

# Policy formation in rural development in the Netherlands

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## *Introduction*

In this abstract I will give an impression of my PhD-research project on policy formation in rural development. The nature of rural development and rural policy making has changed considerably, not only in the Netherlands, but throughout Europe. Underlying are changing demands placed on rural areas by society. In the next section I will give an image of the specific features of the development process in rural areas in the Netherlands and the policy problems at stake. I will proceed with the objectives of my PhD-research. These are followed by my research design combined with some central theoretical notions guiding my research. Finally, I will address a couple of methodological issues concerning my research project.

## *Rural policy change in the Netherlands*

In rural areas in the Netherlands an important process of change is taking place. Both practices and policy arrangements in rural development differ considerably from the previous model for agriculture and rural areas based on the notion of modernisation. Until recently, Dutch society's main interest regarding the rural was agriculture's contribution to food security and gross national product. Rural development became almost synonymous to agricultural development. Now additional and partly substituting demands are placed on rural areas and agriculture. Rural areas are supposed to provide peace and quietness to weary city people and should offer attractive living surroundings for rural dwellers. The declining number of farmers should not only produce food as efficiently as possible; they also have to meet severe environmental, animal welfare and

food quality standards. Furthermore, infrastructure, house construction and nature demands put an increasing pressure on rural space.

Besides changes in land use, the new societal demands have resulted in new policy objectives such as sustainability and maintenance of attractive landscapes and natural values. Also the way policy making is done has come under attack. The corporatist policy arrangements that dominated agricultural policy making in the Netherlands for decades have come to an end. However, no single policy arrangement has replaced the previous corporatist model so far. Different policy arrangements concerning rural areas co-exist and sometimes compete, while new arrangements are still being developed.

Recently, the national State issued a new set of policy initiatives under the heading of 'rural renewal'. It is favouring a specific type of policy arrangement based on two central concepts: integrated socio-economic development based on regional specificity on the one hand and interactive, bottom-up decision making on the other hand. Despite the State's recent discovery of participative and bottom up processes, it remains to be seen to what degree regional networks in rural development really will be able to 'make a difference'. At several policy levels, developments are taking place that may have an important impact on rural areas in the Netherlands. At the European level, Agenda 2000 presents an important reform of the agricultural market policies. At the global level, new negotiations on the liberalisation of agricultural trade are expected to start at the end of 1999. Nationally, issues such the restructuring of the pig industry and the creation of a coherent network of protected nature areas head the policy agenda.

These 'external' policy developments structure decision making in rural development at the regional level. Participating actors interpret and incorporate external influences in specific ways in their practices. Incongruity between objectives, strategies and priorities of the different policy levels involved in rural and agricultural policy making may however hinder the development process at the regional level. It is this problem that I wish to adress in my research project.

***Research objectives***

Actors involved in rural development, public and private, exhibit a great variety of views on the future of rural areas. They also have different conceptions of governance and policy making and interpret the context of their practices in various ways. Often, there are competing interests at stake in rural development such as agriculture versus nature, young farmers versus old farmers etc. Stable power positions become more and more contested. In policy networks around regional rural development projects, these conceptions and interests come together. My research on policy formation in rural development aims at gaining insight in the structuration of decision making in rural development at a regional level. The focus is on the nature of rules in rural development, the division and use of resources, the (coalitions of) actors taking part and the relations and strategic interactions between them. It is hypothesised that there is a mismatch or incongruity between steering efforts of different policy levels involved in rural development. Furthermore, the national State, representing a link between the region and the European or global level, is assumed to play a co-ordinating role. The research should therefore present strategies for State action that result in more congruity.

***Research design and central concepts***

The policy networks around regional rural development initiatives constitute the object of my research. Policy networks can be defined as: 'more or less stable patterns of social relations between interdependent actors, which take shape around policy problems and/or policy programmes' (Kickert et al, 1997: 6). The notion of interdependence means that no actor, public or private, has the capacity to solve the policy problem on its own. Solutions, outcomes or consensus can only be reached by exchanging resources between actors. These policy networks will be reconstructed around a couple of regional rural development projects in the Netherlands by means of case study research. The networks may cover various policy levels, from the local to the European, although not all policy levels are involved in interaction at the same time.

The research focuses on both interactions and structures. These can only be distinguished analytically however. In 'reality' interactions and structure presume each other. Therefore, the interaction process will be analysed by means of 'eventualisation' to start with. Then, the events

as defined in time/space will be contextualized and interpreted focusing on the rules and resources involved (compare Flyvbjerg, 1998).

The rules structuring the interaction process can be divided conceptually in meta-rules of signification and legitimisation on the one hand and 'arena'-rules on the other hand. The former give meaning to and legitimise the way 'politics is done' in a certain policy domain, while the latter explicitly guide decision-making on the ground (Van Tatenhove et al, 1998:15). According to the principle of duality of structure both meta-rules and arena-rules may change as a result of the actual interaction processes and social practices taking place. My research is, however, limited to the impact of meta-rules on the rural decision-making process and the production and reproduction of arena-rules.

The resources mobilised by participants range from money, to land, research and organisational capacity. To reach solutions resources are exchanged between actors. Even though each actor involved has some resources to offer, these resources are not divided evenly amongst actors, resulting in asymmetric power relations.

The research pays special attention to the role of the national State in rural development. Strategies, policy objectives and priorities of the national State concerning rural areas will be analysed on their congruity with the solutions, meanings and rules that are produced in regional policy networks in rural development. This must lead to recommendations on how to reach more congruity in policy making. It also provides a second constraint to the structural analysis. Only those rules and resources that the national State can possibly affect will be considered.

### ***Method***

To gain insight in the complexity of the interaction processes and the diversity of structures influencing policy formation in rural development a multiple case design is chosen as a research tool. Four case studies into regional rural development projects in the Netherlands will be performed.

The cases are selected on the bases of two criteria. The first criterion concerns the socio-spatial problems of a region. Maximum variation on this criterion is expected to give insight in a broad array of structural factors. The second criterion for case selection relates to the role of the national State in regional projects. It is assumed that the degree of congruity in steering efforts is connected to the intensity of the involvement of national State in the regional policy networks. By allowing the two criteria to take two different values, four cases can be selected.

To achieve as much validity as possible two types of triangulation will be applied:

- Triangulation in sources: persons, media, policy documents, situations and scientific reports
- Triangulation in methods: interviews, analyses of documentation and observation

Furthermore, interviewees will be asked to react on the case stories in order to check validity and to get additional information on the interviewees perspective.

### **References**

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