financed projects (Buitelaar, 2023). The ongoing externalization of planning expertise, driven by New Public Management reforms, has further weakened in-house capacity at municipal levels, complicating strategic coordination and long-term oversight.

Furthermore, hard and soft resources are interdependent. Financial investment without political legitimacy can trigger public backlash. Land without zoning rights is inert. Technical expertise without narrative alignment can result in fragmented interventions (van der Krabben et al., 2023; Verheul et al., 2019). Conversely, institutional trust and collaborative culture can compensate for material constraints by enabling joint investment, risk-sharing, and adaptive planning.

Many stalled development projects can be traced to the absence of a single key resource: a strategic land parcel, a binding legal instrument, or a coordinating actor. This highlights the importance of early resource mapping and gap analysis in the governance process (De Zeeuw, 2020; Verheul et al., 2019). Addressing such gaps requires not only institutional foresight but also adaptive management, an ability to recalibrate strategies considering changing resource constellations and political conditions.

#### **4.6 The implementation: aligning governance in area development**

Area development is not a governance instrument that operates by default. In today's decentralized and fragmented institutional environment, the successful implementation of area development requires deliberate effort to bring together actors, narratives, and resources in a way that produces both collective direction and operational capacity. This process of implementation, the alignment of governance elements into a coherent and actionable strategy, is at the heart of enabling area development as a mode of governance.

As formulated by Verheul et al. (2019), the implementation of area development depends on the alignment of three interrelated elements for implementation: narratives, actors, and resources. These are not isolated building blocks, but co-dependent conditions that together shape whether development can take form and proceed in practice. Narratives provide the rationale, actors provide the agency, and resources provide the means. Area development becomes operable when these three components are strategically configured and maintained in balance over time.

This idea resonates with broader governance theory. Stoker (1998) describes governance as a condition in which "the capacity to get things done does not rest on the power of government to command or use its authority." Instead, governance requires constructing the conditions for collective action through interdependent relationships among public and private actors. In this view, implementation is not a matter of issuing directives, but of mobilizing coordination across dispersed nodes of authority. It is precisely this form of "governing without government" that makes implementation work both essential and difficult.

This challenge becomes even more visible when viewed through the lens of multi-level governance, as theorized by Hooghe and Marks (2003). They distinguish between two types of governance: Type I, which consists of nested, general-purpose jurisdictions (as in traditional hierarchical government), and Type II, which refers to flexible, task-specific and overlapping jurisdictions. Area development in its current form is increasingly enacted within a Type II governance landscape. It unfolds through informal networks, ad hoc regional coalitions, and project-based alliances that lack permanent structure or formal authority. In this context, stable implementations are harder to achieve and maintaining them over time requires constant adjustment.

One of the core difficulties of configuring area development lies in the non-linearity of its governance logic. The presence of committed actors is not enough if narratives do not align; nor are resources useful if no legitimate coalition exists to deploy them. Conversely, strong narratives or funding opportunities may go unrealized if key stakeholders are absent or unwilling to commit. This non-linearity introduces both strategic risk and opportunity: well-timed efforts to connect elements can produce momentum, while misalignment can delay or derail progress altogether.

Moreover, the implementation is not a one-time effort. It is a continuous, adaptive process, shaped by shifts in political leadership, economic conditions, institutional capacity, and public sentiment. Governance actors must be capable of detecting misalignments, rebuilding coalitions, and reframing narratives as conditions change. This makes implementation both a strategic and a managerial task, requiring foresight, negotiation skills, and institutional resilience.

Understanding implementation as a governance practice helps explain why some area development initiatives manage to advance under adverse conditions, while others remain stalled despite technical feasibility or broad support. It highlights that the question is not only whether area development is planned,

but whether it is governed in such a way that actors, narratives, and resources can be aligned into an actionable whole.

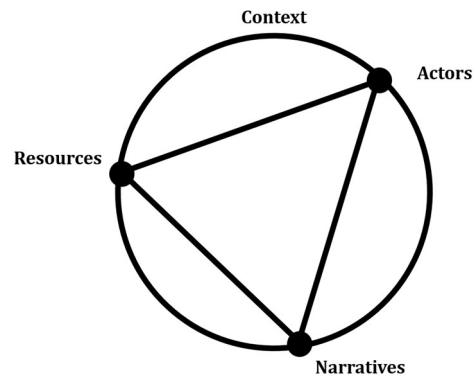


Figure 6: The implementation of elements (Verheul et al., 2019)

#### 4.7 The steering of area development

In today's complex governance landscape, steering area development is no longer a matter of top-down authority. Traditional hierarchical control has become less effective in fragmented, actor-rich environments where no single party holds full decision-making power. Instead, steering must be understood as the practice of guiding, enabling, and coordinating across multiple actors, often without formal control (Verheul et al., 2019). In this thesis, steering is treated as a flexible governance function, ranging from soft, informal dialogue to formal regulation, used to align ambitions, manage conflicts, and maintain momentum. As the case of Rijnenburg shows, when no actor is able or willing to take the lead in more directive forms of steering, development risks stalling despite early willingness. Effective steering, therefore, depends not just on authority, but on timing, legitimacy, and institutional capacity to act when needed.

As Stoker (1998) argues, governance involves the creation of conditions for ordered rule and collective action through mechanisms that do not rest on the command-and-control power of the state. This reorientation requires governance actors to develop new ways of influencing outcomes, what Stoker calls "steering without rowing." Governments must act not as dominant authorities but as conveners, brokers, and strategic enablers who can bring together fragmented capabilities into temporary alignments. In area development, this often means navigating political sensitivities, aligning divergent ambitions, and enabling decisions under uncertainty.

Steering in this context is primarily about maintaining the implementation outlined in the previous section. That is, ensuring that narratives remain aligned, actors remain engaged and cooperative, and resources remain available and directed toward collective goals. This process rarely follows a linear or formalized path. Instead, it requires adaptive, context-sensitive strategies that can flexibly respond to shifting coalitions, legal uncertainties, or emerging policy agendas.

Four general steering roles are commonly recognized in the literature on area development and governance (De Zeeuw et al., 2020; Verheul et al., 2019):

1. **Connecting:** bringing together relevant stakeholders, bridging policy sectors, and linking different levels of government or governance arenas. This often includes mediating between public and private actors and fostering trust.
2. **Stimulating:** creating momentum by framing the urgency of development and encouraging actor commitment through visioning, pilot projects, or public discourse.
3. **Regulating:** defining spatial and legal boundaries, setting planning conditions, and managing risk through zoning, legal agreements, or procedural frameworks. While weakened, this formal power still plays a role in shaping trajectories.
4. **Giving Direction:** exercising political leadership by providing direction and accountability, even when formal mandates are weak. This can include the strategic use of public investments, agenda-setting, or the activation of institutional memory.

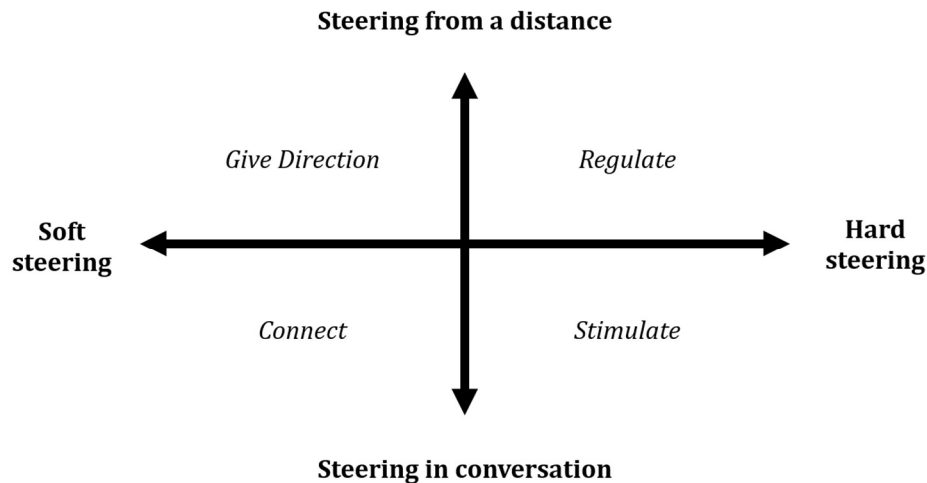


Figure 7: Steering of area development (Verheul et al., 2019)

These forms of steering in Gebiedsontwikkeling 2.0 are typically exercised in combination and are highly context dependent. In some cases, the presence of a politically credible and institutionally embedded public actors such as a municipality, province, or development agency, who can articulate a long-term vision, mobilize actors, and maintain accountability functions as the decisive enabling factor (Steenbergen, 2022; De Zeeuw, 2020). In other cases, particularly in fragmented or contested development contexts, steering relies more heavily on process facilitation, relational capital, and institutional entrepreneurship (Buitelaar et al., 2025; Verheul et al., 2019).

A defining characteristic of steering under contemporary conditions is that it is often asymmetrical and distributed. Different actors hold influence over different parts of the process, municipalities may control zoning, developers may control land or capital, while provinces may act as brokers or frame strategic coherence. No single actor typically holds authority over the entire development chain, and as a result, success is not guaranteed by formal mandates but must be constructed through strategic coordination and mutual dependency (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Steenbergen, 2022).

This fragmented influence demands a high degree of coordination, role clarity, and iterative learning among actors. It also underscores the vulnerability of area development to governance failure, not necessarily due to lack of will, but due to the inability of any single actor to stabilize the system or sustain momentum over time (Verheul et al., 2019; Buitelaar, 2023).

In this light, steering is less about hierarchical control and more about keeping the process open, inclusive, and coherent enough to allow for the dynamic alignment of narrative, actor constellation, and resource base. This kind of steering aligns with what Hajer (2003) calls "institutional design in conditions of uncertainty" form of governance that depends on the capacity to hold together a 'performative coalition' around a shared storyline.

Such steering requires not only formal instruments, such as spatial visions or investment programs, but also relational competencies: the ability to build trust, mediate conflicts, and sustain cooperation across phases and political cycles. Institutional memory, long-term engagement, and political legitimacy become strategic assets in maintaining continuity and collective learning (Verheul et al., 2019; Steenbergen, 2022).

In summary, steering in area development today constitutes a governance challenge defined by soft power, negotiated influence, and adaptive coordination. In the absence of directive authority or comprehensive control, the capacity to steer is determined by the ability to shape decision-making processes, frame legitimate narratives, and sustain alignment across time and uncertainty (Buitelaar et al., 2025; Allmendinger et al., 2015).

## 4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the conditions under which area development becomes implementable as a governance strategy in the context of a decentralized and fragmented planning system. Unlike earlier periods characterized by state-led coordination, implementation today involves the continuous alignment of institutional, political, and societal dynamics. Area development is no longer guaranteed by statutory instruments or public control over land and funding, but must be actively enabled through cooperation, negotiation, and adaptive governance.

Implementation, in this context, does not refer to a linear or technical phase. Rather, it reflects the ability to create and sustain a governance environment in which development can unfold. Drawing on the framework proposed by Verheul et al. (2019), this chapter has shown that successful implementation depends on the strategic alignment of narratives, actors, and resources. These three dimensions are co-dependent. If one is missing or poorly coordinated with the others, area development is unlikely to materialize or endure.

A central insight from this analysis is that infrastructure, particularly in the form of accessible, reliable transport connections, is not just a physical prerequisite, but a narrative and institutional enabler. Without credible plans for public transport or road access, the story of integration, sustainability, or regional livability quickly loses traction. Infrastructure grounds the spatial narrative in feasibility, reassures market actors, and justifies public investment. In this sense, infrastructure must be considered as a fourth pillar, crosscutting and supporting the core dimensions of narrative, actor alignment, and resource mobilisation.

This perspective aligns with the governance theory described by Stoker (1998), which defines governance as a shift away from centralized authority toward distributed decision-making across interdependent networks. Steering, in this environment, is less about control and more about facilitating, connecting, and directing processes through soft forms of influence. Political leadership, framing strategies, and institutional trust are increasingly important mechanisms for guiding action in the absence of hierarchical power.

In addition, the structure of multi-level governance, as theorized by Hooghe and Marks (2003), frames area development as a process embedded in overlapping jurisdictions, informal collaborations, and functional networks. These governance settings offer flexibility but lack the stability and clarity that characterized earlier planning regimes. As a result, the task of configuring development must be continuously revisited and re-negotiated.

Throughout this chapter, three underlying conditions for enabling area development have been emphasized: willingness, ability, and sustainability. Willingness relates to the presence of a shared narrative and a sense of collective purpose. Ability refers to the legal competences, institutional mandates, and resource availability that empower actors to act. Sustainability concerns the long-term resilience of governance arrangements, including trust, institutional memory, and legitimacy. In light of the above, a fourth implicit condition can be highlighted: connectivity, not only in physical terms, but also in symbolic and institutional terms. When these conditions are not met or break down over time, area development loses its operational capacity.

Under the current conditions of Area Development 2.0, implementation is both more necessary and more difficult. It relies on the presence of enabling governance environments, supported by intentional coordination, adaptive leadership, and a shared commitment to common goals. Infrastructure, like narrative, is not a technical afterthought, but a central component of legitimacy and feasibility. Without these interconnected supports, area development risks remaining an abstract ambition rather than a functional strategy.

## 5. Analytical Framework

This chapter introduces the analytical framework that will guide the comparison of regional cooperation in the cases of Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg. The framework builds on the theoretical foundations laid in Chapters 3 and 4 and is developed in response to a key gap in the current understanding of area development: how cooperation is formed, becomes operational, and is steered over time in fragmented governance environments.

Various frameworks exist to study area development, most notably the typologies provided by Friso de Zeeuw, who focused on market and institutional models for land development (De Zeeuw et al., 2020). While these offer important structural insights, they often lack a dynamic governance perspective that captures the evolving relationships and strategic alignments necessary for implementation.

The implementation model developed by Verheul et al. (2019) provides a valuable starting point for understanding how actors, narratives, and resources are aligned. However, Verheul's model is primarily descriptive and does not explicitly account for the conditions under which cooperation becomes possible, nor does it systematically incorporate the steering mechanisms required to guide and adjust area development over time. This thesis builds upon and extends that work by making the governance process itself visible and analysable, particularly in decentralised and institutionally fluid planning contexts.

To do so, the framework draws on key theoretical insights from Hooghe and Marks (2003) and Stoker (1998). Hooghe and Marks distinguish between different forms of multi-level governance, some more structured and stable, others task-specific and adaptive, which helps illuminate why regional cooperation varies across cases. Stoker's proposition that governance involves interaction between public, private, and civic actors, without relying solely on formal authority, supports the idea that cooperation must be actively constructed through institutional design, trust-building, and strategic coordination.

The framework developed in this thesis consists of three interrelated components:

1. **Conditions** – These are the institutional, political, and relational factors that enable or constrain cooperation. They include questions of willingness, ability, and commitment, and they form the groundwork upon which cooperation can emerge.
2. **Implementation** – This refers to how elements for implementation (actors, narratives, and resources) are aligned into a coherent and actionable strategy. It assesses the capacity to move from informal coordination to operational planning.
3. **Steering** – Steering refers to the mechanisms through which cooperation is guided and maintained over time. In this thesis, the concept of steering is treated both analytically and empirically, using a quadrant model that distinguishes between soft and hard steering, and between coordination “in conversation” versus “at a distance.” This model is not imposed as a prescriptive pathway but is used to trace the steering trajectories that unfold within each case.

The three components are best visualized as three interrelated phases of regional cooperation. Starting at the conditions, moving to the implementation and finalizing at the third phase of steering. It's an overlap between phases of continuous alignment between the components. As for example: when the development demands a change in steering, this must be configured in the implementation as well as the conditions of the actors within the cooperation. This continuous alignment is key for the cooperation (Allmendinger et al., 2015).



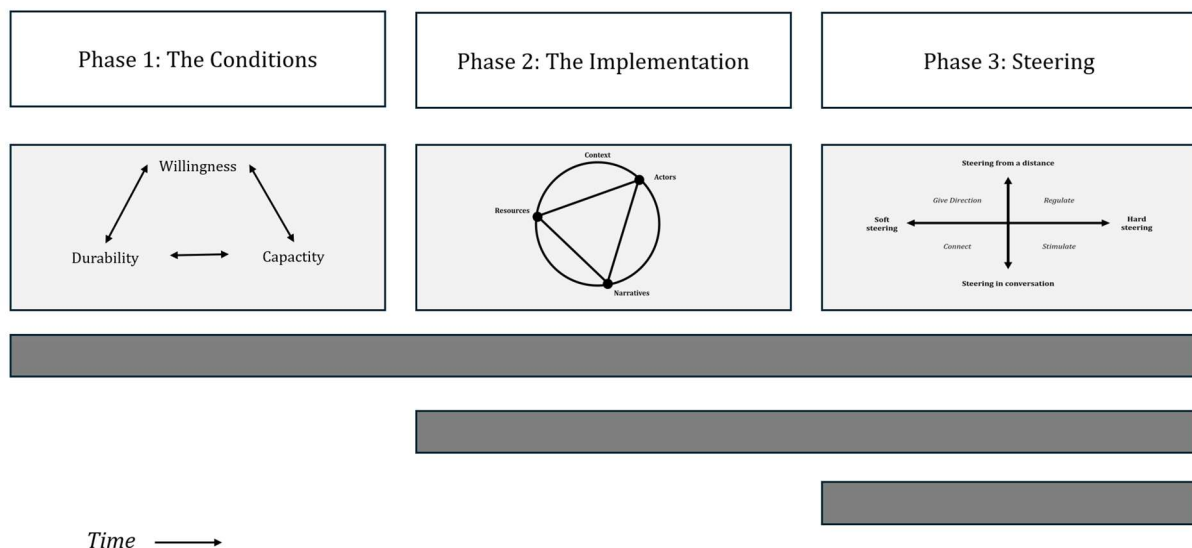


Figure 8: The analytical framework (own work)

The aim of the framework is not to model ideal forms of cooperation, but to identify the enabling, or constraining, conditions that shape implementation. It is designed to be analytically flexible, allowing the researcher to enter the governance process at different points, whether through actors, narratives, or institutional constraints. At the same time, it is practically useful for planners and policymakers who must navigate today's more decentralised, politically complex, and resource-scarce development environment.

In this way, the framework contributes to a deeper understanding of how regional cooperation is not merely a backdrop to area development, but one of its foundational mechanisms, necessary for aligning interests, managing uncertainty, and translating planning ambitions into implemented outcomes.

## 5.1 Understanding area development through a governance lens

Area development is increasingly recognized not as a discrete project or planning instrument, but as a form of governance. It involves the coordination of multiple actors, interests, and resources across different institutional levels and sectors. In the Dutch context, where spatial planning has become more decentralized, fragmented, and dependent on negotiated cooperation (Buitelaar, 2023), this governance lens is essential to understand how area development functions, and why it often struggles to gain traction.

The governance perspective shifts attention from government as a central authority to governance as a multi-actor, multi-level process, where public and private actors interact under conditions of mutual dependence. According to Stoker (1998), this perspective is valuable not because it provides definitive answers, but because it helps identify the right questions, those concerning legitimacy, accountability, effectiveness, and power in a context where "governments must govern through others". These questions are especially pertinent in area development, where the formal instruments of control (e.g. land ownership, financial levers, planning mandates) are no longer concentrated in public hands, and where outcomes depend on complex forms of cooperation.

The shift from centralized, directive spatial planning to more adaptive and negotiated processes has been well documented in both Dutch and international literature. In the Netherlands, this transformation was accelerated by the weakening of national spatial planning policy after 2004 (Nota Ruimte) and the gradual withdrawal of the state from active land development (Buitelaar et al., 2025; Steenbergen, 2022). As a result, area development has become embedded in network-based governance arrangements, often constructed around informal cooperation and intermunicipal coalitions.

This governance setting also aligns with the model of multi-level governance described by Hooghe and Marks (2003). In their typology, area development today takes place mostly within Type II governance structures: flexible, task-specific, and overlapping institutional arrangements that are not bound by clearly nested hierarchies. This institutional form allows for tailored cooperation but also increases the risk of fragmentation, unclear mandates, and gaps in accountability.

From this perspective, area development cannot be analysed solely through planning outcomes or technical feasibility. Instead, it must be understood as the product of governance implementation, interdependent arrangements of actors, narratives, and resources that are constructed and maintained over time. These implementations are shaped by institutional conditions, strategic framing, and the steering efforts of actors who operate without guaranteed authority or enforcement mechanisms.

## 5.2 Conditions for implementation: willingness, ability and sustainability

The first element of the analytical framework concerns the conditions under which regional cooperation in area development can take root and endure. These are not given but must be cultivated through institutional arrangements, strategic alignment, and political effort. As introduced in Chapter 4, and drawing on Verheul et al. (2019), Stoker (1998), and Allmendinger et al. (2015), three key conditions are identified: willingness, ability, and commitment (see Section 4.2).

Willingness refers to the collective motivation of actors to participate in cooperation, often driven by a shared sense of urgency, mutual benefit, or alignment around a unifying narrative (see Section 4.4). Without this shared framing, coordination is difficult to initiate. However, willingness is inherently fragile and can erode without reinforcement through trust, reciprocity, and visible progress.

Ability concerns the practical and institutional capacity to act, such as access to legal instruments, financial resources, expertise, and organisational readiness. As discussed in Section 4.3, this capacity is often unequally distributed across actors, shaping their roles within a regional coalition. Ability is not merely technical; it is closely tied to political will and the strategic use of available instruments.

Commitment reflects the long-term durability of cooperation across changing political, institutional, and spatial contexts. It involves both formal continuity (e.g. agreements, institutional memory) and informal factors like trust and credibility. Particularly in fragmented planning environments, commitment determines whether early alignment can be sustained through later phases of uncertainty or transition.

These three conditions form the enabling environment in which implementation becomes possible. They do not constitute implementation themselves but define its feasibility. In the case study analysis, this framework will be used to assess how the presence, or absence, of these foundational elements shaped regional cooperation over time.

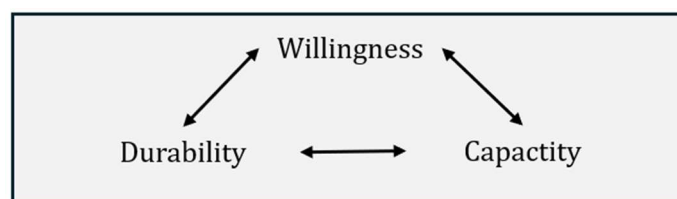


Figure 9: The conditions for implementation (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Stoker, 1998)

## 5.3 The implementation model: from vision to execution

At the heart of this analytical framework lies the concept of implementation, as developed by Verheul et al. (2019). Their model posits that the implementation of area development depends on the alignment of three key dimensions: narratives, actors, and resources. These elements do not function in isolation. Rather, they must reinforce and support one another to produce a stable and actionable governance arrangement. Area development becomes feasible not when these elements are merely present, but when they are effectively configured into a coherent structure capable of navigating complexity, conflict, and institutional change. Narratives provide the strategic frame that enables and gives direction to area development. They help define the problem, set goals, and justify action. Narratives also serve to connect local development ambitions to broader societal issues, such as climate adaptation, housing shortages, or mobility transitions, thereby enabling alignment across policy domains and governance levels (Verheul et al., 2019). A compelling and inclusive narrative fosters shared understanding and can generate political and societal support. Conversely, the absence of a unifying narrative can lead to conflicting agendas, disengagement, and fragmentation (ibid.).

Actors are institutions and individuals involved in shaping, negotiating, and implementing area development. These typically include municipalities, provinces, developers, landowners, water boards, and sometimes civil society organizations. In enabling settings, actor constellations are often unstable and must be continually rebuilt and maintained. Their alignment depends not only on formal roles and competences, but also on informal factors such as trust, relational history, and perceived fairness in the cooperation (Stoker, 1998; Verheul et al., 2019).

Resources refer to the material and immaterial inputs that enable action. These include tangible resources such as land ownership, financial capital, and legal instruments, as well as intangible resources like institutional knowledge, administrative capacity, and legitimacy. Verheul et al. (2019) argue that both hard and soft resources must be available and align able for area development to proceed. In many cases,

the resources needed are dispersed across actors, making cooperation a precondition for. When key resources are missing or inaccessible, whether funding, competences, or political support, area development efforts often stall, regardless of narrative strength or actor alignment (Buitelaar et al., 2025; Steenbergen, 2022).

Implementation is not a one-time arrangement but a dynamic and iterative process. Governance settings evolve over time due to leadership changes, institutional reform, economic shocks, or shifts in societal priorities. For this reason, an implementation that works at one stage of development may need to be renegotiated later. The capacity to adapt and reconfigure while maintaining coherence is thus critical to implementation success (Verheul et al., 2019).

This framework treats implementation as the core mechanism through which area development is made operational. It is not sufficient for narratives, actors, and resources to exist independently; they must be actively aligned. A breakdown in one dimension can destabilize the others, undermining the feasibility of implementation. This interdependence explains why certain area development initiatives can advance under complex conditions, while others stagnate despite technical readiness or political will.

The next section turns to the role of steering, the practices and strategies that keep implementations on track and responsive in the face of evolving governance conditions.

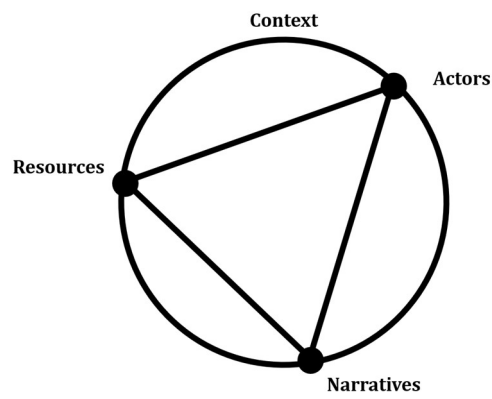


Figure 10: The implementation model (Verheul et al., 2019)

#### 5.4 The steering of regional cooperation: a continuous balancing act

Steering is not simply about exercising authority; it is about enabling direction, coherence, and adaptability within a complex governance setting. As Verheul et al. (2019) and Stoker (1998) argue, in contemporary area development, governance settings rarely progress in a linear planned fashion. Even when favourable conditions are present and an implementation of narratives, actors, and resources has been established, the process remains vulnerable to disruption. This is particularly the case in decentralized and multi-actor environments where no single actor holds full control. Under such conditions, steering becomes a critical function in sustaining cooperation, guiding decision-making, and adapting to evolving circumstances (Heurkens et al., 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Stoker, 1998).

As Stoker (1998) notes, governance today is less about issuing commands and more about enabling collective action through coordination, persuasion, and negotiation. Governments must increasingly “govern through others” and cannot rely on formal authority alone. Steering in this sense refers to the capacity to keep fragmented governance arrangements aligned, and to manage the dynamic interdependencies that emerge between actors, levels, and sectors over time.

In area development, steering involves a range of practices aimed at maintaining the implementation of narratives, actors, and resources. Verheul et al. (2019) conceptualize steering as one of the four forms of public influence in area development, alongside stimulating, regulating, and connecting. Steering entails providing strategic direction, safeguarding public values, and adjusting the pace and focus of development in response to shifting contexts. It is not simply about control, but about creating the conditions under which cooperation can be sustained and spatial strategies implemented.

Steering often requires a combination of formal instruments, such as land-use planning frameworks, legal agreements, and financial contributions, and informal capacities, including institutional memory, leadership, trust-building, and the ability to frame shared narratives. In many area development processes, steering is carried out by coordinating bodies or intermediary actors who operate as process managers or facilitators. These actors play a key role in bridging the gap between sectors, managing interdependencies, and keeping governance structures operational in the absence of strong hierarchical command (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Steenbergen, 2022).

In multi-level governance systems, as described by Hooghe and Marks (2003), steering becomes even more complex. Decisions are made across overlapping jurisdictions, and authority is distributed among actors with varying degrees of autonomy. Steering in this context requires sensitivity to institutional fragmentation and the ability to navigate different mandates, time horizons, and policy logics. This complexity also increases the risk of drift: where actor networks lose cohesion, narratives lose urgency, and resources are redirected elsewhere.

Moreover, steering is essential in maintaining commitment of governance implementations over time. Area development often unfolds over decades, and initial alignments must be renewed as political leadership changes, organizational structures evolve, and societal priorities shift. Without active steering, even well-functioning implementations may disintegrate due to institutional fatigue, shifting coalitions, or external shocks.

In sum, steering is the integrative and adaptive function that sustains governance implementations and enables implementation under conditions of institutional uncertainty. It is not a singular action, but a continuous practice that operates through multiple channels, formal and informal, visible and backstage. In this analytical framework, steering is treated as a necessary component that links and maintains the implementation of area development over time, shaping whether ambitions remain actionable and aligned with evolving governance realities.

#### 5.4.1 The steering model

Steering in area development is not a single act or linear sequence, it is a multi-dimensional, adaptive process that demands the ability to operate in different modes simultaneously. This thesis applies the steering quadrant model developed by Verheul et al. (2019) and further elaborated by De Zeeuw (2020), distinguishing between two intersecting dimensions: steering that is in conversation versus at a distance, and steering that is soft versus hard. These axes generate four distinct but interrelated quadrants:

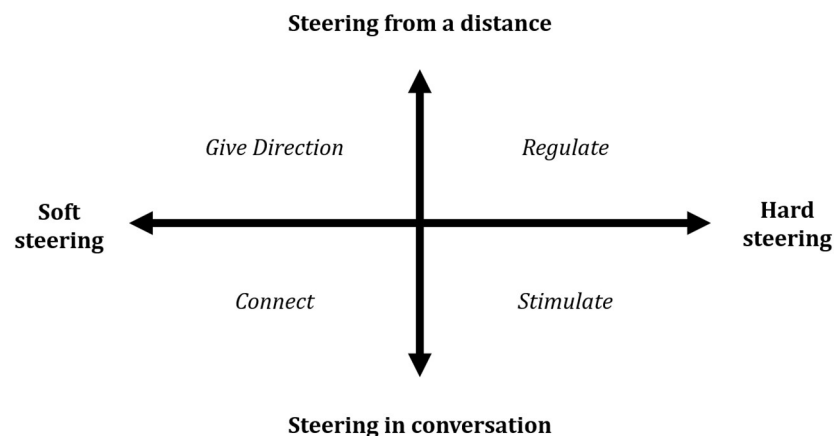


Figure 11: The steering model (Verheul et al. 2019)

What makes this model particularly valuable is that it moves beyond binary views of governance. As Beer et al. (2025) stresses in their work on urban area transformation, successful implementation requires the capacity to act in multiple modes at once, responding to different types of coordination needs, political tensions, and development phases. Area development is inherently messy and multi-actor and thus demands a form of governance that is equally multi-dimensional.

Rather than assuming a sequential trajectory, the steering model acknowledges that developments may require action in several quadrants simultaneously. For instance, while actors are negotiating long-term spatial visions in the connecting quadrant, immediate land-use decisions may require regulatory certainty or political leadership in the directing quadrant. This means that each quadrant must be occupied by actors with the authority, legitimacy, and resources to act. If no actor can enforce legal certainty, or no one takes responsibility for day-to-day coordination, governance vacuums emerge, and progress stalls.

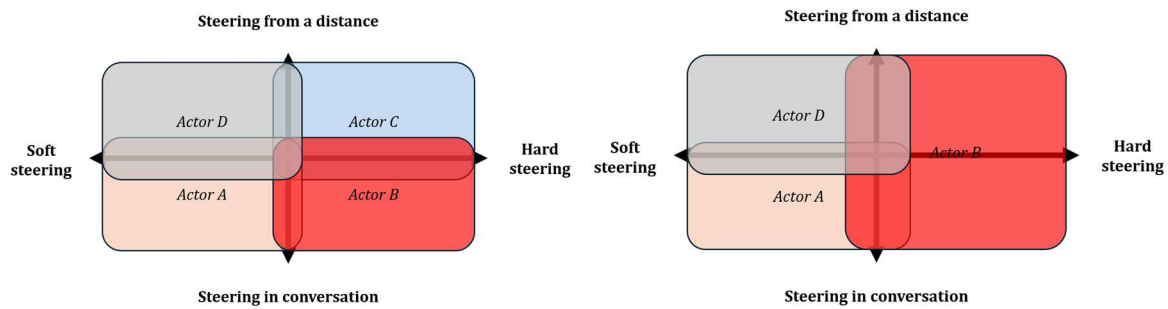


Figure 12 & 13: Examples of implementations of actors (own work)

Early stages of development typically involve connecting, through informal conversations, exploration, meetings, and trust-building (De Zeeuw, 2020). This is especially crucial in fragmented settings where no single actor holds dominant power. If successful, these early alignments allow for a shift into the stimulating quadrant, where ambitions are translated into shared visions, policy frameworks, or financial arrangements (Verheul et al., 2019). However, this only works if actors are also able to escalate into harder forms of governance when required.

The directing and regulating quadrants become essential when plans need to be enforced, conflicts resolved, or critical decisions taken under pressure. Here, the presence of public institutions with formal authority, such as municipalities, provinces, or national ministries, is crucial. As Beer et al. (2025) notes, these “institutional anchoring” ensure that ambition does not dissolve into symbolic planning or endless negotiation. Without enforcement capacity, spatial ambitions remain rhetorical.

This dynamic was visible in Leidsche Rijn, where the steering evolved across quadrants over time. The early alignment through the RBU (Regionaal Bestuur Utrecht) took place in the connecting quadrant, supported by national VINEX regulation in the regulating quadrant. As the BRU (Bestuur Region Utrecht) assumed a coordinating role, both directing and stimulating functions were institutionalized. Once roles stabilised and spatial and financial structures matured, centralized steering faded, confirming De Zeeuw’s (2020) insight that governance may shift toward lighter oversight when a project reaches operational maturity.

In sum, the steering quadrant is not a roadmap, but a diagnostic lens. It helps identify where steering is taking place, where gaps exist, and how governance can be made more adaptive. Critically, successful area development requires institutional presence across all four quadrants. This enables governance to connect, stimulate, direct, and regulate in response to evolving demands. If any quadrant remains unoccupied, cooperation risks becoming fragile and progress vulnerable, regardless of how promising the early phases may seem.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has developed an analytical framework to examine how regional cooperation enables or constrains the implementation of area development. The framework is grounded in the recognition that in today's decentralized and fragmented governance environment, cooperation does not arise naturally from shared goals or formal mandates alone. Instead, it must be actively constructed and maintained through institutional design, strategic alignment, and ongoing negotiation. Area development, particularly when it spans multiple jurisdictions and interests, depends on the capacity of governance arrangements to bring together the right actors, align narratives and resources, and sustain coordination over time (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Stoker, 1998; Van Steenberghe, 2022).

The framework consists of three interrelated components. First, it considers the conditions under which regional cooperation can emerge, focusing on willingness, institutional ability, and relational durability. These conditions shape whether actors recognise shared interests, have the tools to collaborate, and can maintain trust throughout uncertainty. Second, it addresses the implementation of cooperation, drawing from Verheul et al. (2019), but extending their model by situating implementation within broader institutional and political dynamics. Here, the alignment of actors, narratives, and resources forms the operational core through which area development is activated. Third, the framework introduces steering as a dynamic and often overlooked governance function. Steering refers to how cooperation is guided, escalated, or adapted over time, especially in response to conflict, institutional change, or project complexity. The steering component adds an important temporal and directional layer to the framework, highlighting how governance is not only built, but navigated.

Importantly, the framework is both diagnostic and flexible. It allows for structured comparison between cases, while also enabling reflection on where cooperation succeeds or breaks down. It is not designed to prescribe ideal governance models but to identify the enabling, or constraining, factors that shape implementation outcomes. This makes the framework not only analytically robust, but also practically useful for planners and policymakers dealing with long-term area development in uncertain institutional contexts.

The framework was reviewed by a panel of experts in the field of area development. Their feedback confirmed the relevance of the three-phase structure, conditions, implementation, and steering, and emphasised the importance of focusing on actor commitment and institutional durability. As one participant noted, “you should be prepared for two crises in every area development,” a comment that reinforces the framework's emphasis on resilience, adaptability, and the long-term nature of cooperative planning. The panel's remarks validate the framework as a meaningful contribution to both academic understanding and practical strategy (panel of experts, 2025).

The chapters that follow apply this framework to two empirical cases: Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg. Each case will be examined through the three lenses of the framework, allowing for a structured analysis of how cooperation was initiated, how governance was configured, and how the process was steered over time. This comparison will highlight not only differences in governance success but also offer lessons on how regional cooperation can be cultivated under shifting institutional conditions.



## 6. The lessons of Leidsche Rijn

Leidsche Rijn is one of the most extensive and influential area development projects in the Netherlands. As a designated VINEX location, the project aimed to deliver over 30,000 homes in the western periphery of Utrecht, alongside social infrastructure, commercial space, and high-quality public transport connections (Van den Hof, 2006). It represents a period of relatively centralised spatial planning, in which the Dutch national government played an active coordinating role, and regional cooperation was formalised through institutional structures such as the Bestuur Regio Utrecht (BRU) (De Zeeuw, 2020). In this context, Leidsche Rijn offers a valuable opportunity to study the functioning of regional cooperation under favourable institutional and political conditions.

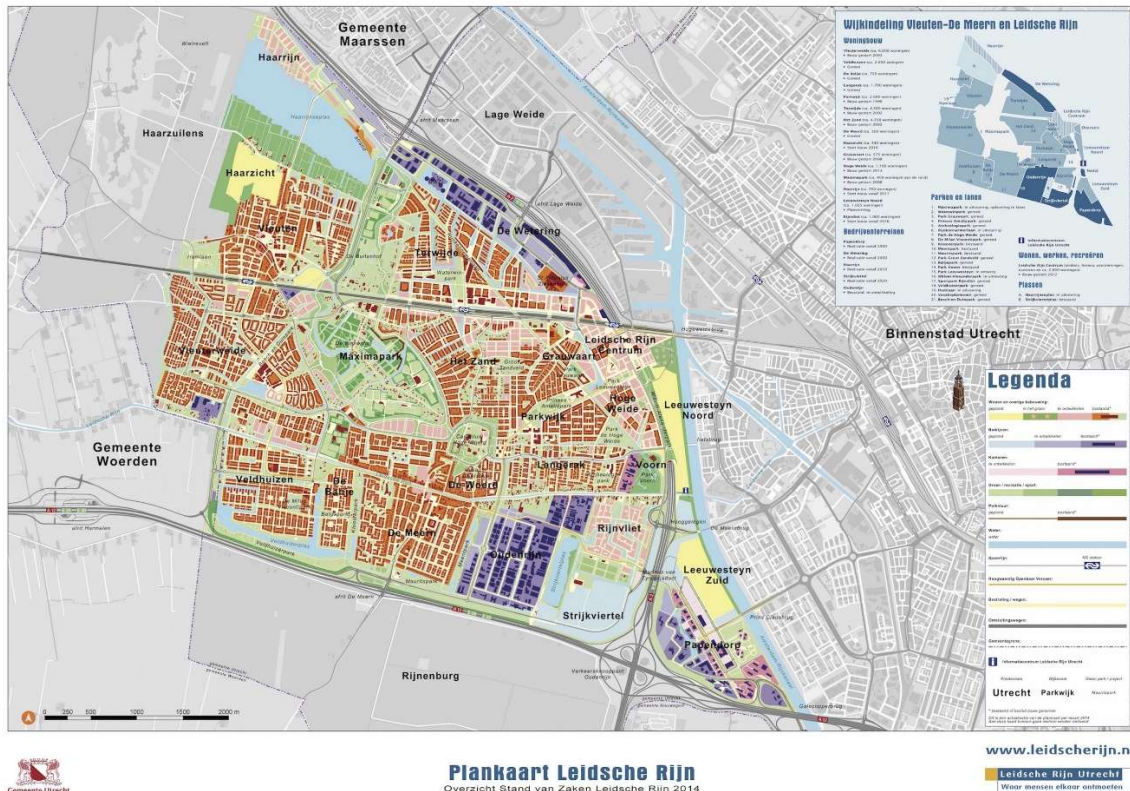


Figure 14: Map of Leidsche Rijn (Municipal, 2025)

The central question addressed in this chapter is: What are the main lessons, regarding regional cooperation, from the area development of Leidsche Rijn? Answering this question contributes to the broader aim of this thesis: to understand how regional cooperation enables or constrains the implementation of area development. Leidsche Rijn serves as a benchmark case that helps to identify key enabling factors, governance mechanisms, and institutional arrangements that supported effective cooperation.

This analysis applies the analytical framework introduced in Chapter 5. The framework conceptualises regional cooperation not as a static arrangement, but as a dynamic governance process composed of three interrelated elements. First, the conditions under which cooperation emerges, such as the willingness of actors to collaborate, their institutional ability to do so, and their commitment to shared goals. Second, the implementation of governance, how narratives, actor constellations, and resources are aligned and mobilised to advance development. Third, the steering mechanisms that ensure governance remains coherent over time, using both formal instruments and informal coordination (Stoker, 1998; Verheul et al., 2019). In addition to academic literature, including the in-depth study of Leidsche Rijn as a public-private partnership by Van den Hof (2006), this chapter draws on interviews with municipal planners, regional policymakers, and private developers directly involved in the project. These sources provide insight into both the formal institutional design and the informal dynamics that shaped cooperation over the course of the development.

The interviewed respondents were selected for their in-depth involvement and distinct perspectives on Leidsche Rijn. Respondent 1, an academic expert in area development, contributed essential historical context on the role of VINEX and regional governance in the 1990s. Respondent 2, a long-time project manager at the Municipality of Utrecht and participant in the BRU, provided insight into internal municipal dynamics and intermunicipal coordination. Respondent 4, a commercial developer directly involved in Leidsche Rijn, offered a private-sector perspective on land development, negotiation processes, and the spatial ambitions of the project. In addition to the interviews conducted for this thesis, a separate interview with Riek Bakker, assigned urban planner from the Municipality of Utrecht, provided valuable insight. As one of the key figures behind the initial vision of Leidsche Rijn, Bakker's reflections helped clarify the spatial, political, and institutional context in which the project took shape.

By applying the lens of the analytical framework, this chapter identifies the factors that contributed to the relatively successful regional cooperation behind Leidsche Rijn. These insights not only help to understand the case itself but also provide valuable lessons for ongoing and future developments, including Rijnenburg.

## **6.1 The Conditions of Leidsche Rijn: The VINEX era**

The emergence of regional cooperation around Leidsche Rijn in the 1990s was shaped by a specific constellation of conditions. This section analyses these through the lens of the analytical framework introduced in Chapter 5, focusing on three dimensions: willingness to cooperate, institutional ability to act, and the commitment of collaboration over time.

### **6.1.1 Willingness: political urgency and strategic positioning**

The willingness to engage in regional cooperation for Leidsche Rijn in the early 1990s was not self-evident, it was actively shaped through a convergence of national policy pressure, local strategic ambition, and institutional entrepreneurship (Respondent 2, 2025).

At the national level, the launch of the VINEX policy (Fourth Nota Extra) in 1991 established a new framework for urban expansion, identifying key locations for large-scale housing to absorb demographic growth. While major cities like Amsterdam and The Hague were quickly designated as part of the core Randstad strategy, Utrecht was conspicuously absent from these early discussions. This exclusion generated a sense of existential risk among local policy elites. As respondent 2 (Municipality of Utrecht) explained in the interview, "we feared Utrecht would remain a provincial city without regional leverage".

This marginalisation created a window of political urgency, which local actors rapidly exploited. Instead of waiting for recognition, they moved to proactively position Utrecht as a central urban hub within the broader Randstad vision. This was a pivotal act of what Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) call soft space-making, the crafting of informal, functional planning regions that transcend administrative borders. With no statutory regional government in place, informal alliances filled the void.

Among the key actors were a group of institutional entrepreneurs: notably, a professor at Utrecht University and the local Chamber of Commerce. Together, they initiated the Regionaal Bestuurlijk Overleg Utrecht (RBU), a coalition of municipalities that would later evolve into the Bestuur Regio Utrecht (BRU). These actors were not motivated by technical planning needs alone, but by the strategic imperative to embed Utrecht in national spatial planning discourse (Respondent 2, 2025).

Their shared goal was to reframe Utrecht's image from that of an isolated mid-sized city to a vital hinge in the west-east axis of the Netherlands. As respondent 1 put it: "We had to make clear that if you leave Utrecht out, you cut the Randstad in two". This process demonstrates how regional cooperation was not simply a reaction to top-down mandates, but also a bottom-up project of narrative construction and coalition formation (Respondent 1, 2025).

This emergent willingness extended beyond the public sector. Developers and infrastructure agencies, too, were drawn into the conversation as it became clear that the spatial scale and ambition of Leidsche Rijn would necessitate regional coordination on mobility, housing, and economic development. Thus, willingness became distributed: shared across institutions with different mandates but overlapping stakes in Utrecht's metropolitan future (Respondent 1, 2025; Respondent 2, 2025).

Finally, willingness was bolstered by the mutual benefit that cooperation promised. For national ministries, Utrecht's commitment to a large-scale VINEX location provided a much-needed urban extension in the centre of the country. For Utrecht and its neighbours, participation in such a programme ensured access to funding, infrastructure investment (including the A2 underpass and station development), and long-term spatial influence. In this sense, willingness was not just symbolic or moral, it was materially incentivised and institutionally reinforced (Bakker & Groenteman, 2024; Respondent 2, 2025).



### 6.1.2 Ability: A pragmatic response to limited resources

While the ambition to develop Leidsche Rijn was high, the actual ability to do so was shaped by institutional fragmentation and uneven capacities across jurisdictions. One of the most significant constraints in the early 1990s was the lack of a formal regional government tier. The Dutch governance structure, based on a strong role for municipalities and provinces, offered no official framework for coordinating planning across municipal borders. As such, when the proposed expansion area for Leidsche Rijn extended beyond Utrecht's territory into Vleuten–De Meern, it created a direct governance challenge (Respondent 2, 2025).

The western part of the Leidsche Rijn development lay within the boundaries of the then-independent municipality of Vleuten–De Meern. This meant that the successful realization of Leidsche Rijn required close collaboration between two municipalities with different administrative cultures, political leadership, and levels of planning capacity (Respondent 2, 2025).

Utrecht, as the initiating and financially constrained city, had a clear interest in realizing the project quickly and at scale, especially given its Article 12 status and the pressure to regain financial independence. Vleuten–De Meern, by contrast, was a smaller, more suburban municipality with a greater reliance on market-oriented planning, and a relatively autonomous stance. As respondent 1 observed in the interview, “Vleuten–De Meern was more market-driven, whereas Utrecht leaned on traditional public-led models” (Respondent 1, 2025).

This mismatch in planning approaches made coordinated development difficult in practice. Infrastructure timing, land acquisition strategies, and spatial quality ambitions varied between the two. As a result, initial plans for Leidsche Rijn risked becoming fragmented and inefficient, undermining the strategic intent of the VINEX designation. To resolve this institutional misalignment, a major political step was taken: the annexation of a significant part of Vleuten–De Meern by the municipality of Utrecht. This move was politically delicate but ultimately justified to enable integrated area development and to align decision-making authority with the spatial scope of the project (Respondent 1, 2025; Respondent 2, 2025).

The annexation allowed Utrecht to gain full legal and administrative control over the development area, streamlining governance and reducing the friction of intermunicipal negotiation. From a capacity perspective, this shift significantly increased Utrecht's ability to plan, zone, and develop the area coherently. It also allowed for a more unified engagement with the national government, the BRU and private developers, which had been complicated by the previously split jurisdiction (Respondent 2, 2025; Respondent 4, 2025).

Despite the annexation, elements of shared governance remained, particularly through the BRU (Bestuur Regio Utrecht), where both Utrecht and surrounding municipalities coordinated on mobility, infrastructure, and spatial planning. The early experience of fragmented authority, however, served as a key learning point: territorial misalignment can be a structural barrier to effective governance, especially in contexts without a formal regional tier (Respondent 1, 2025).

The Leidsche Rijn case shows that governance ability is not merely about the internal strength of institutions, but also about their territorial alignment with the scale of the task. In this case, administrative restructuring, annexation, was a powerful tool to realign institutional geography with spatial ambition.

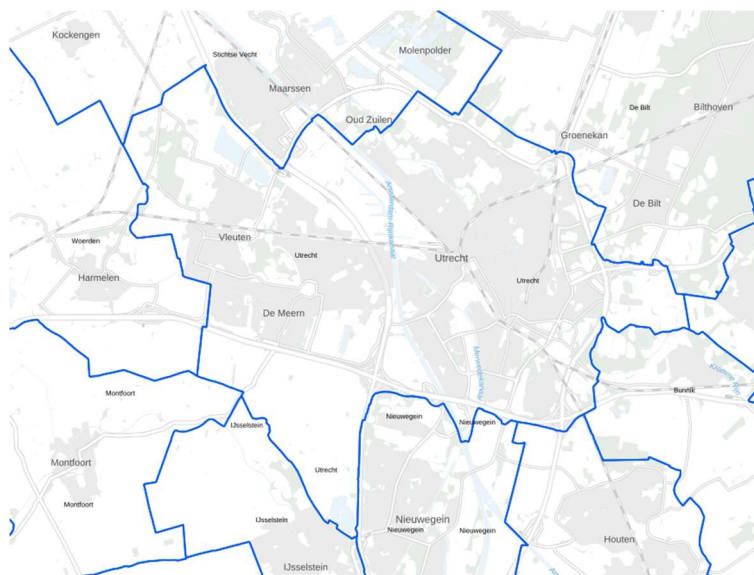


Figure 15: Current municipal borders with the annexation of Vleuten-De Meern and Rijnburg (KadastraleKaart, 2025)

### **6.1.3 Commitment: From temporary alliances to institutionalised cooperation**

The commitment of cooperation in Leidsche Rijn was neither guaranteed nor automatic. What began as a politically expedient alliance between municipalities, ministries, and market actors gradually evolved into a resilient governance structure capable of withstanding institutional shifts, political cycles, and long project timelines. The initial push for Leidsche Rijn in the early 1990s relied heavily on ad hoc coalitions and informal cooperation platforms like the Regionaal Bestuurlijk Overleg Utrecht (RBU). However, as the project scaled up in ambition and complexity, encompassing tens of thousands of homes, major infrastructure works, and ecological compensation, a more stable, formalised coordination structure became necessary (Respondent 2, 2025).

This led to the creation of the Bestuur Regio Utrecht (BRU), a formalized regional collaboration platform that institutionalized the earlier RBU efforts (part of the WGR+ regions discussed in chapter 5). The BRU was not just a governance mechanism for Leidsche Rijn, it became a durable regional player, coordinating public transport, spatial development, and mobility investments across the wider Utrecht region. By integrating Leidsche Rijn into the broader institutional landscape, the BRU allowed the development to persist beyond the lifespan of individual political terms or project teams (Respondent 1, 2025; Respondent 2, 2025). This reflects what Van Steenberghe (2022) describes as “durable governance implementations”: networks that evolve from opportunistic coalitions into embedded structures with resources, legitimacy, and long-term continuity (Respondent 5, 2025).

As discussed in the Ability section, the annexation of parts of Vleuten–De Meern by the municipality of Utrecht played a crucial role in making governance more durable. It resolved a key spatial-institutional mismatch: a fragmented jurisdiction over the area to be developed. This territorial consolidation did more than improve coordination, it allowed Utrecht to embed the development of Leidsche Rijn into its long-term municipal structure and budgeting processes. The area was no longer a shared project with uncertain boundaries, but an official part of the city, subject to regular city planning, taxation, maintenance, and political accountability. This change locked in commitment and reduced future risk of political withdrawal or institutional disengagement (Respondent 2, 2025).

In addition to structural reforms, the commitment of Leidsche Rijn's governance was reinforced by a compelling and consistent narrative: that Utrecht was “the missing link” in the Randstad. This spatial-political narrative, repeated in planning documents and public discourse, helped to justify continued investment and sustain a sense of shared purpose, even when specific aspects of the development (e.g., infrastructure phasing, housing density) were renegotiated (Respondent 2, 2025). According to respondents 1, 2 and 4, this narrative helped bridge political transitions in the municipality and maintain support at the provincial and national levels. It turned Leidsche Rijn from a technical planning project into a strategic identity project for Utrecht, a way for the city to claim its place within the Dutch metropolitan hierarchy. This kind of narrative continuity is a subtle but essential factor in maintaining durable coalitions (Buitelaar, 2023).

Finally, the long implementation timeline of Leidsche Rijn (spanning from the mid-1990s to well into the 2020s) required durable governance arrangements that could absorb feedback and adapt. The establishment of the Projectbureau Leidsche Rijn allowed for continuity in project management, monitoring, and stakeholder engagement. Lessons learned from early neighbourhoods (e.g. infrastructural timing, housing mix tensions) were fed back into later phases. This institutional memory helped stabilize the project and improved resilience against external shocks (e.g. political change, economic downturn) (Respondent 2, 2025).

## **6.2 The Implementation of Leidsche Rijn: strong institutional anchoring**

Whereas the previous section (6.1) highlighted the enabling conditions for regional cooperation around Leidsche Rijn, focusing on willingness, ability, and commitment, this section turns to the implementation of the governance arrangement. By exploring the involved actors, the shared narrative, and the mobilised resources, we gain a more detailed understanding of how cooperation was structured and operationalised over time.

### **6.2.1 The Actors of Leidsche Rijn: A Multi-Level, Evolving Coalition**

The implementation of Leidsche Rijn emerged through an evolving coalition of public and private actors, bound by shared urgency and spatial interdependence. Rather than fixed from the outset, the governance structure developed incrementally in response to shifting political, institutional, and territorial conditions.

The Municipality of Utrecht played a central agenda-setting role, initiating the expansion strategy and negotiating with national and regional partners (Respondent 2, 2025). Initially, a large part of the area lay within Vleuten–De Meern, complicating coordination due to differing planning cultures (Respondent 1,

2025). This was resolved through annexation, allowing Utrecht to unify authority and streamline implementation.

The Bestuur Regio Utrecht (BRU) provided a soft but crucial institutional framework for coordinating across municipalities, the province, and infrastructure agencies. It aligned housing targets, infrastructure investments, and spatial visions, building on earlier informal networks (Respondents 2 and 4, 2025). Although BRU lacked formal development powers, its role in long-term agenda-setting gave continuity across election cycles. The Ministry of VROM and the Ministry of Finance enabled the project through the VINEX framework and financial incentives tied to Utrecht's Article 12 status (Respondent 2, 2025). National support extended to infrastructure, notably the A2 tunnelling, in coordination with Rijkswaterstaat and the Ministry of Infrastructure (Bakker & Groenteman, 2024).

Developers were invited early to assemble land positions and co-finance planning. Firms like BPD, AM, and Fortis participated through joint ventures such as the Regional Exploitation Firm (REM), facilitating structured risk-sharing (Respondents 1 and 4, 2025). As one developer now active in Rijnburg reflected: "We weren't just reacting to public plans, we helped shape them" (Respondent 3, 2025). Academic and planning professionals, particularly from Utrecht University, played a key role in early narrative formation and regional framing (Respondent 1, 2025). In later phases, urban designers introduced spatial identity and design governance. Riek Bakker was especially influential, pushing for the A2 tunnelling and the creation of Maxima Park as a landscape anchor (Bakker & Groenteman, 2024). Alongside Jo Coenen and Adriaan Geuze, she expanded the coalition beyond bureaucracy and markets, offering what Verheul et al. (2019) describe as "unsticking" capacity, repositioning the project through spatial imagination and strategic mediation.

Together, these actors transformed Leidsche Rijn into a nationally significant urban extension. The case highlights how adaptive, multi-level governance, underpinned by shared narratives, institutional continuity, and design leadership, can enable large-scale implementation in complex environments.

### **6.2.2 The Narrative: From National Growth Centre to Integrated Urban Vision**

The narrative that shaped Leidsche Rijn emerged at a time of socio-economic transformation in the Netherlands. Following the post-war reconstruction period, a large segment of the Dutch population lived in social housing, particularly in older cities like Utrecht. However, by the early 1990s, economic growth and individual prosperity led to a cultural shift: many households began aspiring to homeownership and more spacious, green living environments. As respondent 1 (academic) noted, "people wanted out of the city centre, but not out of the city" (Respondent 1, 2025).

This shift in housing preferences aligned with the goals of the VINEX policy (Fourth Nota Spatial Planning Extra), launched in 1991. VINEX aimed to direct urban growth toward strategic locations near existing cities, reduce car dependency, and prevent uncontrolled suburbanisation. Leidsche Rijn was one of the largest VINEX locations, and its early framing was explicitly tied to these objectives: a compact yet green, accessible, and family-friendly urban extension (Respondent 1, 2025; Respondent 2, 2025).

A crucial strategic narrative emerged in this context: "Utrecht as the missing link in the Randstad." Respondent 2 (municipal project leader) described how Utrecht feared being left out of the VINEX agenda and used this narrative to reposition itself: "If we didn't grow, we'd lose relevance nationally" (Respondent 2, 2025). This story helped to secure support from the national government and build alignment across regional municipalities through the RBU and later the BRU.

Over time, however, this early growth-oriented narrative evolved. It absorbed new elements tied to political negotiations, planning decisions, and spatial interventions. One such turning point came in 1999, when the decision was made to tunnel the A2 motorway, a move advocated by Riek Bakker, who played a central role in translating spatial challenges into symbolic and strategic choices. In her interview with Groenteman (2024), Bakker emphasized how the A2 "should not divide, but connect" the city. This shifted the narrative from pragmatic expansion to spatial integration and urban identity (Bakker en Groenteman, 2024).

A second defining moment was the annexation of Vleuten-De Meern in 2001, a decision that stabilized territorial governance and reinforced the narrative of Leidsche Rijn as a coherent urban district. As respondent 2 put it, "this move made it clear: Leidsche Rijn is not a suburb, it is Utrecht" (Respondent 2, 2025). Another symbolic anchor in the narrative was the ambition to realize Maxima Park, championed by Bakker as a "green heart" for the district. Its inclusion reflected a shift toward quality of life, landscape identity, and long-term liveability. Respondents 2 and 4 both confirmed that the park became more than an amenity, it became a core part of the public justification for the entire development (Respondent 2, 2025).

These narrative shifts echo what Verheul et al. (2019) describe as the co-evolution of storylines and actor implementations: narratives in area development are not fixed but are actively constructed and re-constructed to stabilize coalitions, navigate planning dilemmas, and bridge institutional complexity. In Leidsche Rijn, the narrative evolved from growth to identity, from infrastructure to place-making, and from

political necessity to civic pride, anchored by a long-term vision, but reshaped through a sequence of spatial and governance choices (Verheul et al., 2019).

### **6.2.3 The Resources: Assembling Land, Legitimacy, and Financial Commitment**

The development of Leidsche Rijn was only possible through the mobilisation of a diverse range of resources, financial, legal, institutional, and symbolic, across multiple governance levels and sectors. These resources enabled the project to overcome constraints and maintain momentum over nearly three decades.

In the early 1990s, the Municipality of Utrecht lacked the financial capacity for active land policy, due to its Article 12 status. As Respondent 2 explained, the city was heavily dependent on national support and unable to make upfront investments in land or infrastructure. To address this, the municipality strategically engaged private developers early in the process, inviting them to acquire land positions and share development risk. Instruments like building claims (*bouwclaims*) allowed the city to retain control over urban structure while enabling private capital to unlock land, an approach in line with concession-based land strategies (Van der Krabben et al., 2023).

Jurisdictional resources were also critical. Since Leidsche Rijn initially spanned multiple municipalities, Utrecht's planning authority was limited. This was resolved in 2001 through the annexation of Vleuten-De Meern, which consolidated zoning and permitting powers and significantly enhanced the city's legal and institutional capacity.

Beyond legal and financial tools, symbolic and professional resources played a vital role. The municipality commissioned prominent architects and urban designers, including Riek Bakker, Jo Coenen, and Adriaan Geuze, to develop masterplans and public landmarks. These consultants were not just designers but strategic actors who helped shape spatial vision, secure public legitimacy, and embed quality into the project's identity. Their work contributed to what Verheul et al. (2019) describe as symbolic resources: elements that foster collective narratives, justify investment, and reinforce shared commitment in uncertain governance settings. The development of Maxima Park, for example, became a visual symbol of green ambition and long-term spatial quality.

Finally, institutions like the Projectbureau Leidsche Rijn and the BRU functioned as procedural resources, providing continuity, coordination, and conflict resolution. These semi-permanent bodies embedded institutional memory and ensured decisions could be sustained across political cycles. Leidsche Rijn's success depended on much more than funding. It was the alignment of market capital, jurisdictional control, professional expertise, symbolic leadership, and institutional structure that allowed the project to evolve from ambition into integrated urban reality.

## **6.3 The steering of Leidsche Rijn: a well-balanced interplay**

The governance of Leidsche Rijn was marked by a dynamic combination of informal coordination and formal regulation. Rather than following a linear process, steering evolved through different phases and challenges, often shifting between modes of governance depending on what was needed. The steering quadrant model introduced in Chapter 7 helps clarify how these different forms of coordination were activated over time. Leidsche Rijn illustrates how successful implementation often depends on the ability to steer across multiple quadrants simultaneously.

In the early stages, steering occurred primarily in the connecting quadrant, where informal alignment and trust-building were essential. This phase was facilitated by the Regiobureau Utrecht (RBU), a somewhat informal regional coordination body. The RBU played a critical role in convening stakeholders, aligning ambitions, and framing the project as a shared regional priority. As Respondent 2 noted, the RBU "was mainly a talking shop, but an effective one, it helped establish the idea of Leidsche Rijn as a joint project." This form of early, trust-based coordination laid the groundwork for more formal arrangements.

At the same time, steering in Leidsche Rijn was also grounded in the regulating quadrant. Through the national VINEX policy, the Ministry of VROM designated Leidsche Rijn as a priority location for housing development. This top-down allocation of residential growth created strong policy pressure and funding mechanisms, giving the project a national mandate. As Respondent 1 explained, "Once Leidsche Rijn was on the VINEX map, it had political weight and funding, it became a national commitment." The VINEX designation introduced clear development goals and timelines, which helped anchor the more informal regional coordination efforts.

As cooperation matured, the project shifted toward the stimulating quadrant, particularly with the formalisation of the Bestuur Regio Utrecht (BRU). The BRU provided a structured platform for joint decision-making, coordinating land development, distributing subsidies, and phasing infrastructure investments. Importantly, the Municipality of Utrecht was a key player within the BRU and, as such, is represented in the model under that umbrella. This setup gave the BRU both the political legitimacy of its member municipalities and the administrative capacity to implement regional housing targets.

One of the implications of the BRU's central role is that it effectively absorbed the functions the Province of Utrecht might otherwise have performed. As a result, the province played no significant role in steering Leidsche Rijn. Respondent 3 stated this clearly: "The province was more or less sidelined, the BRU did the regional work." In the quadrant model, this means the province does not occupy a steering position. Similarly, while the waterboard was formally present in the planning process, its role was largely technical and advisory, with minimal strategic influence. Because of this limited involvement, the waterboard is not explicitly represented in the steering quadrant.

Over time, steering in Leidsche Rijn also involved periods of escalation into the directing quadrant, especially in moments requiring strong intervention. Key examples include the annexation of Vleuten–De Meern in 2001, the tunnelling of the A2 motorway, and the use of 'beeldkwaliteitsplannen' (image quality plans) in Leidsche Rijn Centrum. These were not just technical decisions but moments of strong public direction, often led by the Municipality of Utrecht in cooperation with national ministries. As Respondent 4 noted, "In some places, the city wanted every brick discussed; in others, they let us develop more freely." This illustrates how steering was spatially differentiated, tight control in sensitive zones, more freedom where market delivery was trusted.

Eventually, as Leidsche Rijn approached completion, the BRU was dismantled through a liquidation plan. Its remaining tasks were absorbed into lighter regional collaborations, such as U10. This reflects the final stage in the quadrant model, where intensive coordination gives way to distributed responsibility and institutionalised routines. By that point, steering had become embedded in policy, process, and trust.

The figure below illustrates the occupied steering quadrants throughout Leidsche Rijn's development, the figure on the following page shows how the steering quadrant of Leidsche Rijn was filled and used throughout the development period of Leidsche Rijn.

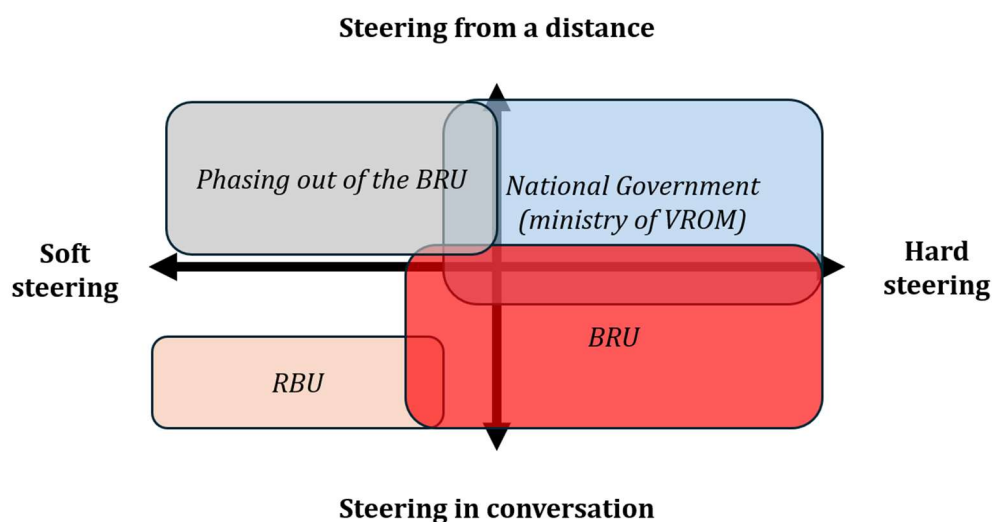
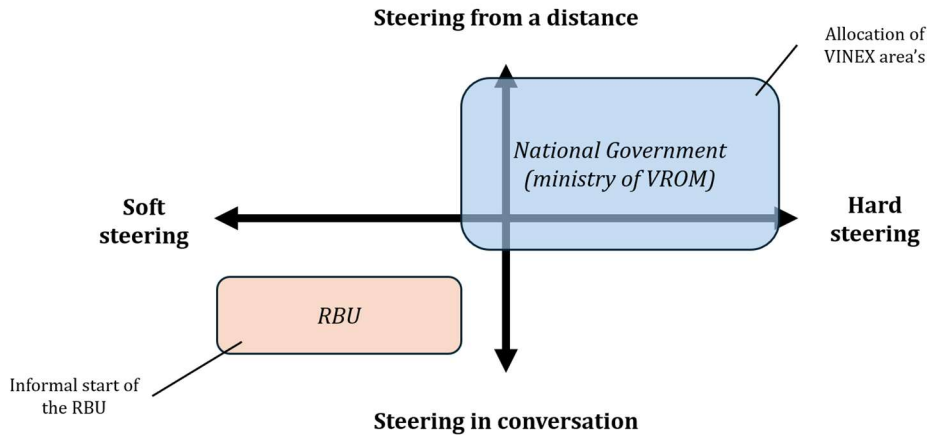


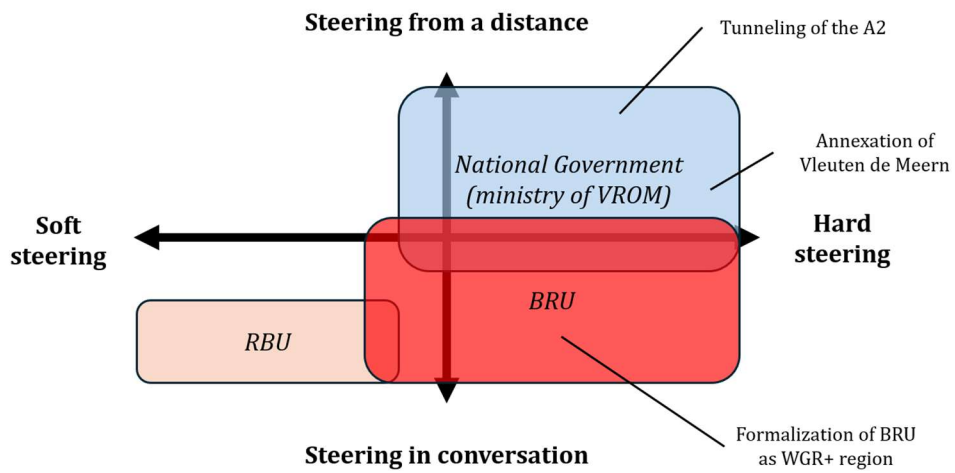
Figure 16: The steering quadrant of Leidsche Rijn (own work)

In conclusion, the steering of Leidsche Rijn succeeded not because of a rigid model, but due to the project's ability to shift fluidly across governance modes. From early informal alignment to later regulatory enforcement and strategic oversight, most steering positions were effectively occupied. The combination of national policy, regional coordination through the BRU, and municipal leadership enabled Leidsche Rijn to progress steadily through complex phases of implementation, without falling into governance vacuums.

**1**



**2**



**3**

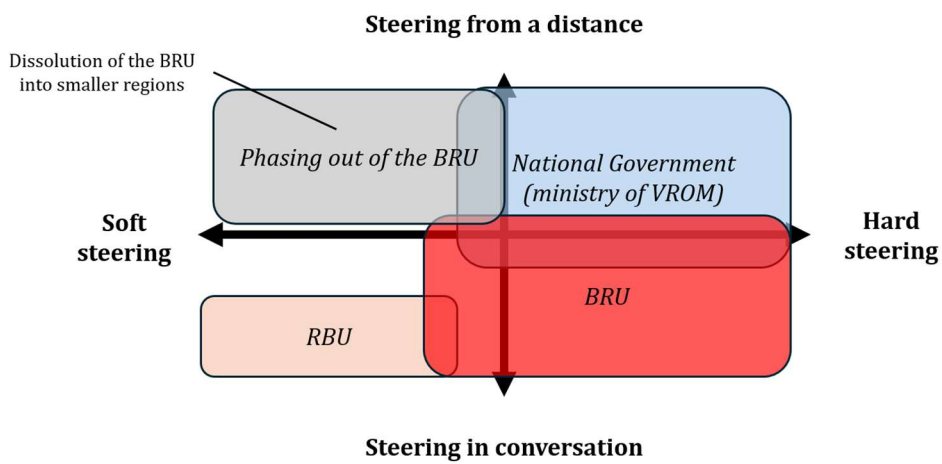


Figure 17: Phases of steering on Leidsche Rijn

## 6.4 Conclusion

The case of Leidsche Rijn illustrates that regional cooperation in area development is not built on rigid templates, but on adaptive and evolving forms of governance. While national policy support and strategic framing were present from the outset, implementation unfolded incrementally, through negotiation, improvisation, and institutional learning. The success of Leidsche Rijn lay not in strict control, but in the ability to steer through multiple modes simultaneously.

A key lesson from the case is the importance of multiple, complementary forms of steering. In the early phase, cooperation emerged in the connecting quadrant, facilitated by the 'Regionaal Beraad Utrecht' (RBU), a relatively informal coordination platform where trust, ambition, and narrative alignment were built. Simultaneously, steering in the regulating quadrant was provided through the national VINEX policy, which designated Leidsche Rijn as a priority development location. This top-down allocation of housing ensured political momentum, funding, and clear development targets. Together, these forms of soft and hard steering reinforced one another, demonstrating that successful area development often requires layered governance from the start.

The role of formal agreements, such as the VINEX nota and subsequent elaborations by the Bestuur Regio Utrecht (BRU), was central in translating ambition into implementation. These agreements laid down preconditions for land use, infrastructure, financing, and cooperation, and helped institutionalise mutual trust. The BRU became the core platform for joint decision-making, with the Municipality of Utrecht as one of its most active members. In fact, because the municipality was part of the BRU, its role is represented in the model through the BRU itself.

Importantly, the Province of Utrecht played no significant steering role in the project, as many of its potential responsibilities were taken over by the BRU. As such, it remains outside the steering quadrant. Similarly, while the waterboard was formally involved, its influence was limited to technical input, and it did not play a strategic role in the governance of Leidsche Rijn.

Despite overall success, the case also highlights a structural shortcoming: the underinvestment in public transport. Although Leidsche Rijn was designed as a major urban extension, the absence of early, high-quality transit provision led to deep car dependency, spatially and behaviourally. This shows how early misalignments in one policy domain, even in well-coordinated developments, can have lasting consequences.

The analytical framework used in this thesis reinforces that conditions, implementation, and steering are not linear stages, but interconnected and cyclical. At various moments, cooperation needed to step back, to renegotiate roles or recalibrate agreements, to maintain progress. The quadrant model is therefore best understood not as a step-by-step path, but as a tool to interpret the iterative dynamics of governance.

As the project matured and implementation mechanisms became embedded, formal coordination through the BRU faded. Its dissolution in 2015 did not disrupt the project, which by then had become largely self-sustaining. This underlines that regional cooperation is most vital during the formation and early execution phases and can gradually recede once institutional and spatial structures are in place.

In sum, Leidsche Rijn demonstrates that successful regional cooperation relies on the ability to combine different types of steering at different moments. The interplay between informal trust-building and formal regulation, between the RBU and VINEX, allowed the project to take root and adapt to complexity. At the same time, the case reminds us that missing one steering dimension, such as mobility, can have long-term spatial and behavioural impacts. Steering is not a one-time act, but a layered and continuous process that shapes the urban landscape far beyond the drawing board.

The case of Leidsche Rijn illustrates that regional cooperation in area development is an adaptive and evolving process, not a static or predefined blueprint. While the strategic framing and national policy support were strong from the outset, cooperation and implementation unfolded incrementally, through negotiation, recalibration, and learning by doing.

A notable aspect is the relatively limited visibility of the Province of Utrecht and the waterboard in the governance of Leidsche Rijn. While these actors were formally present in the institutional landscape, their roles were less prominent during the key phases of development. The limited role of the province can be explained in part by its institutional embedding in the BRU, a regional body that represented the collective interests of municipalities in the Utrecht region, including the city of Utrecht itself. As such, the province's distinct steering role was largely absorbed within the BRU. The waterboard, although formally responsible for water safety and infrastructure, mainly operated in a technical advisory capacity, without a strong institutional voice in strategic planning. This suggests that effective regional cooperation does not necessarily require activation of all possible actors, if key stakeholders hold sufficient coordination capacity, progress can still be achieved.

The role of formal agreements was crucial in establishing a shared starting point. Agreements such as the VINEX nota and the more detailed elaborations by the BRU were more than symbolic, they defined the joint ambitions, responsibilities, and preconditions of development between national, regional, and local governments. These agreements functioned as strategic anchors, enabling early alignment on infrastructure, spatial quality, housing targets, and financial contributions. They helped institutionalise mutual trust and offered continuity through moments of friction or institutional transition.

At the same time, the case reveals that cooperation had to be figured out in practice. Even with policy guidance and formal agreements in place, governance mechanisms required continuous adjustment to respond to shifting market conditions, infrastructure phasing, and changes in institutional structures. Steering moved flexibly between soft coordination and more directive regulation, depending on the project phase and emerging needs.

A critical lesson from Leidsche Rijn lies in the underperformance of public transport integration. Despite the scale and ambition of the development, the provision of high-quality public transport lagged behind. As a result, car dependency became deeply embedded in the spatial and behavioural patterns of the area. Once established, this mobility behaviour proved difficult to reverse. The lack of early, coordinated investment in transit infrastructure limited modal shift options later in the project and highlights the long-term consequences of early infrastructural choices. This illustrates that even in otherwise well-coordinated developments, misalignment in one domain, such as mobility, can have enduring impacts.

Reflecting on the analytical framework, the case confirms that conditions, implementation, and steering are not sequential phases, but interdependent processes. Cooperation sometimes needed to regress or recalibrate, redefining roles, adjusting expectations, or re-negotiating decisions in response to emerging tensions. The steering quadrant is best viewed as a diagnostic tool rather than a model, attuned to the iterative and cyclical nature of governance in area development.

Importantly, Leidsche Rijn also shows that the intensity of formal regional cooperation may diminish over time. As physical and institutional structures matured and the BRU was dissolved in 2015, the project continued largely uninterrupted. By then, roles were clear, mechanisms were embedded, and the cooperation had become self-sustaining. This suggests that regional cooperation is most critical in the formation and early operational stages, and can gradually fade into the background once stable implementation structures are in place.

In conclusion, Leidsche Rijn demonstrates that successful regional cooperation depends on adaptive governance, clarity of roles, and the ability to steer flexibly across phases. While not all actors were central, the combination of shared principles, institutional trust, and a capable coordination platform proved sufficient to guide one of the Netherlands' most ambitious urban expansions. At the same time, the mobility shortcomings offer a cautionary reminder: early strategic decisions, especially on infrastructure, shape behaviour and spatial form for decades to come.



The case of Leidsche Rijn illustrates how regional cooperation in area development is an adaptive and evolving process, rather than a static or predetermined blueprint. While the early framing and strategic ambitions were strong, the actual realisation of cooperation, implementation, and steering unfolded incrementally through negotiation, adjustment, and learning.

One notable observation is the limited role of the Province of Utrecht and the waterboard in the governance of Leidsche Rijn. Although formally part of the institutional landscape, their influence remained marginal compared to the dominant roles played by the municipality of Utrecht, the BRU, private developers, and national ministries. This suggests that effective cooperation does not necessarily require the full activation of all potential regional actors but can proceed if key stakeholders possess sufficient authority and coordination capacity.

The development of Leidsche Rijn also shows that regional cooperation must be figured out along the way. Initial conditions and actor implementations provided a foundation, but cooperation structures needed to adapt continuously to new challenges, such as infrastructure phasing, market dynamics, and governance restructuring. Steering evolved flexibly between soft coordination and hard regulation, depending on the needs of each project phase.

Reflecting on the analytical framework, the case confirms that conditions, implementation, and steering are not strictly linear stages. Sometimes cooperation regresses to an earlier step, for example, renegotiating actor roles or reframing narratives, to unblock stagnation or align new interests. The framework thus functions best as a dynamic tool, recognising the iterative, cyclical nature of governance in complex area developments.

Importantly, Leidsche Rijn shows that the importance of formal regional cooperation diminishes once the development is firmly set in motion. As the physical, institutional, and financial structures of Leidsche Rijn became embedded, the need for intensive regional coordination declined. The abolishment of the BRU in 2015 did not derail the project because by then, the "stage was set": roles were clear, frameworks were agreed, and implementation mechanisms were self-sustaining. This highlights that regional cooperation is most critical in the formation and early operational phases, while later phases may require less formal coordination if strong foundations have been laid.

In conclusion, Leidsche Rijn demonstrates that successful regional cooperation in area development depends on adaptive, negotiated governance, clear distribution of roles, and the flexibility to steer dynamically across phases.

## 7. The challenge of Rijnenburg

Rijnenburg represents a new phase in the Utrecht region's area development history. Initially considered as a potential VINEX location in the 1990s, the site was ultimately set aside in Favor of Leidsche Rijn, which offered more favourable development conditions at the time (Buijze, 2013). A renewed attempt to initiate development in Rijnenburg around 2010 failed to gain traction, hindered by fragmented landownership, weak financial feasibility, and a lack of political and institutional momentum. As Respondent 3, a commercial developer, noted, "the fundamentals never aligned, financial feasibility and land access were simply not there." Now, under the pressure of a national housing shortage and growing urgency around spatial capacity, Rijnenburg has re-emerged on the regional and national agenda as a strategic post-2030 housing reserve (Buijze, 2013; Van Steenberg, 2022).



Figure17: The area of Rijnenburg (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024a)

This chapter explores what recommendations can be made for the development of Rijnenburg. To answer this question, the analysis applies the same analytical framework from chapter 5 to study the case of Leidsche Rijn. This framework conceptualises regional cooperation as a dynamic governance process composed of three interrelated elements: (1) the conditions under which cooperation emerges, defined as willingness, ability, and commitment; (2) the implementation of governance through actor alignment, narrative construction, and resource mobilisation; and (3) the steering mechanisms that coordinate and direct the development process over time (Stoker, 1998; Verheul et al., 2019). Through this lens, the chapter examines how far cooperation in Rijnenburg has developed, what tensions and barriers remain, and what this reveal about the feasibility of area development under uncertain and fragmented conditions.

The analysis is based on interviews with key stakeholders directly involved in the planning and governance of Rijnenburg. Respondent 3 provided insight into the developer perspective, highlighting how the absence of formal commitment and coherent land policy discourages market initiative. Respondent 5, an urban planner who contributed to the early visioning of Rijnenburg, explained how initial ambitions were undermined by institutional drift and a lack of provincial leadership at the time. Respondent 6, a project manager from the Municipality of Utrecht, described the city's shifting position, caught between internal political divisions and the broader framing of Rijnenburg as a national issue. According to Respondent 7 from the Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning (VRO), Rijnenburg is now recognized as part of the national development strategy, but the state has yet to offer clear procedural steps or structural funding to move the project forward.

Crucially, Respondent 9 from the Province of Utrecht explained that the role of the province differs from era of Leidsche Rijn. The province has thus far operated primarily in a facilitating role but is now under increasing pressure to take a more active coordinating position, particularly under the evolving expectations of the NOVEX program and national housing acceleration policies (Steenbergen, 2022). This shifting role reflects a broader tension in Dutch spatial governance: provinces are expected to mediate between

municipal ambition and national targets yet often lack the formal instruments or mandate to do so effectively.

The interview with Respondent 8 from Water Board HDSR confirmed the crucial role of the water board in Rijnenburg. As a low-lying area, flood risk and climate adaptation are central concerns. The recent policy shift toward a “water- en bodem sturend” (water and soil steered) approach marks an important transition, positioning the water board as a proactive spatial actor rather than a reactive stakeholder (Van Steenberg, 2022).

Together, these perspectives suggest that regional cooperation in Rijnenburg cannot yet be considered a stable arrangement. Rather, it remains an evolving configuration of responsibilities, expectations, and institutional gaps. The case illustrates how cooperation must be actively constructed, not only through formal agreements, but through political alignment, actor commitment, and strategic coordination. In this light, the recommendations presented in this chapter seek to identify the governance interventions needed to make implementation in Rijnenburg feasible, adaptive, and future proof.

## **7.1 The conditions of Rijnenburg: marked by fragmentation**

Where Leidsche Rijn emerged under the institutional clarity of the VINEX era, with formalized agreements, strong public land positions, and top-down coordination. Rijnenburg unfolds in a decentralized and fragmented planning environment. This section applies the same analytical lens of willingness, ability, and commitment to analyse the foundational conditions for regional cooperation in Rijnenburg, using interview insights to illuminate how the institutional context has evolved and why cooperation remains tentative.

### **7.1.1 Willingness: Broad Support, but Ambiguous Commitments**

Across the board, there is a clear willingness to develop Rijnenburg. All respondents, from the developers’ consortium (Respondent 3), the municipality of Utrecht (Respondent 6, 2025), the waterboard HDSR (Respondent 8), the province (Respondent 9), and even national government actors (Respondent 7, 2025), affirm the urgency and strategic relevance of the location. Unlike Leidsche Rijn, where top-down VINEX directives created a political push, Rijnenburg is characterized by bottom-up recognition of the need to act.

Yet, several respondents highlight that while willingness is present, it is difficult to specify what exactly actors are willing to do. “The willingness is there, yes,” said one provincial officer, “but the concrete form of that willingness depends on so many uncertainties that it’s hard to act on” (Respondent 9). A project manager at the municipality echoed this sentiment: “Everyone supports the idea of development, but because there’s no shared plan, it’s hard to take ownership” (Respondent 6, 2025).

This ambiguity stems not from a lack of motivation, but from the scale and complexity of the task. The development of Rijnenburg requires decisions on water safety, mobility infrastructure, housing types, phasing, energy generation, and spatial quality. Respondent 8 of the waterboard noted that “it’s not just housing, it’s a delta landscape that has to be fundamentally rethought.” In this context, the limits of willingness often reflect the limits of ability, the capacity to turn intention into action in a fragmented and uncertain governance environment.

### **7.1.2 Ability: Fragmented Capacity in an Unfamiliar Playing Field**

Where Leidsche Rijn was preceded by decades of large-scale public development experience, most notably in the context of the VINEX policy, Rijnenburg enters a vastly different landscape. Since the decentralization of spatial planning, municipalities, provinces, and even national ministries have lost much of the institutional infrastructure, financial control, and project experience that once made such developments feasible. “We haven’t done a project of this scale in this way before,” admitted a municipal project manager (Respondent 6, 2025). The expertise that made Leidsche Rijn possible is no longer concentrated on any single public actor.

This erosion of in-house capacity is visible across levels. Respondent 9 (Province of Utrecht) noted that the province now plays a facilitating rather than directing role, with limited tools to enforce alignment. At the municipal level, Respondent 6 explained that most spatial and technical tasks are outsourced to external consultants, which has helped build momentum but also leads to institutional fragmentation. “We don’t always speak the same language anymore,” one planner remarked, referring to the coordination burden that comes with outsourcing.

The developers face similar challenges. As Respondent 3 described, while the consortium controls a large share of the land, much of the design and feasibility work is commissioned externally. “There’s no integrated development organization like before,” they noted. “We try to create cohesion, but it’s a patchwork of teams.”

Even the waterboard (HDSR) which holds crucial knowledge on the area's environmental vulnerabilities, are operating with limited formal authority. As Respondent 8 explained, “we provide input, but whether it's taken up depends on the willingness and capacity of others.” This dynamic highlights the structural problem: many actors hold a piece of the puzzle, but no one has the ability, or mandate, to assemble it.

In short, the ability to act is not absent, but scattered across actors, consultants, and jurisdictions. Unlike Leidsche Rijn, where a central development office coordinated efforts, Rijnenburg unfolds through loosely coupled networks with limited institutional memory and few tested routines. As a result, the system struggles not only with who does what, but who can.

### 7.1.3 Commitment: Navigating Political Shifts through Institutional Signals

In the case of Rijnenburg, commitment is not absent, but it is cautious, adaptive, and evolving. All public actors interviewed acknowledged that large-scale developments like this are vulnerable to political swings. Past experiences, such as the long-standing pause on Rijnenburg during earlier municipal coalitions, have shown how easily priorities can shift with a new city council or provincial executive. “That history is still in everyone's mind,” said Respondent 6. “It makes it harder to ask private parties for long-term trust.”

To counteract this fragility, both the municipality and the province are actively working to build more durable forms of commitment, not just through formal plans, but through a mix of informal signals, strategic studies, and governance instruments. The municipality of Utrecht, for example, is developing a trajectory of research and scenario-building to clarify the spatial, environmental, and mobility challenges of the area. This is shown in the process timeline (see Figure 18) and described by Respondent 6 as a “first step toward building a shared reality with all stakeholders.”

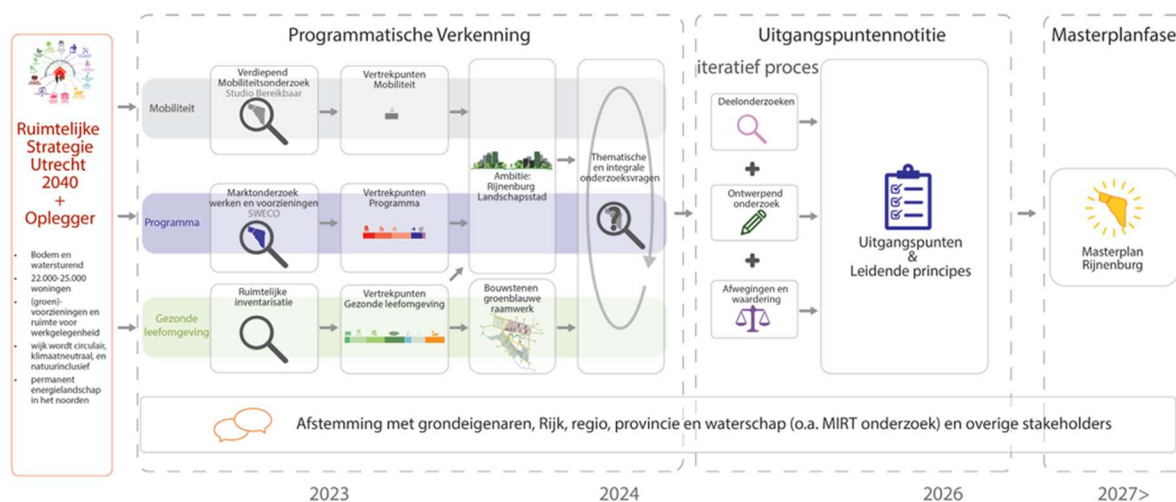


Figure 18: Process schedule of Rijnenburg (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024a)

Similarly, the province of Utrecht is exploring its own role. During the provincial debate on Rijnenburg on 15 May 2025, several members of the Provincial Executive expressed the intention to create a Nota van Principles, a statement of shared principles and expectations that could serve as a governance anchor. Respondent 9 confirmed this: “We see the value in a lightweight but clear document that helps align expectations, even if the development itself is still years away.”

This dual strategy, combining informal political commitment with formalized, non-binding instruments, reflects a broader shift in governance style. Unlike the top-down project structures of the VINEX era, actors now seek to develop ‘soft’ forms of institutionalization (Allmendinger et al., 2015), designed to survive electoral cycles and build mutual confidence over time.

The success of this approach depends on whether these instruments can indeed generate continuity, clarity, and legitimacy. But in a context where no actor can guarantee the future, this emerging practice of pre-commitment, grounded in principles and process rather than plans, is a critical step forward.

## **7.2 The implementation of Rijnenburg: stalled by misalignment**

Where Leidsche Rijn benefited from a tightly coordinated implementation structure, with clearly defined roles, a shared spatial narrative, and secured resources, Rijnenburg reflects a more fragmented and uncertain process. Despite growing willingness and emerging signals of commitment, actual implementation is still in an exploratory phase, hindered by a lack of alignment across actors, narratives, and resources.

### **7.2.1 Actors: Many players, no conductor**

The actor landscape in Rijnenburg is dense but decentralized. Private developers such as BPD, AM, and Amvest have organized themselves in a consortium covering around 60% of the land (Respondent 3, 2025). Yet even within that group, coordination remains fragile: “We speak with one voice externally, but internally we’re still ten different owners,” Respondent 3 explained. They depend heavily on third-party consultants to manage knowledge and planning capacity, which adds organizational complexity.

On the public side, the municipality of Utrecht is officially in the lead but has limited ground positions and struggles with institutional continuity. “We’re building a knowledge base through studies and explorations,” said Respondent 6, “but there’s no integrated project team like there was in Leidsche Rijn.” The province, meanwhile, supports from a distance. Respondent 9 noted: “We’re not the lead, but we do see a role for ourselves in facilitating cooperation. That’s why we’re exploring a shared note of principles.”

Respondent 7 (Ministry of VRO) described the state’s role as “strategic but hands-off,” adding that steering capacity in such developments must emerge from the bottom-up. The waterboard (Respondent 8) is also involved, especially given the area’s vulnerable water system, but it lacks a formal mandate to co-steer. “We’re consulted, but we’re not at the helm,” they noted.

In contrast to Leidsche Rijn, where the BRU, municipality, and Rijk formed a centralized development organization, Rijnenburg is marked by a network of semi-autonomous actors, none of whom have the legitimacy or mandate to orchestrate implementation.

### **7.2.2 Narrative: competing visions, no guiding story**

The Municipality of Utrecht envisions Rijnenburg as part of the ‘greater Merwede zone’, a broader spatial development corridor that stretches from the city centre westward. This framing positions Rijnenburg as the final phase in a trajectory that begins with inner-city intensification projects such as Merwede, Beurskwartier, and Cartesius. Within this strategy, Rijnenburg is scheduled to start construction in 2035, once the existing urban fabric has reached saturation (Respondent 6). This phased timeline is not only a political choice but also reflects the technical and financial lead time needed to realise the Merwedelijn, a proposed public transport line intended to link Rijnenburg with the rest of the city.

The Merwedelijn plays a central but ambiguous role in the narrative. Amongst almost all respondents, municipality (6), developers (3, 5), and national representatives (7), it is described as a critical precondition for unlocking large-scale housing in Rijnenburg. Yet it currently lacks concrete commitments in terms of funding, governance, and planning. The project is part of a national ‘MIRT-verkenning’, a strategic exploration under the Multi-Year Programme for Infrastructure, Spatial Planning and Transport. While this process acknowledges the line’s importance, it simultaneously delays hard decisions. As such, the Merwedelijn remains more of a conceptual anchor than an operational planning tool.

In contrast to the city’s sequenced approach, developers advocate a more urgent narrative. With initiatives such as the Appèl voor Rijnenburg (BPD, 2019), the development consortium frames Rijnenburg as a shovel-ready answer to the regional housing crisis. They offer a vision focused on deliverability, scale, and public-private collaboration, arguing that waiting until 2035 is both unnecessary and unwise (Respondent 3, 2025; Respondent 5, 2025). Their narrative also attempts to reframe Rijnenburg from a reserve zone into a priority development area.

At the national level, the narrative is more ambiguous. Rijnenburg is recognised as a future urban extension with strategic value (Respondent 7), but lacks a formal designation, programme, or clear integration into national housing or mobility policy. Without this institutional anchoring, Rijnenburg floats between potential and postponement.





Figure 19: Rijnenburg and Groot Merwede (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024a)

The result is a field of disconnected narratives: a municipal storyline of phasing and urban logic; a developer-led push for acceleration; and national-level strategic ambiguity. None of these framings are inherently incompatible, but they have not yet been integrated into a shared spatial vision that can justify investment and drive intergovernmental cooperation. The unresolved status of the Merwedelijn, as both infrastructural precondition and political unknown, embodies this narrative fragmentation. Until these perspectives converge, implementation will likely remain tentative and uncoordinated.

### 7.2.3 Resources: potential without instruments

The resource base underpinning Rijnenburg remains fragmented, incomplete, and subject to change. While actors are engaged and studies are underway, many essential resources; land, funding, infrastructure, and institutional arrangements, are still absent or undecided.

A key constraint is the municipality's minimal landownership. As Respondent 6 confirmed, Utrecht controls only five plots in the development area. This limits its ability to steer development through active land policy, phasing, or value capture. Most land is privately held by developers, investors, and individuals with diverse interests. Respondent 3 noted this complicates coordination: "It's not one owner with one strategy, it's a mosaic."

Despite this, the municipality brings strong planning capacity. Respondents 5 and 6 highlighted the expertise of urban designers and strategists, supported by external consultants. These soft resources help the municipality lead the planning dialogue, but without financial commitments or legal frameworks, the implementation of architecture remains thin.

Crucial infrastructure, most notably the Merwedelijn, is still in a MIRT-verkenning phase, with no secured funding or timeline (Respondents 6, 7). Developers emphasise this uncertainty: "We can design all we want, but without the Merwedelijn, no one will invest" (Respondent 3). Meanwhile, the Ministry of VRO limits its role to exploration discussions (Respondent 7, 2025), and no national funding decisions have been made.

Private developers such as BPD and AM hold strategic land and have invested in spatial visions like the 'Appèl voor Rijnenburg' (BPD, 2019). But they also hesitate to commit without public clarity. Respondent 3 stated: "We're ready to move, but not alone and not blind."

Regional actors like the province and waterboard remain only loosely involved. This is especially problematic given Rijnenburg's low elevation and high-water risks. As Respondent 8 observed: "If we're not integrated from the start, we'll be stuck adapting after the fact."

In contrast to Leidsche Rijn, where early agreements and project structures secured alignment, Rijnenburg operates in a vacuum of hard resources. Trust, studies, and procedural legitimacy exist, but they have yet to mature into a viable delivery model. Without clearer instruments, the risk is that intentions remain locked in a pre-project phase, indefinitely.

### 7.3 The Steering of Rijnenburg: The struggle of a governance vacuum

Steering in Rijnenburg remains concentrated in the connecting quadrant of the analytical framework. Informal dialogues, exploratory working groups, and bilateral contacts characterise the process. While actors are engaged and relations are improving, formalised coalitions, steering agreements, or shared mandates have not yet emerged.

The Municipality of Utrecht has shifted from resistance to cautious acceptance. Internally, Rijnenburg is no longer viewed as a taboo because of the failure to develop in 2010, but as a long-term necessity (Respondent 6). However, the municipality lacks a clear mandate, financial framework, or decision-making platform. As Respondent 5 noted, "We're preparing the ground, but we're not yet building." The city is signalling leadership but remains in a strategic waiting position, seeking clarity on critical uncertainties such as the Merwedelijn and development financing. This ambiguity reflects broader trends. As Buitelaar et al. (2025) argue, municipalities in decentralised systems often carry formal responsibility without sufficient authority to coordinate across jurisdictions. Utrecht, too, struggles with how to lead without control, limiting its ability to move beyond soft coordination.

Private developers, meanwhile, remain involved but reserved. Respondent 3 described their current posture as "aligned, but not led," adding that without public leadership or regulatory clarity, private initiative cannot scale. The 'Appel voor Rijnenburg' (BPD, 2019) illustrates an attempt at bottom-up steering, but such institutional entrepreneurship remains speculative in the absence of a public counterpart.

At the provincial level, signs of renewed commitment are emerging. During the provincial debate on 15 May 2025, multiple parties expressed support for a Nota van Principles to clarify ambitions and roles. Respondent 9 confirmed that this initiative is being explored but emphasized the early and enabling nature of the process "we want to support, not impose."

The absence of national leadership is similarly telling. Respondent 7 noted that the Ministry of VRO is engaged in dialogue but hesitant to take the lead, especially without clear regional consensus or financial alignment around the Merwedelijn. Respondent 8 (Waterboard) echoed the concern: "We're consulted, but not structurally involved." Given the area's high-water risk, their marginal position highlights the lack of integrated steering.

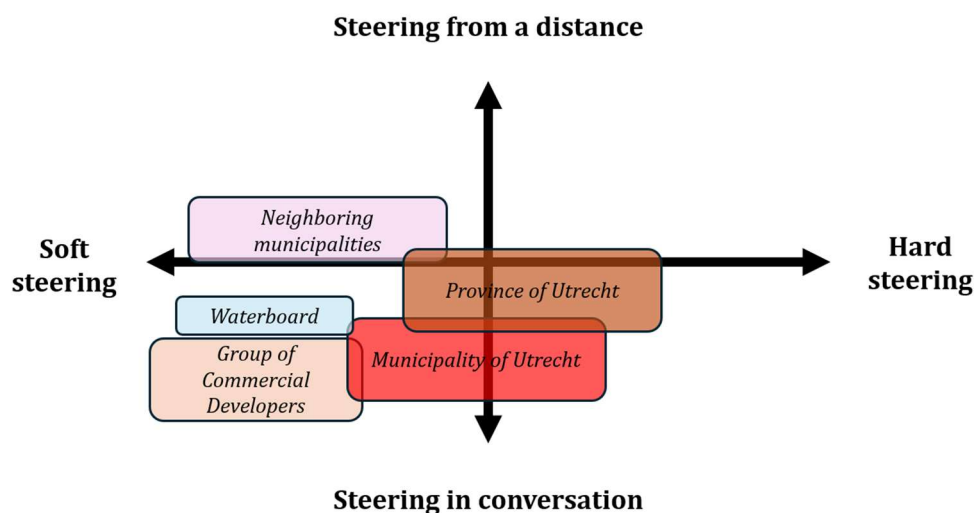
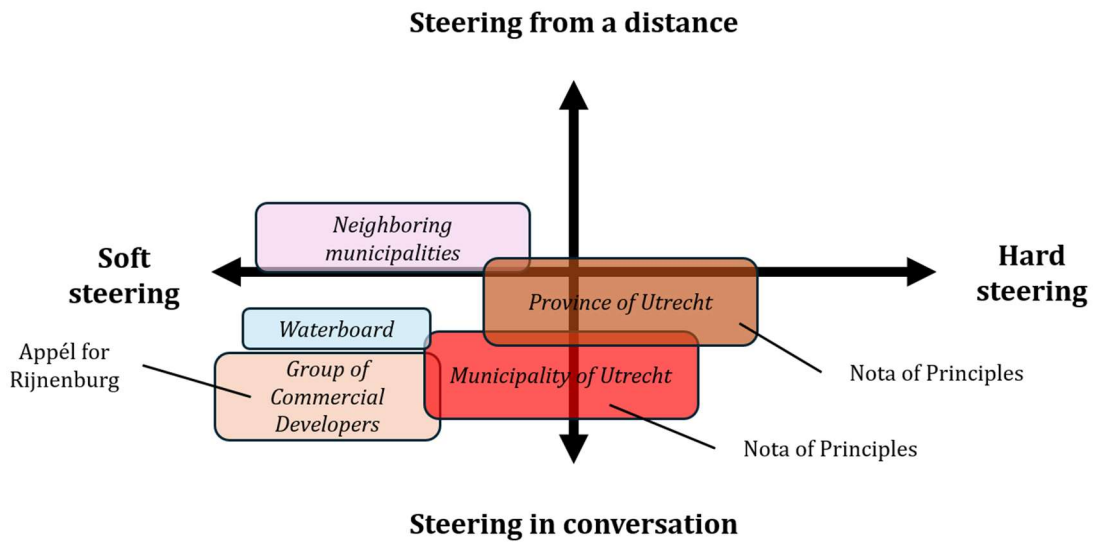


Figure 20: The steering model of Rijnenburg (own work)

Crucially, the stimulating, regulating, and directing quadrants remain empty. There are no binding instruments, no financial commitments, and no shared governance table, unlike the BRU-led structure that enabled Leidsche Rijn. Until such a framework emerges, Rijnenburg remains in a pre-coalition phase: actors are circling the issue, but no one is yet convening the space to act.

1



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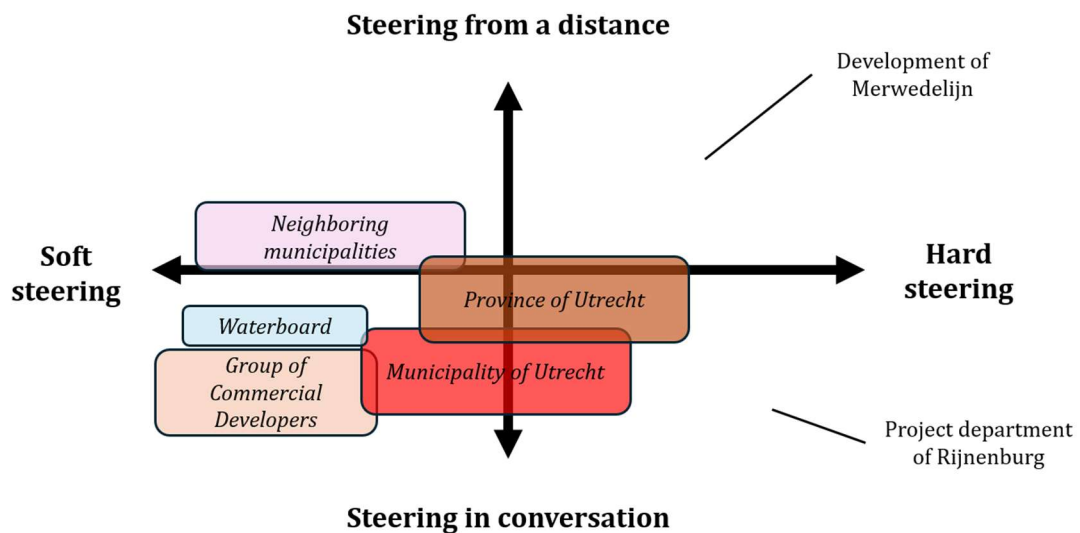


Figure 21: Phases and use of steering for the development of Rijnenburg

<sup>1</sup> The captions in the model refer to certain interventions in time. Some of which point at an actor in the model and have been undertaken. Some interventions are expected to be needed and are currently placed in the governance vacuum. For these interventions the actor with authority is still unknown.



## 7.4 Conclusion

The development of Rijnenburg illustrates a fundamental shift in how large-scale urban extensions are governed. Unlike Leidsche Rijn, which was embedded in a strong national planning regime and steered through a centralised project organisation, Rijnenburg is unfolding within a decentralised, fragmented, politically sensitive environment. While willingness among actors is present, no party fundamentally opposes development, this has not yet translated into aligned commitments, shared governance structures, or concrete implementation instruments.

The ability to act is a central challenge. Whereas Leidsche Rijn benefited from strong public institutional capacity, in Rijnenburg, ability is far more distributed across the market. Developers now possess not only large parts of the land, but also a significant share of the technical, design, and coordination capacity required to advance the project. This marks a notable shift: private actors are no longer just implementers of public plans, but key initiators and narrative builders. However, without clear public frameworks, their efforts risk remaining speculative and fragmented.

The role of the waterboard and the province has also evolved. HDSR, once a peripheral actor in urban development, is now expected to play a strategic role due to the area's complex hydrological conditions. Their early involvement is essential but not yet structurally secured. The province, meanwhile, is moving from coordinating to a connecting role. The recent debate of 15 May 2025 and the initiative to formulate a shared *Nota van Principes* indicate a growing willingness to claim a more proactive position in guiding the process.

The Municipality of Utrecht has similarly shifted in stance. Once opposed to development, it now views Rijnenburg as a necessary long-term extension of the city. Internally, planning notes (*Notes of Principles*) are being developed to gradually build commitment and legitimacy. These informal instruments, if formalized and supported politically, could lay the groundwork for stronger public direction. The fact that the province is willing to build on this is a promising sign of institutional alignment.

Meanwhile, the national government remains in a watching and waiting position. Through the MIRT-verkenning of the Merwedelijn, it signals interest but has not yet claimed a decisive role. Its involvement could be critical, not just for infrastructure funding, but also as a potential arbiter in complex multi-level decisions. As long as this role remains undefined, however, the governance vacuum persists.

To move Rijnenburg from exploratory dialogue to coordinated implementation, several steps are needed. First, the *Nota van Principes* should be formalised jointly by the municipality and the province. This document can provide shared direction, clarify roles, and offer a foundation for trust and cooperation. Second, a dedicated project department should be established, like the project department used for Leidsche Rijn, that centralises planning, legal, and financial expertise and creates continuity in leadership. Third, given the growing influence of market parties, further reflection is needed on their formal role within the development process. Structuring their responsibilities, expectations, and potential contributions more explicitly will help ensure coordinated action rather than fragmented initiative. Finally, the governance vacuum must be addressed. Clear agreements should be made with participating actors, possibly including a stronger decision-making role for the national government in key areas such as infrastructure funding or regulatory coordination. Without a mechanism to consolidate authority, Rijnenburg risks remaining in a prolonged pre-development phase.

The coming years will therefore be decisive not necessarily for building homes, but for building the governance framework that will make those homes possible.

## 8. Conclusion & Discussion

### 8.1 Conclusion

This thesis started with the main research question; “How can regional cooperation contribute to area development implementation in the Netherlands, with a focus on lessons from Leidsche Rijn for the future development of Rijnenburg?”. Based on a comparative case study approach and a dedicated analytical framework, the central concern of the thesis lies in the growing difficulty of implementing area development in the Netherlands due to fragmented decision-making, fragmented financial means, and conflicting interests. As national spatial planning has decentralised, responsibilities have multiplied while instruments and resources have become more dispersed. In this context, no single actor can steer large-scale development alone.

Rijnenburg is a high-stakes development area in the Netherlands, strategically located on the urban fringe of Utrecht, yet its implementation has stalled for over a decade. One of the most pressing conditions for unlocking development is the resolution of infrastructure, particularly the realization of the proposed Merwedelijn. This public transport connection is seen by many as a critical enabler of urbanization, without which Rijnenburg risks becoming an isolated and car-dependent extension. The current absence of a credible, funded infrastructure solution is symptomatic of a deeper institutional paralysis.

This paralysis is most visible in the steering framework of Rijnenburg. As analysed in chapter 7, Rijnenburg suffers from structural governance vacuums: formal responsibilities do not match actual power, actor alignment is weak, and no institution currently has the mandate or legitimacy to steer the development. There is willingness among stakeholders, but insufficient coordination to translate this into action. The result is a stagnation of decision-making across key domains: mobility, housing, watermanagement, and energy integration.

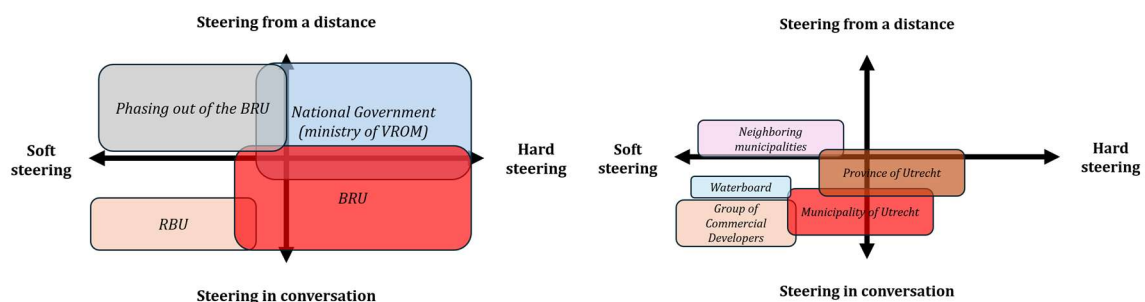


Figure 22: The steering frameworks of Leidsche Rijn (left) and Rijnenburg (right) compared (Own work).

To move beyond this impasse, this thesis proposes the creation of a temporary regional cooperation: a focused, time-bound governance arrangement tasked with preparing and initiating the Rijnenburg development. This cooperation should be regional in scope, as the complexity of the challenge spans administrative boundaries and requires horizontal and vertical coordination between the municipality, province, national government, water authorities, and private actors. At the same time, the cooperation should be temporary to avoid political and legal resistance to the creation of new, permanent regional authorities. A defined mandate and timeline can offer both flexibility and legitimacy.

The Province of Utrecht is well-positioned to help initiate regional cooperation. Unlike during the VINEX era, provinces today have greater formal authority, especially under the ‘omgevingswet’, which strengthens their coordinating role in spatial planning. While not required to lead, the province can pick up the glove, using its mandate, regional scope, and neutral position to convene actors and structure the temporary cooperation Rijnenburg urgently needs.

The proposed cooperation should be underpinned by four institutional interventions that emerged from this thesis. First, a municipal and a provincial Nota van Principes should be agreed upon. These formal documents would clarify shared goals, lay out preconditions, and offer an entry point for other actors such as HDSR and national ministries. Second, a dedicated project department should be established, either under provincial coordination or as a joint venture. This department would be responsible for managing coordination, consolidating technical expertise, and ensuring continuity across political cycles. Third, the growing influence of market actors in Rijnenburg, who control much of the land and increasingly shape development narratives, must be acknowledged. Their formal inclusion in the governance structure would

reduce speculative fragmentation and align private investment with public objectives. Finally, both the national government and waterboard HDSR-must clarify their roles. The waterboard's influence is crucial due to the area's flood risks and ecological constraints, while the national government must commit to its share of financial and infrastructural responsibility, especially regarding the Merwedelijn.

Together, these interventions would give form to a minimum institutional architecture for Rijnenburg. They would not impose new authority but enable existing actors to collaborate more effectively. A temporary regional cooperation, constructed around these elements, can provide the structure, continuity, and narrative alignment that is currently missing. It offers a way out of the governance vacuum. Not by imposing top-down solutions, but by enabling shared responsibility in a decentralized era.

In sum, regional cooperation can contribute to the implementation of area development by creating the missing institutional bridge between ambition and execution. While lessons can be drawn for Leidsche Rijn, where institutional alignment enabled decisive action, Rijnenburg operates in a different era, this demands a novel approach: a temporary regional cooperation that reflects today's governance realities with the shared ambition. If actors can rise to this challenge, Rijnenburg could show how collaboration is the future of Dutch planning.

## 8.2 Discussion

This research was guided by a growing sense of urgency around spatial planning in the Netherlands. As housing shortages deepen, climate adaptation becomes more critical, and the spatial claims of mobility, energy, and nature increasingly overlap, the space available for integrated development appears to shrink. These pressures have sparked renewed attention for large-scale, coordinated area development. At the same time, the institutional capacity to realise such projects seems increasingly fragile. This thesis set out to explore whether regional cooperation might offer a way forward, not as a fixed solution, but as a lens to better understand the governance conditions under which implementation becomes possible. The premise was that area development is not only a spatial or technical challenge, but a deeply institutional one. It relies on the ability of actors to work together across administrative levels, sectors, and timelines, often in the absence of formal mandates or stable structures.

In doing so, the thesis builds on a wider body of work that reflects on the shifting nature of spatial governance in the Netherlands. Scholars such as Buitelaar, Steenbergen, Verheul, and De Zeeuw have described how planning has moved away from national policy frameworks and formal hierarchies toward more negotiated, adaptive arrangements. The comparison between Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg contributes to this literature by illustrating what happens when the institutional scaffolding that once supported large-scale development is no longer in place. The comparison between Leidsche Rijn and Rijnenburg invites reflection on how governance arrangements shape the transition from ambition to implementation, and what the implications might be when those arrangements are incomplete or unstable.

To support this analysis, the thesis introduced an analytical framework. This framework proved helpful in clarifying where cooperation was forming, where it was faltering, and what types of institutional support might be needed. At the same time, it is important to recognise the limits of such a framework. Governance processes are rarely linear or cleanly segmented. Actors often operate in multiple modes at once, and the path from informal coordination to formal agreement is rarely straightforward. The framework should therefore not be seen as prescriptive or exhaustive, but as one way of reading institutional dynamics that are by nature complex, recursive, and political.

A similar caution applies to the institutional interventions proposed in the thesis. The idea of drafting a *Nota van Principes*, setting up a project department, or constructing a regional steering arrangement are all plausible responses to the observed gaps in governance. Yet the feasibility of these interventions is shaped by the very conditions that make them necessary. Fragmented authority, unclear mandates, and political ambivalence make implementation a challenge in itself. These proposals should not be understood as blueprints, but as informed suggestions, steps that could be taken, but only if actors find the legitimacy, trust, and momentum to support them.

The use of Leidsche Rijn as a reference point also requires critical reflection. Its relative success was underpinned by a unique combination of factors: national VINEX policy, regional governance through the BRU, and stable financial conditions. These conditions no longer apply. Transferring lessons to Rijnenburg therefore cannot be a matter of replication. What may be possible is adaptation, recognising patterns, understanding what supported implementation in the past, and reimagining how that might work in the present. Encouragingly, the empirical research for this thesis showed a degree of willingness among actors involved in Rijnenburg. Although formal structures are lacking, informal partnerships are emerging, exploratory studies are underway, and there appears to be shared recognition of the urgency to act. These signals suggest that a foundation for cooperation does exist, even if its form and future remain uncertain.

This brings the discussion to a broader political question: how should regional cooperation be organised? An emerging idea of this could be up for debate in the House of Representatives, is the creation of temporary regions or purpose-specific coalitions to steer complex area developments. This concept raises difficult but important questions. How can such arrangements remain accountable and legitimate? What powers should they hold, and for how long? And who decides when such a structure should be formed or dissolved? The proposal for a temporary regional cooperation in this thesis echoes this wider political discussion, suggesting that new institutional formats may be needed to address contemporary governance challenges. Yet whether such arrangements can be operationalised in practice remains an open question.

Ultimately, the findings of this study do not offer certainty, but rather a clearer view of the questions that still need to be addressed. What forms of leadership are viable without formal authority? How can informal alignment evolve into durable institutional commitment? And what kinds of cooperation can be both flexible and robust enough to carry long-term spatial ambition? These are governance questions at their core, and they are likely to become even more pressing in the years to come.

Yet there is reason for optimism. Despite fragmented structures, actors are connecting, aligning, and showing willingness to act. The outlines of cooperation are already emerging, and with the right support, they may offer a path from standstill to shared progress.

### **8.3 Future research**

This thesis has explored how regional cooperation can support the implementation of area development under fragmented governance conditions. While it proposes several institutional interventions and offers a comparative framework, important questions remain.

Future research could follow how instruments like the Nota van Principles or a municipal project bureau unfold in practice. Do they build lasting commitment or remain symbolic? More empirical work is also needed on the role of developers as institutional entrepreneurs, especially how their strategies align or conflict with public goals under decentralised planning.

Additionally, the steering framework introduced here, connecting, stimulating, regulating, directing, warrants deeper exploration. Governance does not follow a linear path, and future studies could investigate how steering modes overlap, evolve, or fail under real-world constraints.

Finally, research is needed on how governance capacity can be built when national spatial policy is no longer a guiding force. What new regional coalitions, informal agreements, or hybrid institutions are emerging, and under what conditions do they work?

As spatial pressures intensify, the question is no longer just how we develop land, but how we develop the institutions that make cooperation possible. That challenge is as political as it is spatial, and it may well define the future of planning.

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# 10. Appendix

Appendix A – Data Management Plan  
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Appendix C – Informed consent form  
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Appendix E – Approval of HREC application

## 10.1 Interviews

*Transcripts and consent forms of the interviews are part of the appendix.*

Respondent 1 – Academic in area development  
Respondent 2 – Project manager of the municipality of Utrecht developing Leidsche Rijn  
Respondent 3 – Commercial developer Rijnenburg  
Respondent 4 – Commercial developer Leidsche Rijn  
Respondent 5 – Urban planner Rijnenburg  
Respondent 6 – Project manager of the municipality of Utrecht developing Rijnenburg  
Respondent 7 – Regional Director of ministry of VRO  
Respondent 8 – Director at waterboard HDSR  
Respondent 9 – Project manager at the Province of Utrecht  
Panel of experts 1 – A panel of five senior area developers