

“Exploring the boundaries of transparency and public accountability in
failing governance regimes: the case of child care in Flanders”

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1. Introduction

Public policy is increasingly designed and implemented in networks in which public actors work together in close co-operation with non-governmental actors, which may be nonprofit or for-profit (commercial). This phenomenon has been intensified with the rise of the New Public Management-paradigm, under the assumption that service delivery by non-governmental actors may be more efficient, more effective, more customer-oriented and so on, compared to public service delivery by governmental (public) actors. Indeed, in many countries and in many policy fields we can observe a growing importance of private actors in service delivery. We see a trend towards ‘marketization’ (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000), in which public service delivery is brought into a competitive market. Examples are the involvement of commercial organisations in service delivery (competition, contracts, etc.).

Less debated, but nonetheless very relevant, is the involvement of private nonprofit actors in public service delivery. In many countries (especially continental European) the involvement of non-governmental actors in public policy has a long tradition. Especially in the domain of welfare policy (e.g. disabled people, elderly care, child care), education and health care for example, nonprofit organizations have a large share in delivering services (e.g. Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006). This is what Salamon (in Anheier 2006) has labelled “third party government”, or the observation that public authorities and nonprofit organizations are partners: government finances private actors to deliver public services on their behalf.

However, this evolution to involve private actors (nonprofit and/or commercial) in public service delivery has a lot of consequences and implications.

First of all, we observe an increasing complexity in many policy fields. A situation that could become too complex or intransparent for users as they have to face complex governance networks with public and private organisations who share the responsibility for policy design and policy implementation.

Secondly, these complex governance regimes (Heinrich & Lynn, 2000) also challenge the steering role of oversight authorities at the centre of government. In governance regimes that are dominated by public organisations to deliver public services, the steering and control of these public organisations (central ministries or central agencies) by the oversight authorities is quite hierarchical and straightforward. There is a direct, formal and hierarchical accountability line between principal (central oversight authority) and agent (public organisation that delivers the services at ‘street level’). With the evolution, in some policy domains, to governance regimes with service providers of different types, hierarchical steering and control become less relevant and necessary. As private organizations often dispose of a certain degree of independence, they cannot be steered in a too hierarchical way. The steering and control by an oversight authority should take into account this degree of autonomy and also must be considerate of the fact that private organisations may have other accountabilities.

Thirdly, given the fact that private actors of different types and kinds offer the same services, the oversight authority is also challenged to guard the transparency and coordination of the network of service providers. In such complex governance regimes, we often observe that oversight authorities use more market- and

network-type systems to coordinate the service delivery instead of more hierarchical systems (e.g. Ouchi 1991).

In this paper we will study these consequences and implications of complex governance regimes and explore the meaning, boundaries and importance of the concepts accountability and transparency. In particular we will make an in-depth analysis of a *'failing'*¹ governance regime in order to explore how shortcomings in the accountability relations may threaten the success of policies.

The paper will be structured as follows:

Firstly, we will present an example of a complex governance regime by describing how the field of child care in Flanders (Belgium) is organized and regulated. Next, we will theoretically discuss what kind of problems can arise with regard to accountability and transparency in such complex governance regimes. Thirdly, we will test whether, on what level, and to what extent the complex regime of child care in Flanders fails, by presenting results of recent research and by analyzing policy initiatives in the field of child care. To conclude, we hope to start a discussion about possible solutions to deal with the problems of failing governance regimes.

2. Child care in Flanders: a complex governance regime

Child care is a policy field in which a lot of actors are participating, both in policy-making and in service delivery. Child care policy belongs to the authority of the Flemish minister for Welfare, assisted by the public agency Kind en Gezin, but a lot of flanking early childhood policy competences are spread amongst other federal and Flemish ministers and administrative entities, either ministries or agencies². At the service delivery level, the governance regime is even more complex, as child care provision is organized by public, commercial and not-for-profit (social profit) organisations of various types. In this part of the paper, we will give an overview of the (multi-level) governance regime of the child care policy-making and service delivery field.

(Multi-level) Governance regime with regard to policy-making

Division of competences between the federal and regional level

Flanders is a Dutch-speaking region in the federal state of Belgium in which approximately 6 million people are living. Belgian regions have their own parliament and government with extensive autonomous competences. These competences have been devolved from the federal to the regional level over time, as the

¹ In which service delivery practices led to outcomes contradictory to the public goals.

² The Flemish administration consists of departments and autonomous agencies. Agencies mostly take up the service delivery, while ministries have to elaborate ministerial policies, working in close collaboration with the personal advisers of the minister working in his/her ministerial cabinet.

result of some consecutive steps in the Belgian state reform process. Welfare competences have been one of the transferred competences. This means that Flanders has law-making competences in the welfare area, although some (parts of) competences are still regulated and subsidised by the federal state. In the early childhood policy field, the regulations on maternity and parental leave for example are determined at the federal level, as well as the attribution of fiscal reductions for child care. The preventive health care for mothers and children, child care and education policy belong to the authority of the regions.

Division of competences within the Flemish Government

The early childhood policy authority is not only split up between the federal and the regional level, it is also divided between two ministers and policy domains within the Flemish executive branch: the minister for Education on the one hand, and the minister for Welfare, Health care & Family on the other hand. Compulsory education in Flanders starts at 6 years, but the enrolment of children in the so-called 'kleuterscholen' -free pre-school educational provision for children between 2,5 and 6 years, generally attached to a primary school- is enormous. The 'kleuterscholen' are regulated, subsidized and controlled by the minister of Education via the Flemish Ministry of Education. Provision is for a full school day (8.30 am-3.30 pm).

The care for young children from 0 to 2,5 years and the out-of-school care for children from 2,5 to 12 years belongs to the authority of the minister for Welfare, Health care and Families. The competency of child care is delegated to a public agency named Kind en Gezin (Child and Family). Kind en Gezin is responsible for the organisation and monitoring of formal pre-school and out-of-school care.³

Division of competences between the Flemish and the local governmental level

The local level in Flanders -308 communities, governed by their own elected local government- has some additional competencies with regard to welfare policy-making and is also responsible for the coordination of social policy at the local level. In child care however, its main role consists of the delivery of child care, either directed and subsidized by the Flemish government, or delivered on their own initiative, financed with own means. As Kind en Gezin regulates, recognizes or supervizes, controls and subsidizes the care providers, the local government only has an advisory role towards the decisions of Kind en Gezin.

Governance regime with regard to service delivery

Kind en Gezin does not deliver any child care service itself, it only regulates, subsidizes and controls child care services organised by other organisations or local governments. It offers information about the service

³ Besides its child care competencies, Kind en Gezin is also responsible for the preventive medical and educational support for families with young children.

delivery landscape and the child care providers⁴ to parents, but it does not give any guidance to parents who are searching for a place.

Main characteristics of the service delivery governance regime

The child care service delivery landscape in Flanders is very complex, as it covers different organisation types and labels. Hereafter, we will sketch the three most important characteristics of this delivery landscape.

The first and most important characteristic is the difference between recognized and subsidized child care providers on the one hand, and supervised but not subsidized child care providers on the other hand. Recognized and subsidized child care providers receive covering subsidies for their personnel and for equipment, while supervised organisations have to finance their personnel and running costs (equipment like beds, furniture and toys) with own means (via the parental contributions). Although it should be mentioned that some child care providers with a certificate of supervision can⁵ also get a subsidy per place, this kind of subsidy is considerably lower compared to the subsidies that subsidized day centres receive. The subsidy for supervised day centres amounts to only 6% of the subsidy paid to a recognized day centre.⁶ Table 1 shows that in 2007, about two-third of the child care supply was delivered by recognized and subsidized child care providers, while 36% of the providers had a certificate of supervision.

The differences in subsidies do matter for children and parents, as the amount of subsidies the child care provider receive may determine the *quality* (with regard to personnel and infrastructural requirements), *cost price* and *accessibility* of the child care:

- Child care providers with a certificate of supervision are less heavily regulated with regard to personnel and infrastructural requirements, while recognized and subsidized child care providers are obliged to work with qualified staff. Recognized and subsidized child care providers are also legally bound to additional quality system requirements, which supervised organisations do not have to install.
- While supervised child care providers are free to determine the financial contributions parents have to pay, recognized and subsidized child care providers are obliged to ask parents a contribution that depends on their taxable income and familiar situation (number and kind of children), resulting in a contribution between 0 and 25 euro a day. Parents pay their contributions directly to the child care provider. Kind and Gezin complements the parental contributions to recognized child care providers with subsidies to ensure that they can finance their staff and running costs. To supervised child care providers, no complementary subsidies are paid. This system implies that parents with a child in a recognized and subsidized child care provider usually do not have to pay whenever their child is absent due to sickness or holidays, while most supervised child care providers can not afford to be that

⁴ Kind en Gezin offers on-line all contact information of child care services in every community.

⁵ On the explicit condition that they fulfill some preconditions on staff qualifications and opening hours.

⁶ The subsidy per place for day centres with a certificate of supervision is approximately 550 euro per place, the subsidy for its recognised equivalent is approximately 9000 euro per place.

generous⁷. This implies that for most parents, child care in a supervised organisation is more expensive compared to child care in a recognized and subsidized organisation.⁸

- While supervised child care providers can determine their own admission criteria, recognised and subsidised child care providers are legally bound to several admission rules. The latter not only have to work as transparent as possible with regard to their admission policy, they also have to apply established priority criteria whenever the demand exceeds the supply.

The second characteristic of the child care service delivery field that should be mentioned is the difference between residential care on the one hand, and familiar type care in the house of the care provider on the other hand. This difference exists both in the subsidized and in the supervised sector. In the subsidized sector, family care is organised by a family care service who selects the childminders, introduces them to parents, calculates and receives the parental contributions and takes care for the payments of the childminders.⁹ In the supervised sector, all family day carers work autonomously. Most places (54%) were of the familiar care type, while 46% were group care like. Most of the family care is organised by subsidized family care services.

| Sector/ Places | Subsidised | | Non-subsidised | | TOTAL |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| | <i>Subsidised day centres</i> | <i>Subsidised family care services</i> | <i>Non-Subsidised day centres</i> | <i>Non-subsidised family care</i> | |
| <i>Number of care providers</i> | 291 | 193 ¹⁰ | 977 | 1144 | 2567 |
| <i>Number of places</i> | 13.439 | 30.679 | 18.456 | 6.859 | 69.433¹¹ |
| | 44.118 (64%) | | 25.315 (36%) | | |

Table 1: Number and size of the different child care providers (Data from December 2007)

The third characteristic of the service delivery field relates to the variety of sectors involved in child care delivery. Child care can be provided by either local government, by private not-for-profit organizations (often embedded in religious or ideological networks), or by private for-profit organizations (commercial initiatives). The child care field in Flanders is thus a typical example of co-production of public service delivery between different sectors (public, private nonprofit and commercial). Each of these three ‘sectors’ can establish and manage organisations such as day care centres or family day care. These child care providers operate on the local level, as close as possible to the users, but are to a large extent regulated (and in some cases – cf. supra the subsidized sector - financed) by the Flemish government. Over time, this has

⁷ Most supervised organisations work with a very small number of absence days for which parents do not have to pay.

⁸ Just recently, the Flemish government started a project to complement also the parental fees in commercial initiatives. As this policy had just been launched after having submitted the paper proposal, we will not discuss it any further.

⁹ However, the childminders themselves are not tied to the family day care service with an employment contract as they got a specific statute in the Belgian social security system. They do not receive any wage, they only get an allowance for expenses.

¹⁰ More than 5000 baby minders are affiliated to these 193 services. If we would count them like private family care providers, the total number of care providers would exceed 7000 providers.

¹¹ At the end of 2007 there were 69.433 places in Flemish preschool child care. We know that early 2007, 83.600 children attended pre-school child care. A child care place thus was used on average by 1,2 children¹¹. As we know that there were 195.000 children younger than 3 years, approximately 43% of Flemish young children made use of formal child care services. Although informal child care (e.g. grandparents) maintains to be the dominant care type for young children, the use of formal care is rather high.

resulted in a dense network of more than 2500 child care providers (see table 1) from different sectors (public, private nonprofit and private commercial) in the 308 Flemish communities. Table 2 contains additional comparative data¹² on the sectoral prevalences. It is important to mention that only public and non profit organisations can be recognised and subsidised, while not all organisations with a certificate of supervision are commercial (implying that some public and nonprofit organisations have a certificate of supervision, and are not subsidized). There is thus not a linear relationship between the organizational legal status (public, private nonprofit or private commercial) and the fact that the organization is subsidized or not. As recognition is coupled to subsidies, and as the budget for enlargement of the sector is scarce¹³, a lot of public and non-profit set up their own supervised care providers, without Flemish subsidies. Table 2 shows that approximately 5000 supervised places are offered by public (1153 places) and non-profit organizations (3913 places).

| Supply capacity (in places) | CHILD CARE | | | | Total | % |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|------------|
| | Subsidised day centres | Subsidised family care | Non-Subsidised day centres | Non-subsidised family care | | |
| Non-profit | 8.958 | 21.766 | 3.913 | | 34.637 | 50% |
| Public | 4.481 | 8.913 | 1.153 | | 14.547 | 21% |
| Profit (Commercial) | | | 13.390 | 6.859 | 20.249 | 29% |
| Total | 13.439 | 30.679 | 18.456 | 6.859 | | |
| | 44.118 (64%) | | 25.315 (36%) | | 69.433 | |

Table 2: Sectoral prevalences in child care

Table 2 shows that each of the three sectors at least represents more than 20% of the total number of places. The non-profit sector has the largest share (50%), but the commercial sector is more important than the public sector (29% vs 21%). Table 2 also shows that most of the non-profit capacity is subsidized, implying that the Flemish child care field is a typical example of a governmentally subsidized field in which the non-profit sector is mainly a government-dominant funded sector, in a rather corporatist society characterized by large governmental social spending and a large nonprofit sector (Anheier 2006, Salamon & Anheier 1998).

Regulatory framework towards recognized & subsidized child care providers.

As a final aspect in the description of the child care policy field in Flanders, we need some insight in the relation between Kind en Gezin (the regulatory authority at the Flemish governmental level), and the subsidized child care providers. This relationship is characterized by some important rules concerning the recognition of the service providers by the Flemish government, and concerning the governmental subsidies for the child care providers.

¹² We only look at the prevalences in terms of places and will not look at prevalences in terms of organisations, as the minimal size of care providers differs between sectors. Subsidized day centres should count at least 23 places, while supervised day centres can count at least as 8 places.

¹³ The recognition of new places depends on the availability of resources. It is the Flemish Government and the Minister of Welfare in particular who decides if and how many places can be subsidized. The recognition occurs by an enlargement operation in which public and non-profit care providers can apply for a number of places. At the moment a new enlargement operation is being held in which more than 2000 subsidized places will be allocated.

Imposed regulations and autonomy of the service providers

Recognized and subsidized child care providers enjoy –once they fulfilled all basic conditions¹⁴ to receive a recognition- a large degree of autonomy on several fields.

With regard to the recruitment and employment of *personnel*, recognized and subsidized day centres are – within the boundaries of the budgetary envelope they receive¹⁵- free to recruit the staff they want, he/she should only possess the necessary educational qualifications. Family day care services are even free to work with the child minders they want –regardless of their educational qualifications.

With regard to *service delivery*, recognised day centres have to offer child care for at least 11 hours on 220 days a year. They are however free to choose their opening hours and their closing days.

With regard to *parents in search of a place for child care*, recognized child care providers have to be clear about their admission policy, they may not discriminate families or children based on cultural, sexual, racial, ethnical or religious grounds and they have to apply the legal priority criteria whenever they have to choose between several demands. According to these rules, subsidised day centres and family care services are obliged to give prior admission to the following groups:

- Children of parents who can not –due to their jobs- take care for their children during the day.
- Children for whom it would be good for social or pedagogical reasons to stay in a formal care setting outside the family.
- Children of parents with the lowest income.
- Children of single parents.

Within these boundaries, recognized child care providers may add other criteria or may give priority to one or another priority rule, as there exists no hierarchy between the established priority rules.

With regard to *the number of children* they admit, recognized day centres are free to choose how many children they accept, but they should keep in mind their recognized ‘capacity’¹⁶ for two reasons:

- The exceeding of the capacity may lead to a withdrawal of the recognition for reasons of quality or safety.
- An insufficient occupation of the capacity will lead to an adaptation of the capacity, leading to less subsidies.

With regard to the *pedagogical policy*, recognized day centres have to offer optimal chances for development and are obliged to keep the children under watch and ward of qualified personnel, but they are free to choose the composition of the groups, the kind of activities they offer to the children and the plays or tools they give to the children.

With regard to the *parents*, child care providers have to install an information policy. This includes that all agreements about care and costs have to be written down in a written agreement and that parents are

¹⁴ The infrastructure has to comply with several specific requirements with regard to space (enough m² pro child), lay out (sleep and play rooms, kitchen, ...) and safety; the organisation should possess all required insurances.

¹⁵ They receive subsidies for a qualified child nurse for every 6,5 recognized places.

¹⁶ This is the number of places for which they get subsidies and for which they have to fulfill the basic conditions with regard to infrastructure and staff.

informed about closing days, opening hours, special activities, changing cost prices for special services, It also belongs to the autonomy of the child care provider to calculate the contribution that parents have to pay for a day of child care. Although they have to apply very precise legal rules and guidelines, they are free to deviate from the rules for people who are not able to pay.

Subsidies by the oversight authority

Kind en Gezin pays subsidies, according to the number of places it has recognised for the child care provider. This does not mean that two child care providers with the same number of recognised places will be paid the same sum. There are three factors that determine the amount of the subsidy. Firstly, the subsidy complements the parental contributions until the care provider receives a fixed amount per place. Child care providers who received less parental contributions, will thus receive more subsidies. Secondly, the subsidy depends on the average age of the personnel. Child care providers with an older staff will receive more subsidies to finance their main running cost. Thirdly, the subsidy depends on the degree in which the day centre optimizes its occupation rate. To prevent that child care providers would take advantage from the subsidy system, they should have an average annual occupation rate of 80%. If their occupation rate is less than 80%, their recognized capacity will be reduced, implying a loss of subsidies.

In order to get the right amount of subsidies, subsidized child care providers have to pass the following information per quarter to Kind en Gezin: The number and kind of care moments (full days, half days or 1/3 days), the total amount of parental contributions they received, and the names and age category of every member of their personnel. It is important to mention that they do not have to pass names of children, nor private information about the financial or relational situation of the parents. They also should not pass individual information about the parental contribution to Kind en Gezin. The fact that Kind en Gezin does not ask these data, does not mean that these aspects are not controlled. They are controlled by a distinct Inspection agency, specialized in the inspection of welfare organisations. Child care providers are inspected once in 5 years by means of site visits in which inspectors examine if the child care provider is not violating the legal requirements with regard to the employment of qualified personnel, the permanent supervision of the children, the number of children in relation to the present staff, the calculation of parental contributions¹⁷ and so on. The inspectors will also assess the information policy and will check if the child care providers have installed the required systems and procedures. However, the application of the procedures will not be examined. The inspectors will for instance check if the rule book contains enough and correct information with regard to their admission policy, but they will/can not check if the legal priority rules were applied in a correct way. The results of the inspection can be used by Kind en Gezin to ask the care provider to adapt their functioning. If they are not willing to do this, Kind en Gezin can withdraw their recognition.

¹⁷ Whenever they notice any major fault, the child care provider will have to reimburse (parts of) the subsidy and (parts of) the parental contributions they received for that child.

Conclusion

It may be clear that the child care sector can be defined as a very complex governance regime. This complexity can be good illustrated by looking at the field of child care providers from the position of the users. Families are confronted with a rich supply diversity of care providers (either group or family care), organised by public, non-profit or commercial organisations, sometimes subsidized, sometimes supervised. This implies that in many local communities in Flanders, child care providers of the three sectors co-exist and deliver services simultaneously. There is no public body to support or lead parents in their search for a child care place as Kind en Gezin does not offer any direct service of that kind to parents. It only offers information (by means of leaflets and internet) about the characteristics of the different care possibilities and offers an on-line database¹⁸ with contact information of all care providers.

The public goals that Kind en Gezin wants to reach are: offering sufficient places of a good quality in order to support young families (for example to help parents to combine their work and children). As the oversight authority it stimulates local governments and private organisations to offer child care places and regulates them in order to guarantee a minimum level of quality. It also subsidizes a substantial amount of places. These subsidized care providers have to cope with a lot more requirements with regard to cost price, personnel and accessibility. We tried to catch this complexity of the field of Flemish child care in Figure 1.

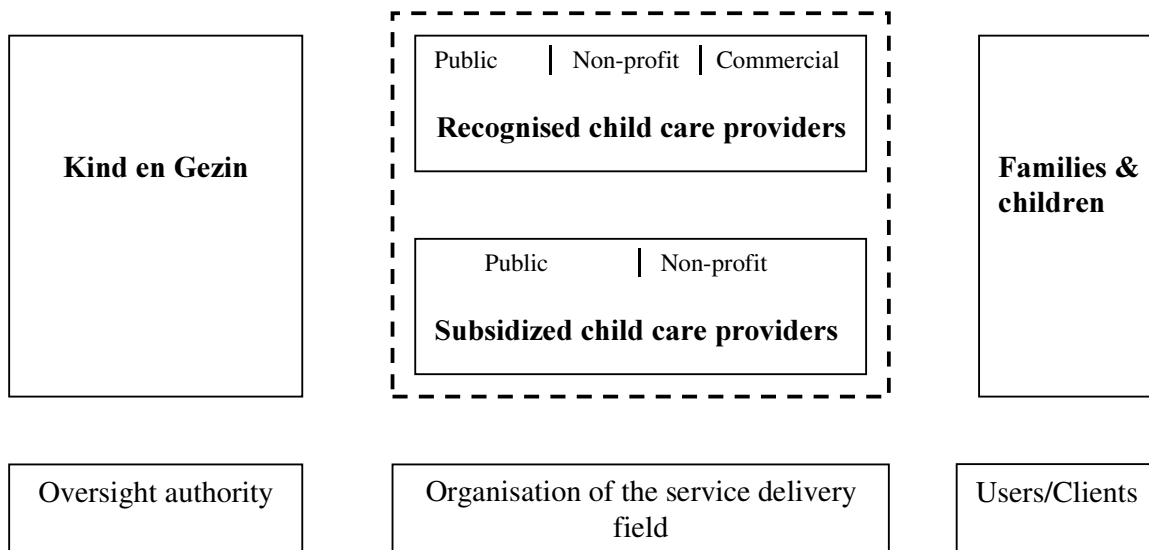


Figure 1: Complex governance regime in Flemish child care

3. Accountability & transparency in complex governance regimes

In the previous paragraphs, we illustrated the complexity of governance regimes, by looking at the example of child care in Flanders which is characterized by a large number of care providing organisations. However, the complexity of a governance regime is not only dependent on the number and kind of organisations, but is

¹⁸ Parents can ask all or groups of care providers in their community.

also determined by the amount, the kind and the content of the accountability relations between the components of a governance regime: oversight authority, service providers and users. The way these relations are set up and are functioning is important, as they determine the performance of the public policy. In this part of the paper, we will examine what kind of accountability relationships exist in complex governance regimes, and will explore what kind of problems potentially accompany these accountability relationships.

Seen from the perspective of the public service providers, one often discerns between vertical or “upward” accountability towards the oversight authorities (the regulatory agency e.g.), and horizontal or “downward” accountability towards the users of the services delivered (clients) (Verschuere et al. 2006). By using this distinction, two key-accountees can be discerned, the users of the services, and the oversight authorities of the service-delivery organisations. However, this is only a narrow view of the accountability relations within complex governance regimes. As a matter of fact, we think that it would be useful to discern at least 5 accountability relationships (see figure 2):

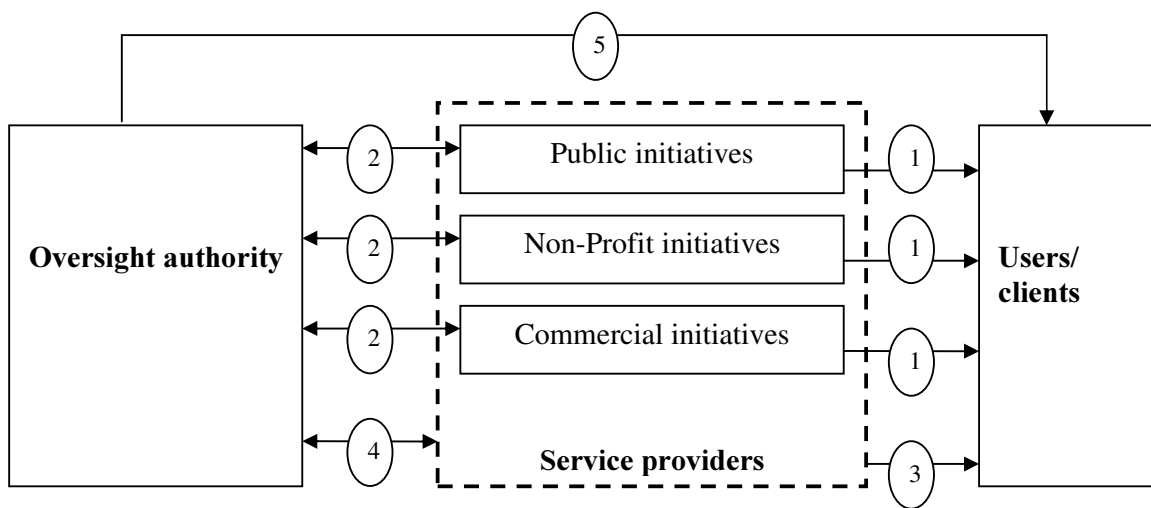


Figure 2: Accountability relationships in complex governance regimes

1. The accountability relation between an individual service provider and the user (horizontal or “downward” accountability);
2. The accountability relation between an individual service provider and the oversight authority (vertical or “upward” accountability);
3. The accountability relation between the network of service providers and the user;
4. The accountability relation between the network of service providers and the oversight authority;
5. The accountability relation between the oversight authority and the user.

Hereafter, these relations will be discussed with particular attention for the accountability problems than can rise.

The accountability relation between individual service providers and users

First of all, we may question how individual service-providing organisations can be accountable, vis-à-vis the users/clients, for their service delivery. The key-stake of the users (or their representatives) of the service delivery is sufficient access to services of good quality, at a reasonable cost. In other words, the organization needs to be accountable to users, peers and interest groups ('downward', e.g. Romzek & Ingraham 2000, Stone 1995). In many instances, however, users of service delivery have few opportunities to hold the organization accountable. There is no such thing as a formal hierarchical relationship between "boss" and "subordinate" in a horizontal accountability regime (Schillemans 2007, PhD). This means that, in terms of Leat (1988, in Anheier 2006), accountability is at most 'explanatory' and 'responsive', by which the organization explains and gives account to the clients or the users for what they are doing (explanatory accountability), or by which the organization takes into account the views of the clients after having consulted these clients in one or another way (responsive accountability). There is also, in normal circumstances, no room for accountability with sanctions – a very formal and legal aspect of accountability – in the relationship between organization and client. The only options that users have is to complain to the organisation or to the oversight authority or to quit the service provider in case. Both strategies are not without any risk, as they may put the good relationship between service provider and client at risk (especially risky in the case of child care, which is a relational good, see Van de Donk 2008). Or the client may end up without service delivery, especially in a field where the demand for services is larger than the supply.

In complex governance regimes however, other accountability problems may arise as the characteristics of the horizontal accountability regime may differ between different kinds of service providers. Public, nonprofit and commercial organisations may all have, to a certain extent, different bottom-lines. We might for example expect that commercial service providers will be driven by the profit-motive, besides their motivation to deliver good services to the clients. To the contrary, public and private non-profit organisations will not be inclined primarily to make profits, as a result of the non-distribution constraint. In terms of accountability, we can expect that non-profit and public providers will have less attention to the demands of the shareholders of the organisations in terms of making financial surplus, compared to commercial organisations. We might also expect that public service providers will have more attention to the stakes of the government that organizes these public services. In our case, public child care providers, organized by local government, will probably have more attention to the demand and stakes of government, compared to private service providers. Concerning the access of people to welfare services like child care, we might expect that commercial providers may be more selective in their admission-policies. As these commercial providers are strongly (but not only) driven by the profit motive, we can expect that they deliberately aim for clients with a certain level of financial status, and that underprivileged parts of society will be underrepresented in commercial welfare organisations and better presented in subsidized organisations.

The accountability relation between an individual service provider and the oversight authority

Next to the relation between service provider and user, we can also question how individual service-providing organisations can be accountable, vis-à-vis the regulatory authorities. The key-stake for the oversight authorities is, besides quality of service delivery, the compliance of the service provider with the requirements of the policy-framework while organizing their service delivery (especially in an environment that is heavily subsidized by governmental means, like welfare policy in Flanders). Oversight authorities that subsidize service providers hold service providers accountable for the correct service delivery by the organisation, with attention to regulations that apply in the sector. Here, we can expect a difference in accountability between those organizations that are heavily subsidized, and those organisations that are less subsidized. In return for subsidies, the oversight authorities will expect compliance with the governmental policy in terms of quality of service delivery and accessibility to the service for the citizens. We therefore might expect a greater attention of public and non-profit service providers compared to commercial service providers, for the demands of the oversight authorities.

The accountability relation between the network of service providers and the user

In complex governance regimes, (potential) users face a complex field with a lot of service delivery organisations of a different kind. Hence, it is not always easy for potential users to be able to find their way through this complexity. The question is often, for many users: “how and where to find the appropriate service delivery in this complex and heterogeneous field of service providers?” In such a situation, the collaboration between the different service providers will to a large extent determine the transparency of the governance regime. Moreover, whenever a user needs a service that has to be produced by more than one service provider alone (e.g. the exchange of information), the user will be highly dependent of the collaboration between service providers to get his service in a qualitative way. For these reasons, it is important to discern an accountability relation between the network of service providers and the users, where the quality of collaboration in the field of service providers will partly determine the quality of the service, as perceived by the user. Especially in a field where access to services is not always easy (waiting lists because demand exceeds supply), and where service providers are not homogenous (in terms of cost for the user, criteria for access, and so on), a better collaboration/coordination between different service providers may increase the transparency of the field for the users.

The accountability relation between the oversight authority and the network of service providers

In a complex governance regime, it is not only important that oversight authorities monitor the quality of service delivery by individual service providers. Equally important is the role of the oversight authority in co-ordinating and steering the service delivery field in order to enhance the transparency of the governance regime and/or to guarantee that the necessary collaboration between different service providers is realised.

Therefore, it is important to know how the regulatory authorities can foster, via the issuing of policy and regulations, (a) the accessibility of the services for the clients in a quite intransparent field and (b) the quality of the services delivered by the service-delivery organisations. To a certain extent, the oversight authorities have a role in fostering the accountability line between the network of service providers and users (cf. supra). In their role as network manager, oversight authorities may apply coordination-regimes that make individual service providers work together in a more intense way. Typically, in a complex governance regime which consists of many private (commercial and nonprofit) organisations, hierarchical coordination is (necessarily) replaced by more market and network oriented types of coordination (Bouckaert, Verhoest and Wauters 2000). In a system where coordination is based on market or network mechanisms, the role of the oversight authorities is different than in hierarchical coordination regimes. In market and/or network systems, oversight authorities regulate, steer and coordinate, and act as network managers, instead of being hierarchical “principals” of policy implementing “agents”. Hence, according to this line of accountability, government (or its regulatory agencies) has a stake in a performant and well-functioning network or market of service providers. This stake may be direct – economies of scale, or effective and efficient use of governmental means via cooperation or competition between service providers – or indirect – transparency for clients in a complex service delivery field.

The accountability relation between the oversight authority and the user

A final accountability line is between the oversight authorities, acting on behalf of the government, and the citizen/clients of the service delivery. We can think of government being responsible for the welfare and well-being of all citizens it is responsible for. In many policy fields, basic rights for citizens are defined by (constitutional) law, such as the right for education, decent living conditions, and public safety. This implies that government is responsible for qualitative service –delivery in all these fields such as the organisation of an educational system, the organisation of a welfare system that guarantees decent living conditions for every citizen, and the organisation of a police- and army-force to guarantee and enforce safety in society. It is, in other words, the responsibility of government, for example via governmental regulatory agencies, that these basic rights for all citizens are guaranteed. This can be pursued by own governmental service delivery (e.g. army and police), or by service delivery by third parties that is subsidized and regulated by government or its agencies (e.g. the welfare system in many Western countries). Hence, the key-stake of the user/citizen of the service delivery in the government (represented by its agencies), is the definition of certain service delivery as a basic democratic right, defined as such in regulation (laws, decrees, even the constitution). In Flanders, for example, “mobility” is a legally defined right. According to the decree of basic mobility, every citizen should be able to have access to mobility (to go to school, to go to work, to travel for leisure etc.). The implication of this right is that the government is responsible to guarantee the conditions in which every citizen has the chance to be mobile. In this case, this means the development of a dense network of public transport that is largely subsidized, to enable people that suffer from “mobility poverty” (disabled, elderly,

school-children, people without a car etc.) to travel. Such a system of basic rights or basic services strengthens the position of the user a lot, as they can claim service delivery as a legally defined right..

4. Problems of accountability & transparency in the field of Flemish child care

It is useful to study patterns and boundaries of accountability & transparency within the complex governance regime of child care, because the service delivery regime (a) turned out to be dysfunctional for parents and (b) led to undesired policy outcomes for Kind en Gezin and the Flemish Government. These difficulties and undesired practices have been documented by two recent studies. In this section, we will present and discuss the main results of both studies, and we will make an analysis of why and under what circumstances the accountability relationships fail.

Undesired policy-outcomes and undesired accessibility practices: some observations

Recent research shows that there were some problems concerning the transparency of the service delivery field (for parents searching a place in child care), and concerning the criteria for access to the child care, applied by the service providers.

The search process of parents

Kind en Gezin ordered a research to obtain information about the (problems in the) search process of parents looking for a place in Flemish child care services. Leading questions were: Do parents find a place for their child according to their preferences and needs? How long do they have to search? What kind of search strategies do they use? What happens when no place is found? The research was conducted by a private company, specialised in market research projects. This company set up a qualitative research consisting of telephonic interviews¹⁹ by a sample of 1400 parents. The data were gathered in 2006-2007. 1048 questionnaires were completed. The research report²⁰ contains some interesting findings about the start, the duration, the intensity and the eventual result of the search process of parents, and about their satisfaction with the search process:

- 53% of the parents started their search process at least 7 months before the expected date of birth. 61% of the families started to look for a place at least 10 months before the preferred start of the child care. Some families even did start their search process more than a year before the preferred date, indicating that some parents start their search at a moment when they were only planning birth (!).

¹⁹ Parents were interviewed twice: the first time after having contacted for the first time a child care service, the second time 6 months after the first contact. This research design made it possible to explore the results and effects of the search processes.

²⁰ See http://www.kindengezin.be/Algemeen/Over_Kind_En_Gezin/Rapporten/default.jsp.

- Concerning the duration of the search process, 50% of the families found a place within two months. 41% had to look for more than 3 months, among which 16% who searched for more than 6 months.
- Families did not restrict their search process to one care type. Nearly 90% contacted day centres. On average these families each contacted 10 day centres. About 60% contacted (also) a family care service. Less than 50% also contacted an autonomous day centre or autonomous family care worker. On average, each of the questioned families contacted 13 (!) care providers during the search process.
- In the end, 90% of the families ended their search successful. However, the fact that 90% of the families found a place for their child did not mean that they stopped searching. 10% continued to look for another place (in another organisation), as the place they obtained did not completely fit with their preferences concerning (e.g.) the date of start, the preferred number of care days, the cost-price and/or the location child care organisation. 10% of the families did not find a place for their child. These families were confronted with huge problems, as the parents could not fully take up their job any longer, had to change their labour regime, had to turn down a job offer or could not follow the training they wanted.

Overall, we can conclude that 20% of the families had a problematic search process. However, this does not mean that the other 80% had an easy search process. Only 25% of all families stated that finding a child care place was easy. About 66% stated that their search process was (very) difficult. Of course these findings are subjective appreciations by the parents, but the fact that the dissatisfied group is that large, cannot be neglected. Perhaps the most important finding of this research was that there were significant differences in the outcome of the search process of families with a different socio-economic composition and cultural & educational background. Single parent families, parents without a full time job and/or parents who did not have the Belgian nationality, did not find a place as easy as their counterpart families. This is probably partly caused by the fact that this group starts their searching process too late²¹, given the unpredictability of their future care need, or by the simple fact that they do not have sufficient knowledge of the procedures to find a place in Flemish child care. However, it is remarkable that two of these ‘excluded’ groups should have – according to the legal priority rules (cf. supra)- prior admission to the subsidized care providers.

The admission policy of recognised and subsidised child care providers

The same private research company also examined the admission policies of subsidized child care providers (2006-2007). An admission policy is considered as a set of two decision rules by the child care provider:

1. How do subsidized child care providers decide to take a demand into consideration or not?
2. How do subsidized child care providers decide to give priority to a certain individual demand, when the demand exceeds the supply (number of available places)?

²¹ As it is known that most parents started to search at least 7 months before birth and as we know that child care organizations make up their planning for occupation for 9 to 15 months.

All subsidized child care providers were sent a written questionnaire. The questionnaire contained questions about decision rules and admission procedures and practices²². 89% of all 480 child care providers completed the questionnaire. The results were surprising, as they showed that many subsidized child care providers do not respect or apply the legal priority rules. Moreover, many child care providers seem to apply own admission criteria, which exclude groups to which the government wants to give prior access.

Firstly, child care providers were asked to indicate the criteria they use to decide to take not into consideration a certain demand. As the answers of family care services do not differ significantly from the answers of day care centres, we will only discuss the answers from day centres. The most important finding is that 54% of the day care centres refuse a demand whenever the demand for care does not correspond with a certain minimum number of days. In reality, 73% of all day centres required a minimal presence of the child for 3,5 half days per week. Other important reasons to refuse demands were ‘the child was too old’ (35%), ‘none of the parents was working or studying’ (19%), ‘none of the parents lived in the community’ (16%) and ‘the parents did not have a sufficient knowledge of the dutch language’ (11%). These data indicate that child care providers use additional admission criteria that determine which demands will be taken into consideration and which ones not. As a matter of fact, these criteria determine which demands for child care will be placed on a waiting list (and which criteria are applied by the child care provider, prior to the application of the legal priority rules). Although it is not forbidden to refuse demands on condition that the decision was not based on discriminatory grounds (e.g. etnical, racial, or ideological), these practices at least are disputable. It is not unrealistic that demands from working parents and/or single parents are among the demands that are not taken into consideration by the child care provider. As such, the additional admission criteria applied by child care providers may conflict with the legal priority rules (as imposed by the oversight authorities). It may therefore not surprise that the application of own admission rules excludes several groups of families, like families who –for pedagogical reasons- deliberately decide to take care for their own children for at least 2 days a week, or families who need formal day care for only one or two days a week.

Secondly, most²³ child care providers confirmed that the demand is larger than their number of available places, which implies that the question about the applicated priority rules makes sense. The care providers had to assess the degree to which a criterion did matter in their decision to give priority to one or another demand. Table 3 shows the most important priority criteria applicated by day care centres²⁴:

²² For example the following questions about admission practices were included in the questionnaire: Do you make use of waiting lists? What information do you take up in these waiting lists? How often and how do you update your waiting list?

²³ 97% of the day centres and 70% of the family care services answered yes to the question ‘Did you receive more demands than you could place during the last 6 months?’.

²⁴ As the answers of family care services again did not differ a lot from the answers of day care centres, we will only discuss the answers from day centres.

| | Criterion | Mean score²⁵ |
|-----------|--|--------------------------------|
| 1. | Parents already have a child in our care service | 6,68 |
| 2. | Parent(s) do work in our care service ²⁶ | 5,86 |
| 3. | Parents applicated prior to other parents | 5,70 |
| 4. | There is a crisis in the family | 5,37 |
| 5. | Parents had a child in our care provider some time ago | 4,79 |
| 6. | Parents have a job or are studying | 4,66 |
| 7. | Parent does not have a partner | 4,60 |
| 8. | Family has a low income | 3,57 |

Table 3: Applicated priority criteria in day centres²⁷

Table 3 shows very that the child care providers ignore at least partly the legal priority rules. They prefer other priority criteria above the legal ones (in bold). There are three criteria that turn out to be far more more important than the established priority rules: the fact that the parents already have a child in the day centre, the fact that the parent is working in the day centre, and the fact that a parent applicated prior to another parent. Giving priority to families who already have a child in the day centre or family care service turned to be the most important priority rule. This seems fair from a pedagogical and practical perspective, but the criterion may conflict with the legal priority rules. Moreover, this priority rule also has –just like the criterion ‘parent is working in the day centre- two undesired side effects:

- The care services will keep on recruting children from the same groups, making it more difficult for new families to enter formal child care.
- The fact that child care providers do give priority to brothers/sisters of children already in the day centre means that the admission planning should be flexible enough to apply this priority rule, leading to a situation in which a care provider tries to wait as long as possible to confirm the demands for child care places. All this leads to long(er) waiting lists, more uncertainty and more frustration.

The fact that the chronological criterion (third criterion table 3) is also very popular implies that parents who legally should get priority, only can get this priority if they had submitted their demand first. Given the nature of the care need of some of these groups, it is clear that families who have to cope with a crisis, or parents who need formal child care in order to follow a job training, will be in a disadvantageous position compared to other groups.

Thirdly, in order to apply the priority rules of their admission policy, most²⁸ child care providers work with waiting lists²⁹. However, 20% of the day centres and 45% of the family day care services do not use a

²⁵ A 7-point likert scale was used to take stock of the main priority rules. 1 represented ‘this criterium does not play an important role in ‘, while 7 stood for ‘this criterium does play an important role’.

²⁶ This criterion did only matter for day care centres as child minders are not personnel of a service.

²⁷ It is important to mention that the order of rank differed slightly between the type of sectoral provider of the child care as public care providers made more use of the criterion ‘Family is living in the community’.

²⁸ 79% of the day centres and 55% of the family care services worked with a waiting list.

waiting list, mainly because their supply satisfied the demand. But there are also organisations who refuse to work with a waiting list, although this would be useful in case the demand exceeds their capacity. The latter category of child care providers is not willing and not able to apply the legal priority rules. But not all care providers who make use of a waiting list, are able or willing to apply the priority rules. Only 30% of the care providers write down particularities of the families on the waiting list. In most cases only the following data are written down in the waiting list: expected date of birth, desired start of the care period, and number of caredays. Even if the subsidized child care providers would have been willing to apply the legal rules, most of the care providers would not be able to do this, due to a lack of relevant information. A lot of care providers use the chronological criterion, giving the place to the parents who apply first for admission. But the study illustrates that at least some of the care providers apply another (additional) chronology criterion. Whenever a place is available, some care providers offer the place to the parents who contacted them first after the place had come available, on the condition that they were registered on the waiting list. As a matter of fact, a lot of child care providers (56%) seem to expect that parents take the initiative to contact the care provider on a regular base, to check their chances for a place. Waiting lists thus do not function as absolute rankings that install a fully transparent priority system for families with a registered care need. There are subjective elements -additional to the priority rules- that determine whose care needs will be satisfied first.

Summary of the undesired practices and outcomes

The studies showed in a very precise manner what kind of problems do exist in the Flemish child care:

- For young families in search of a child care place it is difficult to find a place that satisfies all desires (about location, cost-price and quality), the search process is frustrating, time-consuming and demands a lot of efforts, the admission process of individual child care providers is often intransparent, the admission practices do not correspond with the legal criteria,
- Some groups have less access to subsidized places, even though they should get priority.

Although some of these problems may be mainly caused by a shortage of places and/or by the fact that most parents do have clear preferences for a particular type of child care³⁰, the studies discussed above show clearly that the undesired policy outcomes are also caused by a lack of transparency and problematic accountability relationships in the child care sector. As a matter of fact, in addition to the shortage of (subsidized³¹) child care places, the structure of the child care delivery landscape, the lack of co-operation between child care providers in the field, and the way recognized child care providers are held accountable for their admission policy, makes it very difficult or even impossible for (some) parents to find a place. In the next part of the paper, we will analyze which of the accountability relations cause this undesired situation.

²⁹ On average there were 60 children (!) at a waiting list.

³⁰ Most families (52%) had a clear preference for an income-bound fee, depending on their taxable income. 48% did prefer group care above familiar care, implying that the demand for subsidised day centres will be the largest.

³¹ The shortage exists mainly in the subsidized sector as most parents prefer subsidized organisations for financial and/or quality reasons.

Undesired policy-outcomes and undesired admission practices due to failing accountability relations?

In this paragraph, we will explore why and under what circumstances the accountability relationships fail.

A failing accountability relationship between care provider and user?

There certainly is a failing accountability relationship between child care providers and users. Users are in a weak position, due to the shortage in child care places. They hardly have any choice between child care providers (although most of them have clear preferences, cfr. supra) and they are certainly not in the position to use the exit strategy whenever they are not satisfied about the child care. This leads to a situation in which child care providers hardly feel accountable to families in search of a child care place. Their own needs and interests determine their admission policy, not the kind of the demands, neither the legal criteria. Moreover, child care providers pay more importance to several other accountabilities: their accountability relation towards parents who already have a child in the day centre or family care service, their accountability relation towards their personnel or their accountability relation towards the organisation who organizes the child care (local government, non profit organisation or a given for-profit organisation). It seems like their public accountability gets the lowest priority. Next, one can hardly say that the admission policies of most child care providers are transparent. Although child care providers are legally obliged to inform parents about their admission policy and procedures, the research results show that these practices did not correspond to the written procedures. In particular the fact that the ranking on the waiting lists is often neglected by giving the place to the first parent who calls, is the best example of the complete lack of transparency and accountability towards the potential users.

Failing accountabilities between care provider and oversight authority?

We saw that Flemish child care providers neglected the established priority rules. According to us, the installed accountability mechanisms between service provider and oversight authority failed. Firstly, Kind en Gezin demanded too little information about the admission policy and procedures of child care providers and/or did not hold them accountable for the poor accessibility for some of the priority groups. Secondly, the application of the procedures never was controlled, although some elements could have been checked by the inspectors (e.g. the fact that the waiting lists did not contain any information about the family situation). One could also question whether the frequency of, and the possible consequences of the inspections visits were experienced as important enough by the child care providers, to stimulate them to respect the legal priority rules.

Nevertheless, the reasons behind the undesired practices may also point at important shortcomings in the legal priority rules. The fact that child care providers did not respect the existing public accountability rules does not imply that they neglected the interests of the public at all. In order to give a final appreciation of the

public accountability of subsidized child care providers, we analyze the reasons behind the main admission criteria.

- First of all, the fact that child care providers gave prior access to children who would come a sufficient amount of days in a week, seems to illustrate that the child care providers preferred their own interest above the public interest. Indeed, for administrative & financial reasons, it is better for child care providers to have a lot of children who come full time. For administrative reasons, the less children one has, the less child files, the less parental contributions that have to be calculated, the easier the occupational planning, etc. For financial reasons, it is obvious that the occupation rate will be high when most children are inscribed with the child care provider on a (nearly) full time basis. Moreover, the employment of the staff will be more efficient when the size of the groups is stable on a daily basis.

However, there seems to exist a trade-off between two kinds of public accountabilities as child care providers are asked to attain a high occupation rate to enhance the efficiency of the governmental policy, while they should also guard that children of families with a smaller or less predictable need for child care would be admitted.

Furthermore, their public accountability towards families in search for a place is conflicting with their accountability towards families whose child is already staying with the child care provider. For little children, a stable composition of the groups is preferable to a situation in which children have to face the coming and going of children who attend their group a day a week or who come only for a short period.

To conclude, we should be careful to consider the breaking of the legal priority rule by giving prior access to children who would come regularly as a violation of the public accountability. Child care providers are stimulated by the oversight authority to optimize their occupation rate.

- Secondly, the fact that child care providers give prior admission to children whose sister(s) and/or brother(s) are already attending the child care provider, is also understandable. Not only for reasons of accountability towards other users, but also as the opposite situation – in which parents should carry their children to several child care providers before going to work- conflicts clearly with the public goals of the child care policy (supporting families, amongst others to facilitate the work-life balance). Again, we should be careful to consider the breaking of the legal priority rule by giving prior access to brothers or sisters as a violation of their public accountability.
- While the former two additional admission criteria still could be interpreted as in line with their public accountability, the following criteria are less in the interest of the general public. The fact that public (local government) child care providers gave prior admission to their own citizens conflicts with the public accountability as the local governments have to respect the Flemish priorities whenever they organize child care with subsidies from the Flemish Government. The same can be said about the priority to children of their own personnel.

Failing accountability of the network of child care providers to the user?

Although child care providers do not have or are not expected to co-operate with other providers, users would profit a lot from a collaboration of that kind. The search process for child care would be less frustrating and less time consuming when parents should only contact 1 organisation in stead of 13 (cfr. supra) to apply for a place in child care. Moreover, child care providers would also profit from a certain co-operation as the amount of intakes and administrative dossiers would decrease. Furthermore, as the unique contact point would reduce the waiting lists –which are characterized by a lot of double counts as most children are inscribed to multiple waiting lists-, it would become easier for child care providers to apply their admission criteria.

Nevertheless, individual child care providers are not moving towards more co-operation on their own initiative or for the sake of the well-being or satisfaction of the users. There does not exist a common feeling of responsibility towards the potential users, probably caused by the fact that they see themselves not as delivering a public service or by the fact that the service delivery field is too heterogeneous to develop a common understanding. But the fact that the shared responsibility does not exist is of course also caused by the lack of such requirements by the oversight authority, which will be discussed in the following paragraph.

Failing accountability of the network of child care providers to the oversight authority?

This accountability relationship is lacking completely at the moment. Kind en Gezin is not structurally steering the network of child care providers and does not hold them accountable for the set up of any form of co-operation which would raise the transparency, efficiency and/or accessibility of the child care supply. Nor does Kind en Gezin stimulates any form of collaboration within the bilateral accountability relationship it has with every child care provider.³²

However it should be mentioned that Kind en Gezin tries to foster this co-operation since 2007 by means of experimental subsidies for ad hoc projects called ‘Centres for child care’³³. However, this kind of network-steering gets very little political and financial support. Moreover, the experimental projects prove that some characteristics of the child care service delivery field hinder any fruitful collaboration. Firstly, the fact that there exists a kind of concurrence between child care providers, complicates the collaboration between subsidized and not-subsidized child care providers. There exists e.g. a lot of distrust and anxiety that a unique contact point where parents can apply for a child care place, would threaten the influx of children in commercial care providers. Secondly, the fact that local governments are providing themselves a lot of

³² Kind en Gezin could reward care providers who co-operated with other organizations and/or it could punish organizations that did not work joined up.

³³ A centre for child care is a group of child care providers who decide to work together on several fields and who can receive a small subsidy to facilitate the co-operation.

places hinders the co-operation. In theory, the dispatching of the demands for child care could³⁴ be done by local governments, but the fact that they are involved as child care providers themselves (public child care), makes local governments less acceptable as co-ordinators of the field of child care at subregional level.

Failing accountability between the oversight authority (Kind en Gezin) and user?

As child care is no basic right or basic service like education or public transport, users can not be entitled to a guaranteed access to a child care place. Kind en Gezin is only indirectly accountable to users/citizens through the political accountability of the minister for Welfare. If users are not satisfied with the policy or service of Kind en Gezin, the only way to channel this frustration is to vote against the government or to vote for an other person or party.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the meaning of accountability and transparency in complex governance regimes, consisting of commercial, public and non-profit service providers. As a matter of fact, we made an in-depth analysis of the accountability relationships within a failing governance regime of child care provision in Flanders. Our case analysis clearly shows that complex governance regimes may threaten the transparency of the service delivery field for users, and challenge the role of the oversight authority. Our analysis results in several interesting theoretical and policy relevant points for debate.

At the theoretical level, we firstly have to acknowledge that the theories about public accountability can hardly cover the subtle empirical variations that exist in practice. It seems useful to discern at least five accountability relationships within complex governance regimes. Also, we may not forget that service providers have multiple accountabilities and even multiple public accountabilities, e.g. as they have to face different kinds of users. Furthermore, we noticed that conflicts can raise within and between (public) accountability relationships. Fourthly, the case-analysis showed that is not enough to translate accountability relationships in legal requirements, but that it is also necessary to monitor and control the degree to which the delivered services correspond to public goals.

At the empirical level, the case analysis made clear that it is not easy to deliver public services by private organizations in order to reach all public policy goals. An oversight authority should keep in mind that the policy outcomes will be determined by the degree to which all accountability relationships are well functioning and do not contradict each other. Complex governance regimes do challenge the steering role of oversight authorities, often requiring a two-level steering of the service delivery field: a direct steering of individual service providers and the network and/or market steering of the whole service delivery field (in a

³⁴ However, we may not forget that parents do not search exclusively or mainly for child care within the community they live in, implying that a dispatch of demand and supply for child care at the local level would not be useful everywhere.

community or region). Therefore, accountability relationships should be established between the network of service providers at the one hand and the user and oversight authority at the other hand.

Kind en Gezin (the oversight authority) has drawn a number of lessons from the studies:

- They changed³⁵ the priority rules as child care providers now have to give priority to children of 5 categories:
 - a. Children of single parents who are not able to take care for their own children due to the fact that they have a job or that they follow a training;
 - b. Children of parents who have a job, but whose income is low
 - c. Children of parents who have a low income (regardless of the source of this income, originated by labour or not)
 - d. Children for whom it would be good for social or pedagogical reasons to stay in a formal care setting outside the family
 - e. Children who already have a brother or sister in the care service

It is clear that the priority rules now are formulated in a more concrete (less vague) way, and that the new priority rules acknowledge the public accountability towards parents who already have a child in the care organisation.

- They changed the accountability relationship between service provider and Kind en Gezin as:
 - a. The subsidized child care providers are now obliged to have a certain amount of children of the priority groups in their organisation. These rules apply for at least 20% of the care capacity in the service provider.
 - b. The Inspection Agency will pay more importance to the application of the priority rules during its site visits.

However, we still think that these adaptations will not resolve all the undesired practices or outcomes that were observed by the research. These policy-adaptations only deal with the practice of individual service providers. As long as Kind en Gezin, as the regulatory agency, fails to act as a real network manager or market regulator (and hence gives incentives to individual or groups of care providers to co-operate), the search process for parents will remain difficult, and the transparency (for users) of the field will not increase.

³⁵ Communicated in February 2009, but the new rules should be applied from the start of 2010.

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