

Vlaardingen: a pure bureaucracy?

An analysis of Vlaardingen's organizational structure

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Introduction

The Netherlands is known as the country of rules, or as the saying goes in Dutch: ‘Nederland, regeltjesland.’ During the last century more laws have been put into place to make sure that the Netherlands functions. While most laws and regulations are put into place by the central government in The Hague, much is also left to the provinces and even to the smaller municipalities. These municipalities have, through decentralization, been gaining more responsibilities that were previously reserved for the state or provinces. Because the responsibilities have been expanded, the administrative parts of these municipalities should be growing with them.

However, because of recent years of recession in the early 2010s, municipalities have found themselves struggling to manage their organizations, let alone grow them. This year, the 40 biggest municipalities in the Netherlands have argued that the coming 4 years they will be short of half a billion euros on their budgets. (Sandee, 2019). While municipalities lack in budgets, the process of decentralization is still going strong. To give an example, in 2013, Youth Services went from being a government service to a municipality service. It was thought that municipalities could make better use of the money available, however the staffing for Youth Services did not rise in municipalities. Keeping a municipality running is thus a challenge. For example, the municipality of Vlaardingen, a city with 70,000 citizens, located to the west of Rotterdam, has had a drastic lowering of staff members in its organizational structure the past years. The staffing went from at least 570 fulltime equivalents (FTE’s) in 2014 to 436 FTE’s in 2017. (Gemeente Vlaardingen, 2011 & 2018a)

A question may then arise, how are municipalities run? They are a public organization, receiving funds from the government and delivering services to its inhabitants. According to Michiel de Vries, public organizations, like municipalities, tend to become bureaucracies (De Vries, 2016). What then is a bureaucracy? A bureaucracy is a public organization where staff is dominant. When advisory staff dominates, it results in a machine bureaucracy. When the workforce dominates, this means we have a professional bureaucracy. A machine bureaucracy is defined by standardized processes, while a professional bureaucracy has a standardized set of skills. This then means that an official in a professional bureaucracy has much more freedom than an official in a machine bureaucracy. (Mintzberg, 1980) Municipalities are thus run bureaucratically.

A bureaucracy, be it machine or professional, will always have downsides. These downsides can either be a lack of efficiency, speed, or creativity, or they can be less caution and precision when executing certain tasks. Max Weber defines bureaucracy as an ideal type of

public organization, which would make the government more efficient and predictable. However, this is not an ideal type in the normative sense of the word, it is a rational ideal type. This means that this ideal type will never totally be reached. (Weber, 1978)

The ideal type can be compared to structures of organizations in the real world. Weber defines his ideal type with several characteristics, which since then scholars have been discussing about. In this paper, the focus will be on these Weberian characteristics of a pure bureaucracy. The municipality of Vlaardingen will be tested based on these characteristics and the following research question will be answered: to what extent is the Dutch municipality of Vlaardingen a pure bureaucracy according to Weber's characteristics of a pure bureaucracy? To answer that question this paper will be divided into three parts. First there will be a section about what Weber's characteristics are. The second section will be about the municipality of Vlaardingen and measure its organizational structure based on the characteristics of Weber's pure bureaucracy. Once that is established, the third and final section will be about how Vlaardingen might improve its bureaucracy.

Weber's characteristics of a pure bureaucracy

In his *Economy and Society: An outline of interpretive sociology* Max Weber has an entire chapter dedicated to just bureaucracy. In this chapter he first defines the characteristics of a Modern Bureaucracy. The first of these characteristics is that there is a principle of "official jurisdictional areas, which are generally ordered by rules, that is, by laws or administrative means" (Weber, 1978, p. 956). Thus, there is a division of tasks and authority. The second characteristic sits in line with the division of authority, namely the principle of office hierarchy. This means that there is a system in which the lower offices are supervised by the higher ones. This leads to a monocratic structure, according to Weber.

The third characteristic is that a bureaucracy is based upon written documents, which outline what an official must do. Weber states that a bureau is made up of these written documents, the "files", and of the staff that uses these files. The fourth characteristic is that recruitment of new employees is based upon general rules, experience within the administration and the seniority of the official. This will lead to the equal distribution of authority across the different offices inside an agency. The fifth requirement for a bureaucracy is that there should be a separation between the functionary and the task, thus meaning that if two officials are employed in the same office, they should both be able to complete the tasks at hand.

This makes the individual insignificant compared to the task that needs to be performed, which is another characteristic of a bureaucracy. Because the individual is insignificant compared to the task, they will require a fixed salary. This fixed salary is the seventh characteristic of a pure bureaucracy. The eighth and last characteristic, is that the goal of the agency does not lead to personal profit for the official (Weber, 1978).

De Vries provides us with a shorter list of characteristics:

1. A formal hierarchy within the organization.
2. A strict division of tasks and authority based on written job descriptions.
3. The implementation of tasks based on written documents.
4. Recruitment based on formal examinations and careers based on experience within the administration and seniority.
5. The separation of the functionary and the task.
6. The insignificance of the individual functionary compared to the task to be performed.
7. A fixed salary independent of one's performance.
8. The functioning as a goal in itself as opposed to the means to personal profit

(Found in: De Vries 2016, p.90)

All these characteristics are very much intertwined with each other. The formal hierarchy is based upon the division of authority and tasks, which heavily rely on written document. Because of the clear requirements that are put upon an official, the Weberian bureaucracy is a very structured form of organization. The ideal pure bureaucracy of Weber is also a very efficient one, at least in its standardized functioning (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019). The making of innovative policy and changing the standardized way a Weberian bureaucracy works will present issues for the officials.

The eight characteristics listed above are what is needed for a bureaucracy to be a pure bureaucracy according to Max Weber. If one of these characteristics is missing, the organization is not a bureaucracy. It could then however have an organizational form that is very closely related to the bureaucracy, like a technocracy or adhocracy (De Vries, 2016).

Vlaardingen: a pure bureaucracy?

Now that the eight characteristics of a pure bureaucracy have been established, the next question to answer is: What does Vlaardingen's organizational structure look like and how does this relate to the eight characteristics of Max Weber? The municipality has seven departments: The Managing Board, Urban Development, Urban Management, Means, Information & Facilities,

Public and Social Development. Each department, except for the Managing Board, has its own staff members that assist the officials in their departments. Also, each department has multiple offices under it. For example, the Means department has an office for financial administration, human resource management and finance & purchase (Gemeente Vlaardingen, 2018b). Aside from these seven departments, there are also the Municipality Council and the College of Mayor and Aldermen (CMA). Beside these there is also the Registrar, an official who helps the whole municipality council, and the Municipal Secretary, who forms the connection between the CMA and the municipality officials (Stalman & Ter Haar, 2013).

Having a formal hierarchy within the organization is the first characteristic of a pure bureaucracy according to Weber. On top of the organizational structure of the municipality are the Council of Mayor and Aldermen as Executive Committee of the municipality. As said above, the Municipality Secretary is the link between CMA and the officials. Along with six department heads, a controller and a director, they form the Central Management Team (CMT). The CMT is responsible for advising the CMA, but most importantly they are responsible for advising the Secretary on the functioning of the organization (Van Hofwegen, 2019). Each department thus has a department head, who leads the teams of officials.

While there is a hierarchy in the municipality, the hierarchy is not a direct line, it is not monocratic as Weber would want. This has to do with the duality of Dutch municipalities. On the one side, there is the CMA and on the other the Municipality Council. This makes it that the CMA is no longer a representative of the people, they now take responsibility for the policy of the municipality. The structure is the same as the Cabinet and Members of Parliament in the Dutch *Tweede Kamer* (Stalman & Ter Haar, 2013). Considering that this choice has been made to promote transparency of the municipality, I think that Vlaardingen fulfills the first requirement of Weber's characteristics through a dualistic approach, which still leads to a formal hierarchy.

The municipality officials all have a set of tasks which they must do (For examples, see: Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten, 1960, 28-31). They execute and make policy for the Mayor and Aldermen and also advise the Secretary on said policy (Stalman & Ter Haar, 2013). While that is true for most jobs within the municipal organization, there are two jobs in the managerial layer that are not completely adhering to this requirement. These are the controller and the Secretary. According to Van Hofwegen the controller should be independent of the direct advisory process within the municipal organization. However, the controller is also the deputy Secretary and deputy director of the municipal organization. This makes it impossible for the controller to objectively reflect on the work of the organization. Because the controller

is also the one making the agenda for the College of Mayor and Aldermen, he fulfills a task that should be carried out by the Secretary (Stalman & Ter Haar, 2013). However, since only two jobs inside the whole organization have this problem, the rest of the municipality fulfills the second requirement set out by Weber.

Recruitment of these officials has been mostly internal the last few years, due to budget cuts. If no applicant was found in Vlaardingen, one would be found in adjacent municipalities with who the municipality has a partnership (Gemeente Vlaardingen, 2011, 2015 & 2018a). However, in some cases no-one could be found, so some positions are now open to new recruits from outside of the current organization (See: Werken voor Vlaardingen, 2019). These new recruits are required to have obtained certain diplomas, making for formal examination in Weber's terms. Each official with the same job description also performs the same tasks, although sometimes for different parts of the city. Above shows how the municipality fulfills characteristics 3, 4, 5 & 6 of a pure bureaucracy.

Characteristic 7 is a fixed salary for the official. The salary must be independent of the performance of the official. The municipality of Vlaardingen employs salaries in different scales for its officials. An official can rise in scale by either accumulating more experience or switching jobs, for instance becoming a manager. Weber considers the ability to gain more salary by seniority part of a fixed salary (Weber, 1978). The last characteristic for Weber is that a task does not lead to personal profit for an official. In Vlaardingen, officials do not carry tasks that profit themselves. They perform tasks that benefit all citizens of the city (Gemeente Vlaardingen, 2018a & 2018b).

In conclusion, Vlaardingen ticks all boxes of Weberian bureaucracy. It has a formal hierarchy, division of tasks and authority, tasks based on written descriptions, recruitment based on formal examinations, separation of functionary and task, insignificance of the official, fixed salary and the officials have tasks that do not benefit themselves. While Vlaardingen ticks all the boxes, not everything is going as smoothly as Weber would hope for an ideal bureaucracy.

Vlaardingen: a bureaucracy.

As said above, Vlaardingen ticks all boxes for a pure bureaucracy, however this pure bureaucracy remains an ideal type. In practice however, the formal hierarchy of Vlaardingen could be improved on. As the interim Municipal Secretary Van Hofwegen (2019) points out in his report on the organizational structure of Vlaardingen, the Central Management Team is not always effective in reaching the goal that was set out for it by laws and regulations.

Van Hofwegen points out the following: “The composition of the CMT has a special inequality. Beside department heads, a director, the controller and the Secretary are members. These last three managers have a different role and with that not an equal position.” (Translated from: Van Hofwegen, 2019, p.6). Indeed, the director, controller and Secretary have different roles than the department heads. The role of director is, according to Van Hofwegen, unnecessary. The Secretary, as link between the Mayor & Aldermen and the CMT, is essentially already the ‘director’ of the municipal organization. He should be the one who is responsible for what policy is made by the officials and should be relaying their policy proposals towards the Mayor and Aldermen. Right now, however, that is the task of the controller.

Beside this inefficiency in the management structure, the rest of the municipality stays a largely bureaucratic organization. According to De Vries (2016) the main way to recognize a bureaucracy is the fact that most of the staff is advisory. This requirement is not acknowledged by Weber, however, as he points out himself: his bureaucracy is an ideal type. Organizations might come close to it but will never be a pure bureaucracy. Serpa & Ferreira (2019) say the following about this: “the notion of bureaucracy, the way it is often used, may not be that rational form described by Weber, but particular configurations of the bureaucratic model may be the most rational form for particular activities” (Serpa & Ferreira, 2019, p.16)

Such particular configurations of the bureaucratic model might be the professional bureaucracy and the machine bureaucracy as defined by Henry Mintzberg (1980). The municipality of Vlaardingen does not entirely fall under one of either type. Some departments are more complex than others and some jobs require more standardized work processes. Most of the officials that prepare policy for the College of Mayor and Aldermen can be regarded as working in a professional bureaucracy, while officials that execute the policy would be working in a machine bureaucracy.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper was made with the following research question in mind: To what extent is the Dutch municipality of Vlaardingen a pure bureaucracy according to Weber’s characteristics of a pure bureaucracy? It has been shown that, for the most part, Vlaardingen meets the characteristics of Weber’s pure bureaucracy. The municipality has a formal hierarchy, division of tasks and authority, tasks based on written descriptions, recruitment based on formal examinations, separation of functionary and task, insignificance of the official, fixed salary and the officials have tasks that do not benefit themselves.

The formal hierarchy in Vlaardingen, however, needs to be improved upon. The hierarchy doesn't comply with existing laws & regulations and the Controller fulfills part of the Municipal Secretary's job. The role of director is also, according to Van Hofwegen, unnecessary as that job would be fulfilled by the Secretary. The further hierarchy in the municipal organization is not compromised by this, thus there is a formal hierarchy. The other requirement that is not completely adhered to is the one of separation of tasks, which is already explained above: one official does part of the job of another, this is not a separation of tasks. However, since this is again only the case for two jobs and not for all jobs within the organization, there is a separation of tasks within the municipality.

The results of this research are as expected. As Weber himself pointed out, bureaucracies tend to get closer and closer towards the ideal type of the pure bureaucracy. Since the municipality of Vlaardingen has been around for a few decades and is no longer in its start-up phase, it is therefore only logical that it meets the characteristics that Weber set out almost a century ago. This research builds upon research about Weber's definition of bureaucracy, for example the paper of Serpa & Ferreira (2019), and it links the theory with the practice. Most studies focus on bigger scales, such as governmental agencies. This paper, however, chooses to look at a small scale. This smaller scale allows the research that is conducted to be very thorough. It is however beyond the scope of this study to determine whether bigger municipalities, like The Hague and Rotterdam, also comply to the characteristics of a pure bureaucracy.

The focus on this paper is clearly on the theory of Weber and how that theory can be applied to organizations today. As pointed out in the introduction, decentralization has had an impact on how municipalities work. 'Decentralisatie: maatwerk of uniformiteit' by Judith van der Veer, Jelmer Schaik and Rob Gilsing, published in *Beleid & Maatschappij* (2011), looks more closely at this question. Readers that would be interested in decentralization on municipal level could also take a closer look at Andhika (2018). Andhika focuses on the dilemmas that public administrators have when it comes to being innovative in their initiatives.

Further research on how Marx's theory is relevant still today could be conducted. However, since many municipalities could already be labeled as 'bureaucratic organizations, it might be more interesting to look at the influence of New Public Management or Neo-Weberian Bureaucracy instead.

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