Policies in the Polder: How Institutions Mediate between Norms and Practices of Rural Governance

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Abstract

Matching rural policy and practice has become increasingly difficult. Despite a shift from government to governance, a void is often perceived to exist between policy and practice. This article discusses two hypotheses on the emergence of such a void. The first argues that the void is a result of a process of value differentiation. The second explains the void as a result of a process of depoliticisation. This article examines whether these hypotheses hold true for Dutch rural policy. The analysis shows that though both hypotheses are true for a limited extent, neither succeeds in explaining the changes in Dutch (rural) policy on its own. Instead, it is argued that both are needed for a comprehensive analysis.

Introduction

Recently, attention to institutional changes from government to governance in rural studies has increased (Goodwin 1998; Marsden and Murdoch 1998; Marsden 1999; Frouws and Leroy 2003). Strikingly, most contributions are sceptical about the ability of governance arrangements to improve democratic decision-making (Jones and Little 2000; Edwards et al. 2001; MacKinnon 2002; Herbert-Cheshire 2003; Boonstra and Frouws 2005). In spite of the democratisation processes associated with governance, many perceive a void between policy and practice.

Different authors try to understand this paradoxical situation and offer divergent explanations. Some authors allocate the cause, origin and solution of the void primarily in the institutional transformation of civil society (Etzioni 1993; Putnam 1993, 2000; Fukayama 1995). In this article Putnam’s work (1993, 2000) will be used as representing this approach. He argues that a process of value differentiation decreases people’s involvement in institutions of civil society, which results in low levels of mutual trust. Following Hay (2004), such an analysis is referred to as a demand-side explanation, because it primarily looks at the changing attitudes of people towards policy.
Putnam’s analysis is criticised for neglecting the influence of the state and ideology on the functioning of democracies (Berman 1997; Szreter 2002). Hay argues that ‘democratic policies get the levels of political participation they deserve’ (2004, p. 501). He offers a supply-side explanation, focusing on the institutional development of the state and suggests that the normalisation and institutionalisation of a neoliberal economic paradigm has depoliticised policy making.

This article investigates to what extent these hypotheses are true for Dutch rural policy. Currently, Dutch policy is confronted with a decline in civic trust (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau [SCP] 2005). People are becoming politically disengaged, which results in low levels of participation in policymaking. It is generally acknowledged that this perceived void between policy and practice is a major problem for Dutch politics (Hajer 2003). It is becoming harder for Dutch policymakers to support their decisions with public approval, which problematises democratic policymaking (Lijphart 1997; De Beus 2003). It also problematises democratic policymaking in Dutch rural policy and threatens to ruin important qualities of the Dutch countryside (Raad voor het Landelijke Gebied [RLG] 2004).

This article analyses how processes of value differentiation and the institutionalisation of governance arrangements manifest themselves in social practice. This information can be used to judge whether a void indeed exists and whether it can be attributed to either a process of value differentiation (demand-side analysis) or to a process of depoliticisation (supply-side analysis). For this purpose the results of a case study on the rural policy project in the region of the Langbroekerwetering are analysed.

The analysis points out that both a supply-side and demand-side analysis fail to capture the current problems of Dutch rural politics. They both pay univocal attention to the downside of recent social and political changes and do not account for the ways in which people also re-engage in Dutch rural policy. The case study shows that the constituencies of conventional rural stakeholder groups are fragmenting due to a process of value differentiation, which problematises the typical way in which the Dutch build consensus through stakeholder participation based on interest representation.

However, the case study also shows how new forms of civic engagement are emerging and how individuals and groups try to obtain and acquire political influence by using new initiatives. The remainder of the article presents three examples to illustrate how farmers engage with politics without relying on their conventional representatives. These examples can be understood as efforts towards re-institutionalisation or re-politicisation. But before going into details, it is necessary to get a fuller understanding of the current characteristics of Dutch (rural) politics, which forms the basis for the generally accepted perception of a void between policy and practice.

Disengagement in Dutch politics

According to several commentators (De Rooy and Van der Velde 2005) the 2002 parliamentary elections and the rise and fall of Fortuyn brought to light the void between Dutch policy and the Dutch citizens. Fortuyn was the leader of the party ‘List
Pim Fortuyn, (LPF) which took part in the 2002 elections. He was assassinated nine days before the 2002 Dutch parliamentary elections. Fortuyn made his aim to be elected president very explicit. He was deeply critical of immigration and crime policies and the general condition of the public services. In his media performances and writings he successfully portrayed mainstream politicians as part of a ruling elite that had lost touch with common people. In this election the ruling parties (the Liberal, Socialist and Pragmatic-Democratic party) lost considerable numbers of votes to Fortuyn’s LPF and the Christian-Democratic party. This voter turnout indicated that a large part of Dutch society had lost faith in the ruling political parties. Later, commentators would describe Fortuyn as a catalyst of the latent public discontent in conventional policymaking (Pennings and Keman 2003; Van der Brug 2003).

Despite a change in government and political reforms, the void remained intact after the elections in May 2002 and January 2003 (Van Praag 2003). This became obvious when the European Constitution was rejected during the national referendum in June 2005. Dutch politics now found itself in a strange paradox. Despite more opportunities from the 1960s onwards to democratise political decision-making, people distrust politics to an increasing extent and they are sceptical about the benefits of political participation (SCP 2005).

Civic disengagement poses a serious threat for democratic policies. When policymakers lack public support their policies become dysfunctional and ineffective. People default on their obligations to the government because they feel that the government does not take their problems into account. In case of a deliberative democracy, civic disengagement poses a threat because political outcomes become biased in favour of specific groups of people; those with the means and resources to engage with deliberative policymaking successfully (Sanders 1997).

Origins of the void

A void between policy and citizens is perceived not only in The Netherlands, but also in the USA and the UK. Analysts from both other countries offer different explanations of the origins of this void and, consequently, offer different remedies for it. The first is a demand-side explanation, which locates the cause and solution of the void in civil society (Etzioni 1993; Putnam 1993, 2000; Fukayama 1995). In short, it argues that the demands of citizens towards policy have become individualised because of the de-institutionalisation of civil society. The most influential proponent of this view is Putnam, who studied the historical development of democracy in Italy and the USA (Putnam 1993, 2000). His analysis suggests that the social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness, which together constitute social capital, facilitate a proper functioning of democratic governance. In the case of the USA, Putnam argues that the social capital of civil society has been eroding since the 1960s. This trend is most visible in the declining membership rates of voluntary associations such as Boys Scouts and bowling leagues. Putnam considers this development problematic, as the membership of such associations socialises people into norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. If people are not socialised in these values they are not able to co-operate with each other and the state. Consequently, a decline of social capital is supposed to lead to civic disengagement and political apathy, which undermines good
democratic governance. Putnam sees the solution to this problem in a recovery of shared values through the strengthening of voluntary associations in civil society (Putnam 1993, 2000).

Putnam is criticised for mixing up symptom and cause. Critics state that the fact that people stopped bowling in leagues did not change their attitude towards policy and government (Szreter 2002). Several authors argue that this conflation is due to Putnam’s neglect of the influence of the state and state ideology in the origin of the void. Instead, these authors offer a supply-side explanation suggesting that a neoliberal mode of governance has depoliticised democratic policymaking (Burnham 2001; Pellikaan et al. 2003; Hay 2004). In this view, the origin of the void lies primarily in the policies the state supplies to its citizens. For example, Jones (2002) argues that neoliberalism has reduced policymaking to managing the economy, which has minimised the space for political deliberation and created an impression that political choice does not exist. According to these authors, civic disengagement is a logic correlate of a neoliberal mode of governance (Hay 2004), because politics is a reciprocal matter. If the state chooses to let people fend for themselves, then why would people respect their obligations to the state? (Szreter 2002). In other words, government has an important impact on citizens’ attitudes towards the state. The supply-side explanation suggests that governments could improve political participation by reassuming political responsibility which, under the current circumstances, has been relegated to the market economy. Although aspects of both analyses apply in the Dutch context, none of them fully captures the origins and cause of current problems in Dutch rural policy. They pay univocal attention to either civil society or the state. The distinction between the state and civil society is not helpful in the Dutch context because the two domains have become partly integrated: it is difficult to see where the civil becomes the political and vice versa (Foley and Edwards 1996). The next section shows how, in the Dutch context, institutional changes in both civil society and the state are closely interlinked.

Pillars, policies and values

For most of the twentieth century Dutch policy was organised around sub-national cultures, which were secular (socialist and liberal) or confessional (Catholic and Protestant). These sub-national cultures established their own basic institutions for politics, education, health, media, welfare and sports. This system is called verzuiling, which means pillarisation or columnisation. The different sub-national institutions were organised ‘perpendicularly, intersecting the various horizontal socio-economic classes’ (Zijderveld 2000, p. 147). These so-called pillars (zuilen) were ruled from the top down by men from upper or upper-middle class families (Zijderveld 2000). The ruling elite of each group constructed a consensus across the different sub-national cultures, without reducing the distinctiveness of the different cultures. The norm was that constituencies of the different groups accepted the decisions of their leaders. People who were born and raised in the institutions of their culture identified themselves in the first place with the values of their sub-national culture. A generally accepted argument is that consensual politics was essential to secure national economic success and to prevent the disintegration of Dutch society (Lijphart 1997; Hendriks and Tops 2000).
However, in the 1960s and 1970s this system of social organisation of Dutch policy lost much of its efficiency. During these years a joint process of value differentiation and depoliticisation, called *ontzuiling* (de-pillarisation), has set in, lasting until today. Value differentiation weakened the relation between people and their traditional institutions (Zijderveld 2000). This meant an increase in electoral volatility. People based their vote on their political preferences instead of their social-cultural position (Van der Brug 2003). This changed the functioning of representative democracy, because it became more problematic to rely on the authority of representatives concerning policy choices. Constituencies no longer felt normatively obliged to accept agreements made by their representatives (Frouws 1993; Hooghe and Houtman 2003) which, in turn, forced policymakers and political representatives to actively ensure their own public legitimacy. For these reasons it became more difficult to govern society according to the traditional system of top-down consensual politics.

To retain the state’s regulative capacity, Dutch policy started to change during the second half of the twentieth century. The response to the growing heterogeneity of values and concomitant de-pillarisation was a decentralisation and broadening of consensual politics. Through the institutionalisation of democratic initiatives, such as interactive and deliberative policymaking (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003), policy and planning opened up to include all kinds of other stakeholders and interest groups. The participation of these stakeholders was supposed to tailor regional and local solutions for general problems and was meant to increase support for generic policymaking. Consensus between different interests now had to be struck at lower socio-political scales and between more stakeholders. This new mode of policy promised to involve stakeholders, taking account of their interests and acknowledging their competence and abilities to co-operate in planning practices (Boonstra and Frouws 2005).

However, this policy change also involved a shift of political responsibility from the state to the markets (economisation) and the courts (juridification). This shift was defended as the logical answer to globalised economic markets and an overburdened welfare state. Neoliberalism, which transferred responsibility for public issues from the state to individuals and companies, became a popular response to these governmental problems (De Beus 2003; Burnham 2001; Hay 2004). Despite these changes Dutch policy remained fairly consensual (Pellikaan et al. 2003). The economic recession of the 1970s convinced the governing elites of trade unions, employers’ organisations and government to remain committed to consensual politics, which became internationally known as the ‘polder model’ (Jones 2002). The polder model was held responsible for the quick economic recovery and the situation of full employment during the 1990s. Its success dramatically faded during the elections of 2002 and 2003 and the referendum over the EU Constitution in 2005.

**Changes in Dutch rural policies**

The trends of value differentiation and depoliticisation can also be witnessed in the development of the countryside and rural policies. The functions and perceptions of the Dutch countryside have considerably differentiated since the 1960s, resulting
from the process of de-pillarisation. The countryside is not only valued for its agricultural productive capacity but also for its environmental qualities, possibilities for recreation and other leisure activities (Dutch Institute for Public Opinion and Market Research [NIPO] 2001). In the agricultural sector values also diversified and farm production broadened and deepened (Van der Ploeg et al. 2000).

Rural politics had to adapt to this rural differentiation process (See also Marsden et al. (1993) and Kitchen (2000), who describe a similar process for the UK) in order to retain legitimacy. This became clear at the end of the 1980s and 1990s, when several large-scale generic policy projects, such as the environmental regulation of manure from farming and the establishment of the Ecologische Hoofdstructuur4 (the National Ecological Network), were implemented. It was common practice to reach a consensus over implementation with the representatives of the different, organised interest groups on a national and provincial level. However, the public at local levels did not accept these consensuses any longer. The support base of the traditional representatives weakened due to their fragmented constituency, which problematised consensus building and consequently the implementation of rural policy in general.

Furthermore, many social groups living in the Dutch countryside faced socioeconomic problems during the 1980s and early 1990s (Jones 2002). Farmers’ profits have been squeezed between increasing costs and declining commodity prices (Van der Ploeg et al. 2000) and rural communities have faced the withdrawal of social services from villages (Vinkers and De Hoog 2000). See Mak (1996) for a literary account of these processes. In these circumstances a profound void became manifest5, which not only created problems for the efficiency and legitimacy of democratic policymaking but also gave rise to physical and spatial problems. The political disengagement of rural citizens threatens to ruin important qualities of the Dutch countryside. Essential features of the countryside, for example, land and water management, but also the successful integration of agriculture, recreation, housing and other land-use functions require co-operation between people (RLG 2004). The integration of land-use functions is especially important due to the demographical and geographical characteristics of The Netherlands, a relatively small country with a high population density.

In order to take account of this differentiation of values, rural policy decentralised to stimulate participation at local levels. Several regional and local rural projects started in the beginning of the 1990s under the collective noun, area-based policy. These projects mirrored the typical system of consensual policies, but at a lower level. As it was believed that citizens would more easily accept a consensus reached on such a lower level, small committees, including traditional interest groups, were established at local and regional levels. Despite these growing opportunities for participation, however, several case studies on new rural policies such as the area-based policy indicate that the results match poorly the specificity of rural regions (Boonstra and Frouws 2005).

The ways in which processes of value differentiation and depoliticisation are manifested in the social practice of Dutch rural policy is analysed here, using the results of a case study on the values and attitudes of stakeholders in a land-use planning project in the Langbroekerwetering (LBW) region. The results indicate that
the conventional organisation of participatory forums of stakeholders according to interests does not fully capture the diversity of values held by stakeholders. This mismatch results in a depoliticisation of conventional policy forums but, unlike the conclusions of a supply-side analysis, this does not mean that people in general are disengaging from rural policies. In the remainder of this article a few examples of political action are presented, indicating how rural stakeholders, in this case farmers, re-engage with rural policies. They show how a process of depoliticisation also bears forth a process of re-politicisation.

**Langbroekerwetering**

The Langbroekerwetering is located in the south-east of the province of Utrecht, close to Utrecht city (see Figure 1). The area is situated between the river Rhine and the higher grounds of the Utrechtse Heuvelrug, and has three types of landscape: riverine, a clay landscape and a hill landscape. Agricultural activities are primarily livestock based. The value of nature and the landscape values of the area are threatened due to a scaling up of agriculture and an increase of recreational activities and traffic density (Van den Bijtel 1998). Furthermore, due to the problems of agricultural profitability, a need for new regional economic activities exists. Other developments are increasing recreational use and the construction of new country estates to supply the (urban) demand for residence in the countryside. The various claims of environmentalists, farmers, entrepreneurs, estate owners and (urban) tourists make it hard to decide on the allocation and use of land and water.

This was the main reason why the province of Utrecht and the municipalities in the area started a land consolidation project in 2000. The main objective was to decide on the allocation of land and water by including the main regional stakeholders, that is, the farmers, estate owners, environmental organisations, recreational

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**Figure 1:** Location of the Langbroekerwetering land consolidation project
entrepreneurs, the water board, municipalities and the Province of Utrecht. Due to the lack of space and the diversity of claims, an integration of land use, that is, multi-purpose land use (*meervoudig landgebruik*) was preferred. These regional stakeholders were represented in a district committee (DC) to develop a regional rural development plan in which a strategy for land allocation was formulated. After several public meetings this plan was published in 2001 (Stuurgroep Langbroekerwetering 2001).

This case study considers to what extent the values of stakeholders were represented in the DC. Furthermore, it analyses in what alternative ways stakeholders tried to participate in decision-making in the project. For these purposes an equal selection of the stakeholders involved was interviewed about their values concerning rural policy. A total of 20 interviews was analysed using Q-methodology (Barry and Proops 1999; Durning 1999; Woolley and McGinnis 2000; Dryzek 2005). For a fuller account of the content of the attitudes and Q-methodology see Boonstra (2006). Another 21 interviews were done to investigate how these values corresponded to attitudes in Dutch rural policy and development.

**Value orientations towards rural policy and development**

Through Q-methodology five different value orientations towards the development of the LBW were discerned. These were interpreted using qualitative information from the interviews. In the following section these value orientations are briefly described as portraits, ideal-typical representations. This means that they are presented with a conceptual clarity which they lack in social reality (Swedberg 2005).

**Portrait A: making space for new economical activity**

The crisis in agriculture will result in a decrease in the number of farms in the area. This economical development is inevitable. The agricultural land that is released will be used for new economic activities, or will serve as building plots for new country estates. New economical activities have to be legalised, otherwise the whole area will turn into a mess. The ‘red for red’ regulation\(^6\) can give space to start new activities. The interwoven landscape of the LBW does not allow for the optimal use of land and water. That’s why I think rural policy should strive harder to separate land-use functions. The government should not interfere too much with rural development. Its main task is to facilitate the land market and to provide juridical security. At this moment little connection between rural policy and rural everyday practice exists because policymakers, and especially civil servants, do not have enough knowledge of practices.

**Portrait B: interweaving the landscape**

Despite policy measures to increase nature and biodiversity in the area, the regional environment has not improved very much. Policy measures should pay more attention to the conservation and creation of nature. However, separating land-use functions is not an option. Rather, they should be integrated by making farming more sustainable.
Currently, there are no real choices in rural policy. The result is a compromise between the interests of different rural stakeholders, which creates a homogeneous Dutch landscape. A free market system is detrimental for the qualities of the LBW. It will only stimulate new economic developments and therefore new buildings and traffic density. Therefore, the government should take the role of director of rural development much more seriously. However, it should also allow more possibilities for creating local solutions and for deviating from conventional policy.

**Portrait C: modernising agriculture**

Attention for the LBW is exclusively focused on environmental degradation. This results in more restrictive policies concerning agricultural activities, and consequently more costs for the farmer. Policymakers seem to forget that it is farming that has made the LBW as beautiful as it is now. That is the reason why policies should pay more attention to the development of modern agriculture. At the moment there are too many restrictions which block agricultural development, such as the creation of new nature reserves and new country estates. It would be better if land-use functions were separated more to allow for the agricultural optimisation of the natural resource base, for example, irrigation, drainage and plot size. But currently these issues get little attention from politicians.

**Portrait D: keeping things the way they are**

It is important to keep things as they are now. The landscape is beautiful as it is. I believe that the new area-based policy is a good instrument to integrate different land-use functions. The effects of new economical activities and increasing tourism are detrimental to the quality of the landscape. These developments should be restricted as much as possible. However, the further development of existing nature reserves would be very good. Existing and new country estates could very well take care of nature reserves because they are not economically dependent on the land. Farming will remain important for keeping the landscape as it is and therefore there need to be enough opportunities to modernise the farm. However, broadening farm production would be a bad development because it will destroy the countryside.

**Portrait E: regulated multiple activity in agriculture**

The most important aspect of the LBW is its interwoven landscape. It should be the main goal of rural policy to conserve that. But this quality is being threatened by the financial crisis in the agricultural sector. As a consequence, the remaining farmers are financially incapable of buying land which becomes available as a result of farmers leaving agriculture. So what needs to be done with this land? At this moment it can only be used for agricultural purposes, as is regulated in rural planning schemes. Therefore, legally allowing multiple activities on farms is a fitting solution for this region. Such multiple activities can help farmers to finance the purchase of available land. However, one has to take care that multiple activities don’t lead to chaos. You
don’t want to have farm camping sites everywhere. It is important to have a vision or else you will not be able to direct rural development. Everybody has ideas, but it’s not possible to implement all of them. Therefore the government needs to have control.

Fragmented value orientations

These portraits illustrate the value orientation between rural stakeholders in the LBW, which is considerably different from a distinction based on the different interests of the stakeholder groups represented in the DC, that is, farmers, country estate owners, environmentalists, recreation representatives and government. These differences are visible in Table 1, which shows which rural stakeholders feel attracted to which portrait. Table 1 shows that the different stakeholder groups are considerably fragmented in their value orientation. The fragmentation of the representatives’ constituencies undermines the success of consensual politics. The consensus achieved in policy projects might turn out to be ineffective in practice, because people may not feel constrained by agreements made between representatives in the project and might default on them. This problem was brought up in the interviews, when respondents commented on the difficult position of the farmers’ representative and the estate owners’ representative in the DC and on the relevance of a consensus achieved in the DC. The statements below illustrate these opinions:

Farmers here are sensitive to interference from outside.... That’s why I find myself in a difficult position. On the one hand, I have to keep on talking with the DC because if we are not part of it we lose opportunities to influence decision-making. On the other hand, when I have to go back to my constituency with plans I sometimes meet incomprehension.... Of course it is always difficult to represent farmers in difficult times. It is hard to bring bad news. (Farmers’ representative)

[N]owadays you often see that representatives function well on a policy level, but lose credibility when they have to confront their constituency. (Agricultural consultant)

Conventional consensual politics is still intact on a policy level, despite the fragmentation of constituencies in Dutch rural policy. This indicates that the traditional Dutch organisation of participatory rural policy is path dependent (Pierson 2000) and cognitively locked in (Blyth 2001) the idea that consensus between stakeholders’ interests is needed for good rural policy. According to several respondents, the cognitive lock of constructing an interest-based consensus between stakeholder interests has a negative effect on the robustness and clarity in the direction of rural policy:

Table 1: The division of the respondents over the portraits (N = 20)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portrait</th>
<th>Policymakers</th>
<th>Farmers</th>
<th>Environmentalists</th>
<th>Recreation entrepreneurs</th>
<th>Country estate owners</th>
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I believe rural policy lacks a clear direction because of these middle-of-the-road consensuses. That’s the tragedy of the Dutch countryside and rural policy. There is no direction, which entails the danger that everything slips from our hands. (Agricultural consultant)

Other critical comments are that a consensus is often based on very general ideas. This makes sense, because abstract outcomes may be flexible enough to accommodate a highly differentiated rural society. However, the downside is that they are hard to put into practice:

The whole project [LBW] is too much about images. For example, broadening agriculture, camping at the farm.... Everybody seems to agree on these issues, but do they know what they are talking about? Can a farmer have 50 campsites on his farm? Everybody starts to protest if you want that, even though a farmer needs to have this scale in order to make it profitable.... Everybody can agree on images, but once you start to make things concrete.... It is essential to offer people real opportunities instead of talk; otherwise rural policy remains half-baked. (Employee of the Farm Union)

The above statement illustrates the typical difference between the normative and the empirical in Dutch rural policy. On the one hand, outcomes of policy negotiation processes have become more general and abstract, sometimes even vague, while on the other hand, values are considerably differentiated. This void between the normative and empirical is a structural characteristic in modern democracies (Young 2001; Neblo 2005). It is mediated time and again by institutions in an effort to dissolve it. As this article shows, Dutch rural policy has tried to fill this void through an institutionalisation of consensus-building between interests of different stakeholders.

To a certain extent, both the demand-side analysis and supply-side analysis are able to provide an explanation for the malfunction of institutionalisation of interest-based consensuses. The results of Q-methodology support Putnam’s analysis that values are becoming differentiated. Similarly, the reflections concerning the functioning of the DC in the LBW project are in line with Hay’s analysis that current policy does not offer the appropriate institutions to engage people in policymaking. However, this is not the whole story.

Both a demand-side and a supply-side analysis pay exclusive attention to the downside of recent social and political changes. These analyses ignore the ways in which civil society and the state respectively are re-institutionalising and re-politicising. This is due to their focus on either the domain of civil society or the state. An analysis of Dutch (rural) policy as a meeting ground between civil society and the state is able to pay attention to the ways in which people also re-engage with each other and the state. The remainder of the article will highlight three examples of political attitudes to show that whenever a void between normative and empirical surges up, that is, when the available institutions fail to mediate this difference, new attempts at resolution and institutionalisation develop (Cohen and Ben-Ari 1993).

Re-engagement in Dutch rural policy

The next examples provide an indication of engagement in Dutch rural policy without the conventional representative institutions. The people in the examples are all
farmers. It needs to be stressed that these examples are not inclusive; they merely give an indication of the changing attitudes.

_Self-representation as an inevitability: Mr and Mrs Jansen_

Mr and Mrs Jansen were informed that part of their land had been allocated as a future nature reserve. As usual, they were assured that they were not obliged to leave the land and that if they choose to sell it, they would receive complete financial compensation:

They always say that you will get financial compensation and that ownership is juridically protected. But imagine that you have a nice garden in front of your house. You enjoy working and relaxing in it. One day, an official comes to inform you that they need the garden to put up an electricity pole. ‘But you don’t have to worry, you’ll get financial compensation’. Of course you think, ‘Come on, sir, money is not the issue here’. You see, that impact is really underestimated. (Mr Jansen)

Mr and Mrs Jansen proposed to surrender another piece of their land for the nature reserve, which was low in agricultural production and therefore better suited for nature development:

Jan has asked them so many times to come and have a look at the alternative plot. But they keep on saying that they want it there. We say, ‘Come and have a look at the situation, there are many more opportunities. You can have your part and we will be able to continue with our farm’. But they do not consider it. There is no possibility for discussion’. (Mrs Jansen)

They never really listen, except when you go to court. (Mr Jansen)

Eventually, Mr and Mrs Jansen went to court with the aim of opposing the environmental claim. The court decided that the Province acted correctly, that is, it followed the legal procedures, so there was no reason to reconsider the environmental claim. The whole affair was unsatisfactory for Mr and Mrs Jansen, which is illustrated with the next quotes:

The local level has been used too little. To be sure, not much has been initiated from the local level. That’s pretty sad and I feel bad about that. We, as farmers, as inhabitants from the Langbroekerwetering, have to come up with things ourselves. Come up with a view of what we want with this region. Where we want to go. There needs to be a end with this whole thing [the LBW project]. What can we bring in ourselves? How can we put ourselves in? This is not happening enough. I would really like to see it happening and I am busy with it too. But, you become discouraged pretty quickly because there are very few people who want to co-operate and put in the energy and time needed to do it. (Mr Jansen)

In agriculture we lack people who can express a feeling, who can function as an initiator. As farmers we need to make clear what we have to sell. At the moment we are too occupied with defending what we’ve got. There are too few initiatives from the sector, that could give a counter-pressure to the claims of nature and tourism. People withdraw on their farms for various reasons and they also lack the time to develop new things. (Mr Jansen)

Despite Mr and Mrs Jansen’s active engagement in the LBW project, they would prefer to do it more informally and above all, together with others. It is interesting to note how the above statements seems to correspond with the argument of Szreter
(2002) that individuals in a depoliticised society show a yearning for social connection with their governments and each other. The next example is of a farmer who does not voice such a yearning and who consciously chooses to engage in policymaking individually and informally.

**Self-representation as a desired option: Mr Pieterse**

Mr Pieterse has the largest farm in the LBW region and is considered a highly skilled farmer by his colleagues. In contrast to Mr and Mrs Jansen, Mr Pieterse thinks that self-representation is the best way to engage in rural policy. He would not choose a co-operative effort together with others. He is trying to leave his farm in the LBW to continue somewhere else, where there are fewer restrictions on farm development:

> You always need to remain positive and consider your possibilities. This farm is located on sandy soil, which means that we face restrictions concerning the amount of minerals we can apply. That’s the reason why we started with other activities besides dairy farming, such as making cheese and breeding fish. Currently, we noticed that also these extra activities couldn’t grow anymore. That’s why we decided to look for another location to continue farming.

Mr Pieterse plans to finance his move with money he is able to receive when part of his farm is used for future housing. To realise this plan he has had to negotiate a lot with policymakers. As the next statement shows, he actively engages on his own account with rural policy and policymakers and is anything but disengaged:

> If I relate to my experiences with policymakers within these negotiations, I can only say that there is relatively little distance. You can talk to everybody. I believe that a lot of farmers feel that there is a distance because of the complicated regulations and because they don’t know how to approach policymakers effectively. If you want to establish contact you first need to write a letter and you need to take the initiative yourself. Many farmers are still not used doing these things.

Mr Pieterse is representing himself because he believes that the traditional Farm Union cannot represented his interests comprehensively:

> Take a look at agriculture. There are very many different farmers who all have their own specific view. In the DC there is only one representative for all these farmers. It is impossible for him to represent all these diverse interests. Of course, he can represent a big picture, but not how I want to manage my farm. That’s why I think that farmers as individuals need to engage with politics more.

Despite Mr Pieterse’s scepticism of doing things together with other farmers, there are also examples of new farmer organisations in the LBW. The last example described one of these, a farmer co-operative, Terecht Anders.

**Joint representation: Terecht Anders**

A new co-operative is another way in which farmers engage in Dutch rural policy (Wiskerke et al. 2003). In the LBW region one organisation exists, which could be called a new farmer co-operative. It is called Terecht Anders, which means ‘rightly
different’. It is a platform for farmers in the LBW who want to work together to invite citizens to their farms so as to inform them about farming in the LBW region but also to arrange recreational activities and to sell regional farm products.

One of the founders of this organisation is Mr de Vries. He lives on a traditional farm with 20 dairy cows, fruit trees and some horses. He sells farm products from his house. His next plan is to start a regional information centre and a maize labyrinth. According to him, Terecht Anders helps represent the interests of farmers that diversify their farm activities:

[The Farm Union] thinks that these [diversification] activities are marginal. It might also complicate farmer representation because it creates a kind of contradiction. They still don’t want to support alternatives to agricultural modernisation. They’re afraid that the Province will say: ‘Well, why do you want to enlarge your farm, you can do perfectly well with its current size, just broaden your farm production’. They absolutely don’t want that to happen.

For the farmers in Terecht Anders it is essential to have a representative organisation, especially because they are dependent on subsidies, ‘Our problem is: how do we sell landscape, fresh air or a nice looking stable? I think that for these things we will always be dependent on subsidies’. But representation is also difficult because diversification activities often do not fit into policy categories. Often it is not clear where, that is, at which government department, farmers can represent their concerns. Frequently rural policy only targets well-defined, conventional rural activities:

I wanted to build a new shed, so the civil servant asked what it is for. I said what do you think? He replied, ‘Cows, sheep or chickens?’ But I wanted to use it for a regional information centre. They don’t know how to deal with that. The co-operative deals with culture, agriculture, art, and nature. It is often difficult to know in which way policy relates to us.

The farmers in Terecht Anders are dependent on favourable policies to start their activities and to make them profitable. Still, the relation with policies and policymakers remains ambiguous:

On the one hand they restrict you in your development. On the other hand, you also need them for support because they control the money. For us it is important to remain visible to these people. So I always try to keep in contact with them.

Conclusion

This article investigated to what extent the void in Dutch rural policy could be attributed to a process of value differentiation originating in civil society or a process of depoliticisation originating in the state. Both these arguments presuppose a clear distinction between civil society and the state, which is why each, on their own, does not offer a comprehensive account of the current condition of Dutch rural policy. This article suggests that although civil society is de-institutionalising and the state is depoliticising, there are also attempts towards re-institutionalisation and re-politicisation in Dutch rural policy.

Dutch rural policy and development has changed in a paradoxical way. Due to a process of value differentiation the constituencies of the sub-national cultures of the
pillarisation disintegrated. This has increased electoral volatility, which meant that policymakers have actively had to ensure public legitimacy. These were the reasons for democratising policymaking and institutionalising new governance initiatives, such as deliberative and interactive policymaking. Simultaneously, in reaction to the economic recession of the 1970s and 1980s, policy began to transfer political responsibility from the state to private institutions and individuals.

The project LBW has been studied to understand how these processes manifest themselves in practice. Data from Q-methodology suggest that the values of constituencies of rural stakeholder groups are differentiated to a considerable degree. Information from semi-structured interviews confirms that value differentiation problematise the functioning of the system of representative democracy. Despite changes in Dutch rural policy (de-pillarisation), the idea of constructing consensus between the representatives of rural interests remains the core of Dutch rural policy. But this consensual politics has become vague and abstract in order to accommodate the different values in rural society. Based on these findings, the perceived void in Dutch rural policy is not so much between policymakers and rural inhabitants but rather between normative and empirical considerations of rural policy. The recent turmoil in Dutch (rural) policies has shown that people feel that conventional representative institutions do not represent their values. In other words, these institutions are failing to mediate the void between normative and empirical democracy. As a result, Dutch rural policy is changing, but not in line with the analysis of Putnam and Hay.

The central argument in this article is that despite these negative trends there are also new ways in which people are engaging in Dutch rural policy. The three examples of farmers’ engagement offered here draw attention to the ways in which rural policy re-institutionalises and re-politicises. This is not to say that traditional consensus-building can simply be substituted by the new ways in which people engage in Dutch rural policy. Such an argument would be just as one-sided as a demand-side or supply-side analysis. Instead, balanced analyses of the transformation of Dutch rural policy and development are needed. These can give information about the positive and negative effects of the transformation and identify key problems for rural policymaking.

This article identifies two key dilemmas. The first is that Dutch rural policy needs to accommodate people’s different values. An exclusive focus on the initiatives of deliberative policymaking will not suffice, because these will privilege specific groups of people (Sanders 1997; Shucksmith 2000; Young 2001). For this reason a well-functioning representative democracy is essential to incorporate the values and views of people who are not able to participate effectively in newly introduced deliberative democracy initiatives. This requires that representatives of rural stakeholders know the diverse values of their constituency and are able to aggregate these values into meaningful ideas on the development of the countryside: for example, what the final goals of rural policy should be and the best way to realise them. Secondly, the analysis in this article showed in particular that interest-based consensual politics is malfunctioning. Therefore, the system of representative democracy needs to change. It needs to develop new ways in which (new) stakeholders can represent their values within conventional representative democracy.
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Notes

1 For more information on Fortuyn and the 2002 parliamentary elections see Pellikaan et al. (2003) and articles in newspapers such as The Economist of 2, 9 and 15 May 2002.
2 The process of de-pillarisation could be understood as a Dutch variant of the modernisation process (Zijderveld 2000).
3 This policy change is not only Dutch. International literature often frames it in binary terms, for example, from government to governance (Goodwin 1998; Stoker 1998; Bressers and Kuks 2001) and from instrumental planning to collaborative planning (Booher and Innes 2002; Healey 2003; Innes 2004).
4 This is a network of connected nature reserves in The Netherlands, with a total of 730,000 ha. Through the conversion of agricultural land into nature reserves, already existing nature reserves are to be linked together in an ecological network to be completed in 2018.
5 For example, Frouws (1993) has insightfully described how a void originated between leaders of the Dutch Farm Union and their constituency during neo-corporatist bargaining between the Farm Union, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Product Boards over the redistribution of environmental costs.
6 ‘Red for red’ legislation allows owners to break down farm buildings and build houses with the same number of square metres on the same plot.
7 The names used in this article are pseudonyms. Unlike the self-representation of Mr Pieterse, Mr and Mrs Jansen consider self-representation a necessary evil. If they could choose, they would prefer to engage in rural policies by co-operating with other farmers. However, at present they think that sufficient co-operation is not possible.
8 Some other examples of new ways of re-institutionalisation in Dutch rural policy are the recently established Ruraal Parlement (rural parliament) initiatives of rural women (Bock et al. 2004) and efforts to establish new farm unions (Joosse 2004).
9 These questions and dilemmas are not exclusively Dutch. In the UK the transformation of rural policies has been analysed by a large number of rural sociologists (for example, Goodwin 1998; Shucksmith 2000; Jones and Little 2000; Edwards et al. 2001; MacKinnon 2002; Woods 2003). Woods, in particular, has argued that new rural movements represent a change in conventional rural policy of representing rural interests (Woods 2003). I am grateful to a reviewer of Sociologia Ruralis for pointing this out to me.

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