



# The role of partnerships in ‘realising’ urban sustainability in Rotterdam’s City Ports Area, The Netherlands



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## ABSTRACT

Port relocation leaves a mark on the city’s landscape and history. In Rotterdam, a medium-sized urban delta, the harbour activities are being relocated from close to the city centre to outwards on the sea. This leaves the city with a regeneration challenge accounting for an area of 1600 ha that it is addressed through the drawing up of an ambitious vision. We investigate the partnerships that emerged and contributed by taking up the realisation of the vision. The partnerships further develop and bring to the ground the vision while remaining inspired and driven by sustainability as a guiding and practicing principle. A mapping framework is developed to examine the governance imprint of partnerships along two axes: their impact in terms of synergies and the governance role they adopt. Success factors pertinent to the case include: the sustainability vision created a momentum for action, enjoyed political attention and commitment and was received as a flagship committing different actors to its implementation. Additional factors are the quick reflexes of different agencies to take up action at the aftermath of the vision creation, the local government was open to experiment with new and old arrangements and in this way, it reinvented its role without losing its governing responsibility. In this context, partnerships take up meta-governance roles and coordinate self-organised collaborative governance processes while ensuring synergies and delivering on sustainability ambitions.

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## 1. Introduction

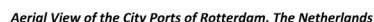
Urban areas transform via adapting to pressures such as climate change, globalization, social fluidity or relocating of activities. Urban transformations require orchestrated efforts of actors from the public, private and social sphere to effectively regenerate and redevelop urban areas. Urban regeneration is a process of (re) establishing social, economic, and environmental values of an area via recreating its identity and function in the urban context (Davies, 2002, p.307). Urban regeneration illustrates characteristics of a wicked problem (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010). Meaning that the problem’s boundaries are ill-defined, it concerns multiple actors with conflicting and overlapping interests every attempt to tackle the problem deconstructs and reconstructs problems dimensions (Giddens, 1984, p.164) and these kinds of problems are uniquely formed by their (in this case, urban) context.

Urban regeneration as a complex wicked problem thus requires joint efforts from multiple actors that consider context and

problem complexity simultaneously. In urban areas, different (collaborative) institutional arrangements emerge that undertake activities to respond to urban problems and demands (Khan, 2013). Urban regeneration becomes even more challenging when it concerns urban waterfronts. Urban waterfronts have significant cultural (historic and symbolic), ecological and economic values for the cities and their transformations bring about opportunities and problems. Their regeneration as a process of transformation requires consideration of multiple ends and means. Waterfronts’ regeneration projects and programmes are often confronted with institutional complexity such as conflicting regulations, non-existing planning laws, required planning and land-use policy changes, environmental restoration complexities (restoring previously industrial-used sites into housing sites with green space demands), and conflicting visions of the restored area between local authorities, citizens and businesses (Moulaert et al., 2003). Urban waterfront regenerations are processes (and projects/programmes) that often succeed in opening debates about urban needs (such as sustainability, liveability, or growth) and mobilising communities and the innovative potential of citizens, businesses and government (Bassett et al., 2002). Sustainability as a driver and quality signifier of urban waterfront regeneration and development also asks for collaborative and holistic planning and governance

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**Fig. 1.** Rotterdam's City Ports Area. (edited by authors, original pictures from [www.stadshavensrotterdam.nl](http://www.stadshavensrotterdam.nl))

approaches (Kenny and Meadowcroft, 1999; Healey, 2006). One of the cities facing a sustainable redevelopment of its urban waterfront is Rotterdam, the case of focus in this article.

### 1.1. Rotterdam's regeneration challenge

Rotterdam is located in the south-western part of the Netherlands and hosts one of the larger ports in Europe, an important economic area in the Netherlands. Being located below sea level, climate change is expected to challenge this deltaic city in a number of ways due to larger influx of water from the rivers, salinization of the underground water, increasing rainfall, and longer dry periods. Rotterdam also faces a number of challenges in its social fabric. Its population of 650.000 is generally low educated, relatively young and ethnically diverse.

The start of the 21st century is not the first time the city sees itself confronted with redevelopment planning and projects (Van der Schoor, 1999; Premius, 2004; Hooimeijer and Geldof, 2008, p.50–55; Van der Brugge and Van Eijndoven, 2009). The construction of the City Ports at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century can be seen as the beginning of the westward movement of the harbour of Rotterdam. This spatial relocation was realized when later the oil harbour, the Eerste Maasvlakte, and now the Tweede Maasvlakte were developed. The relocation and transfer of the harbour activities (including support businesses) outside the city's matrix over the next 25 years create a

need to redevelop the City Ports area while aiming for sustainability.

Covering an area of about 1600 ha located on both banks of the river Meuse and within the city limits, City Ports is the largest urban (re)development area within the urbanized western part of the Netherlands and defined as a project of national importance (Fig. 1). To facilitate the transition process the Rotterdam Municipality and the Port Authorities started a joint program in 2006 for the redevelopment of the City Ports area. Different types of partnerships were established after the vision creation phase that marked a new governance landscape with interesting successes.

The case of the regeneration of the City Ports Area in Rotterdam gets our attention because it presents a number of successes in realising an innovative vision for a sustainable urban transition. In the urban context, a sustainability transition is conceptualised as a long-term process of fundamental change of systems of provision coupled with radical shifts in ways of organising (structures) and operating (practices) (in) a city as well as altering assumptions and perceptions (cultures) towards more sustainable trajectories (Frantzeskaki and de Haan, 2009; Coenen and Truffer, 2012; Nevens et al., 2013). The City Ports case is an example where action follows up a sustainability vision and different partnerships account for bringing sustainability aspirations into life in an innovative and collaborative way. Unlike other cases where a well formulated ambitious sustainability vision remains as a symbol with no action relating to it, the City Ports sustainability vision receives political

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