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## **The role of local 'green plans' in informing the public**

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# **1. The role of local 'green plans' in informing the public**

**Frans Coenen**

## **1. Introduction**

Green plans are plans which address the escalating environmental problems (Dalal-Clayton, 1996) Many municipalities all over the world have adopted environmental declarations, strategies and action plans. These green plans can be an important tool for informing the public. Firstly because they contain the element of a State of the Environment (SoE) report. But green plans intend to be more than a SoE-report. A SoE-report is just a part of the planning cycle. Plans also address the question who should do what to solve or prevent environmental problems.

If green plans are considered as communicative instruments with an explicit external function, they can contribute to informing and changing the behaviour of the public. In this paper we will discuss this proposition. The assumption is that, apart from the consequences through regulatory and economic instruments, all plans contain a 'plan message' which is meant to have a direct impact. With these messages the planning government tries to change the perceptions of other governmental departments and societal actors by sketching the problems, the targets and it's motivation for future decision making . The objective is that third parties will co-ordinate their own decisions and actions to the intended government policy.

The idea that plans are communicative instruments has it's roots in the theoretical planning literature. In section 2 we will shortly discuss the difference between the hierarchical and the communicative model of planning. The empirical discussion will be based on Dutch green planning. The Netherlands present an interesting case for three reasons. Firstly because the first Dutch National Environmental Policy Plan (NEPP), published on May 25, 1989, is world-wide seen as successful forerunner for similar documents published in other countries. Dutch municipalities were also early involved in green planning exercises. Secondly the environmental planning system has an interesting philosophy about the communicative, external function of plans. And thirdly because one of the goals of the plans that are given in the planning system is providing more insight into the future effects of decision-making (abbreviated to future orientation-clarity).

In section 3 we will describe the Dutch system of environmental planning and it's functions. In section 4 we will link green planning with urban air pollution. In section 5 we will evaluate the external function of the Dutch green plans based on the evaluation of municipal green planning (Coenen, 1996) and regional (provincial) green planning (Coenen, Janssens and Oosterveld, 1997). Finally we will draw some conclusions in section 6.

## 2. The communicative function of green plans

Influencing the public opinion by providing information, education, publicity and improving facilities to encourage environmentally friendly behaviour is an alternative or supplement for financial and regulative instruments. But Dutch evaluation studies show that only providing information is not a very effective way of influencing environmental behaviour. *'An appealing policy which is promoted with enthusiasm and provokes widespread discussion in the media and society at large is probably a more appropriate and more effective way for government to influence environmental attitudes'* (Bressers and Hanf, 1996)

Green plans can provoke such a discussion because they not only raise the environmental awareness like a State of the Environment report could do, but also set the direction for solving the problems. And green plans are especially interesting when they not only sketch what government wants to do but also set a framework for the internalisation and self-regulation of target groups. The key word here is communication.

In recent years there have been several cross-national reviews of experiences with green planning (OECD, 1995; Lampietti & Subramanian, 1995; World Bank, 1995, REC, 1995, Johnson, 1995, Dalal-Clayton, 1996). From this comparative research a new type of plan emerges. These new type of plans have a more communicative approach towards other actors in society. To reach this communicative, external function participation in planning processes is stressed. Agenda 21 explicitly takes up the concept of participation in green planning. National strategies should be developed through the widest possible participation. A Local Agenda 21 is based on a communicative dialogue with the population (UNCED, 1992). The 5<sup>th</sup> Environmental Action Programme of the EU also asks for such a new approach. A transition towards sustainable development needs in environmental policy an emphasis on long-term goal-setting on a broad political and societal basis and a co-operative target group policy for the mobilisation of additional decentralised societal capacities (Janicke, 1996; Dalal-Clayton, 1996).

The underlying assumption of this new Agenda 21 type of plans is that they are essentially communicative instruments. As we already stated in the introduction plans contain, apart from the consequences through regulatory and economic instruments, a 'plan message' which is meant to have a direct impact. With these messages the planning government tries to change the perceptions of other governmental departments and societal actors by sketching the problems, the targets and its motivation for future decision making .

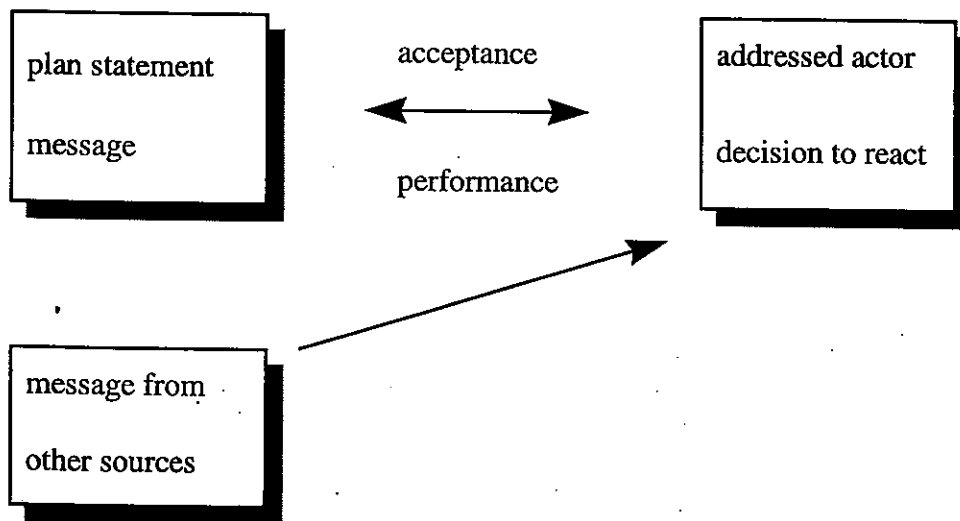
In 'centralist' or 'hierarchic' approaches to planning one supposes that reaching the target group and implementation by the target group is just a matter of power and regulation. These are forms of blueprint planning which don't take the uncertainty of future developments into account. Planning is just seen as the making and carrying out of these blueprints. The concept of blue print planning derives essentially from architecture and engineering. In green planning we cannot expect that, even with a massive application of force, plan statements will be orders addressing other government agencies and societal actors.

Figure 1 The hierarchical model of planning (Faludi, 1990)



in other planning approaches which incorporated the idea of uncertainty into decision making the central problem is no longer simply how to get the actors addressed by the plan to act in accordance with the plan, but to get the message through to the addressed actor.

Figure 2 The communicative model of planning



A plan statement is no longer an order to implement but a message that if it reaches the addressed actor will lead to the acceptance of the message as relevant for a decision to react. The message is open for communication with the sender of the message, the planning subject. The implication for a communicative plan is that, to make an impact, three conditions have to be met:

- the actor who is addressed has to have knowledge of the existence and content of the planning message;
- the actor has to find the message relevant;
- the actor has to do something with the message, he has to use it, be it only to decide to neglect it.

Furthermore, language theory (Austin, 1962, Searle, 1969) stipulates five basic conditions a communicative message has to meet to succeed. Both the target groups and the relevant non-environmental policies have to find the planning message:

- understandable;
- appropriate;
- legitimate;
- sincere;
- acceptable.

### 3. Environmental policy planning in the Netherlands

#### *Philosophy and functions of environmental policy planning*

We stated before that the Netherlands present an interesting case in 'green planning' not only because they are widely seen as forerunner but especially because the Dutch environmental planning system has an interesting philosophy about the communicative, external function of plans.

- Policy planning was not a new phenomenon in environmental planning in the Netherlands. Various environmental laws contained planning obligations for both the national government and the provinces. The planning system as it was developed in the seventies had the nature of a response to urgent problems and focuses mainly on the individual sectors, where these problems showed most clearly. The sector planning system consisted of various environmental compartment or sector plans for solid waste, water quality, soil conservation, etc.

Due to the obscurity and complexity of the system, the lack of coherence between plans and the unclear relation between the plans and other instruments, the system of sectoral plans was criticised from various sides. In response to the problems of the sector system, nearly all reports and proposals proposed a so-called comprehensive environmental policy plan. In his Explanatory Memorandum with the 1982 budget, the Minister mentions such a comprehensive environmental policy plan for the first time as being 'an integration framework for all of environmental policy'<sup>2</sup>.

In the Memorandum 'More than the Sum of its Parts' from 1984 by the then Minister of Housing, Physical Planning and Environment, Winsemius, the foundations for a new system of environmental policy planning are sketched. The new system integrates all sector plans in a single strategic environmental policy plan in relation to a single operational implementation plan. In this Memorandum planning was defined as: *'the development and maintenance of Statements of Future Intent in the form of plans to be able to take future decisions rationally and in their mutual context, and to convince third parties (other authorities, enterprises, citizens) to take this into account in their actions and decisions.'*

This definition gives plans two major functions. The *internal function* concerns the guiding of future decisions taken by the planning subject itself. This internal function places the planning system within the so-called decision-centred view of planning (Faludi, 1982, 1987). The *external function* is the consequence of publicising the plan. By publicising policy intentions, actors in the environment such as citizens, firms, social organisations and other authorities gain an insight into the type of behaviour which is to be expected from the municipalities, so that they can adjust their own decision-making to this. The ideas from this Memorandum were converted into legislation in the chapter 'Plans' of the General Environmental Conservation Act.

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<sup>2</sup> Lower house, 1981-1982, 17000., nr. 2, pp. 129 and 162/163

### *Future orientation-clarity*

A third reason why the Netherlands present an interesting case is that one of the goals of the plans that are given in the planning system is providing more insight into the future effects of decision-making (future orientation-clarity). The Dutch government's central objective with regard to environmental policy planning reads that planning has to result in a higher quality of decision-making. This is the central argument to plan; planning has advantages over day-to-day decision making. The advantages of Dutch environmental planning are contained in a number of objectives that policy-makers at the government level aim to achieve through environmental policy planning.. The objectives concern the features which decision-making should have after planning. The arguments for environmental policy planning are the national government's official policy objectives with regard to environmental policy planning, indicated as planning system targets. Through contents analysis all relevant sources (parliamentary documents, memoranda, plans and circular letters, advice given by advisory bodies, and literature both from policy practice (consulting firms and municipalities) and from scientific sources) were analysed in chronological order from the mid-seventies to reveal the objectives of environmental policy planning, as features of planned decision-making (Coenen, 1996). One important goal of plans was providing the decision-maker with more insight into the future effects of this decision-making, shortly characterised as future orientation-clarity<sup>3</sup>. By means of the environmental policy plan, the municipality is addressing 'third parties'. Firstly with the intention of providing other authorities, enterprises and social organisations with a picture of the type of behaviour they may expect from the municipal authorities. Secondly, the municipality addresses third parties in order to appeal to the adjustment of their actions and decisions to the intended governmental policy.

### *The external function of plans and open planning*

The *external function* is the consequence of publicising the plan. By doing so actors in the environment such as citizens, firms, social organisations and other authorities gain an insight into the type of behaviour which is to be expected from the government, so that they can adjust their own decision-making. The new planning system proposed the concept of '*open planning*'. 'Open' means involving others such as citizens, enterprises, environmental organisations and other authorities in planning at an early stage. This is supposed to increase the scope and recruiting power of planning which in turn is related to the internalisation of environmental responsibility by the plan's target groups. Such internalisation also depends on the way in which the plan is accomplished.

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<sup>3</sup> Other features found were:

- taking future effects more into account in decision-making (future orientation-anticipation);
- in decision-making, co-ordinating a decision better with other decisions of the planning subject (coherence);
- in decision-making, providing other actors with more opportunity to influence a decision (participation);
- in decision-making, providing information on the actions of the planning subject (motivation-clarity) and provide better arguments for decisions (motivation-justification).

Dutch environmental policy is well known for its so-called target-group approach. This policy focus means that, after the national environmental objectives have been formulated in the National Environmental Policy Plans, target groups and their representatives have a strong say in all further stages of the policy process. In creating a consultative structure between the government and the industry organisations acting on behalf of the polluters (i.e. the target groups) and an attempt is being made to internalise environmental responsibility in individual companies. One of the main aims of these consultations is to define the tasks for a specific sector of industry within the framework of the overall national environmental objectives. Usually these arrangements are laid down in covenants and other forms of guidelines, incorporating targets to be realised by the various sectors of industry within a certain time limit. Starting point for the consultative process is the environmental policy plan. The adjustment of the decision making of actors from society to the plan can be considered as a communicative process based on the plan.

#### *State of the environment*

'Care for tomorrow', which in Dutch also means 'worries about tomorrow', was the title of a ground-breaking collection of studies published by the RIVM (State Institute for Public Health and Environmental Protection) in 1988. In these studies, the seriousness of all environmental problems in the Netherlands and the outlook for the future if policy remained unchanged were presented as an interrelated whole for the first time. Almost immediately after the publication of 'Our common future', the Dutch government designated 'sustainable development' as the general guideline for overall Dutch government policy. It was evident from the RIVM report that this would have to have far-reaching consequences. These were translated into the first National Environmental Policy Plan (NMP), entitled 'To choose or to lose' (States General, 1989).

To realise the ambitious goals of the NEPP other actors have to be addressed to realise the NEPP. The NEPP states that *'Everyone is assumed to be aware of his responsibility with respect to the environment and to let this influence his actions. The large scale on which some environmental problems occur, does not detract from this'* (p. 13). And *'Without the dedication of the target groups environmental policy cannot be intensified, and the pursuit of sustainable development becomes a dead letter'* (p. 31). In the first place the other government layers who have their own responsibilities and tasks in the field of environmental protection. In the second place the other policy sectors who have environment-related tasks. And thirdly the actors in society who are the target groups for the environmental policy. So informing these other actors is crucial for implementing the NEPP.

#### **4. Urban air problems and green planning**

In the first NEPP an integral approach was introduced addressing eight so-called themes. One of these themes is *disturbance* concerned with reaching and maintaining a good housing- and living environment climate in the field of noise pollution, odour, vibration, external safety and local air pollution. It will be clear that these problems are very much interrelated in their sources and the affected.

For all these environmental problems there were already sectoral policies. For instance an major attempt to combat Air pollution in the Netherlands was a sectoral one with the Air Pollution Act coming into force in 1972, aiming at the big polluting industries like refineries. But licensing in this field had a rather slow start. Only after eight years three-quarters of the businesses concerned had been issued with a license. The smaller firms had a Nuisance Act license which dealt integral with all environmental aspects of firms. Unfortunately until the mid-eighties a lot of these firms were lacking a Nuisance Act licence or an adequate license.

Environmental planning is aiming at integrating these efforts concerning the same pollution sources (cars, railways, industry, etc.) aimed at the same affected areas or group of people. Urban air problem are considered as part of the integral problem of disturbance. Solutions have to be found for areas, groups of affected people or for a combination of forms of pollution from one source.

At the beginning of the eighties municipalities started introducing a form of traffic planning based on computer models with the aim to reduce the noise and air pollution by re-arranging the traffic flows. The traffic plans would be based on several scenarios open for discussion with the public. The problem of this form of planning are the costs that have to be made for the traffic measures.

#### **5. Experiences with the external function of local green plans**

##### *Local and regional green plans*

According to their own statements, a large majority of the municipalities with more than 30,000 inhabitants (82 percent) drew up a strategic environmental policy plan or a combination of a strategic and operational plan (Coenen, 1996). All the twelve provinces had to make environmental plans based on the chapter Plans in the General Conservation Act.

We give here some very short conclusions on the functions and the content of the plans. There is a difference between local green plans explicitly aiming at the public with a strong external function and plans who emphasise the internal function of the plan, often as a management instrument for the municipality itself (Coenen, 1996). At the provincial level there is a shift in the plans towards becoming more and more external orientated (Coenen, Janssens en Oosterveld, 1997).

The local plans do contain elements of a State of the Environment-report, but often these reports are rather weak because of the lack of specific local data. This is less a problem on the regional level, but there the connection between regional problems and planning is weak. Provincial plans are to much a copy of the NEPP at the provincial level, and not specific enough concerned with the regional problems (Coenen, Janssens en Oosterveld, 1997).



### *Evaluation of the external function*

In paragraph two we elaborated on the principles of communicating through plan messages as a way of informing the public. With these plan messages the planning government tries to change the perceptions of other governmental departments and societal actors by sketching the problems, the targets and its motivation for future decision making. The objective is that through this communicative use of the plan third parties will co-ordinate their own decisions and actions to the intended government policy in the plan.

The conditions for communicative use of a plan stated in section 2 were:

- the actor who is addressed has to have knowledge of the existence and content of the planning message;
- the actor has to find the message relevant;
- the actor has to do something with the message, he has to use it, be it only to decide to neglect it.

In this section we will see in how far Dutch local planning meets this conditions of knowledge and the condition of relevance.

### *Knowledge*

A plan message can reach a target group directly or through their representative organisations. Not all important target groups are organised in such a way that they can be 'reached' through representative organisations that are not only able to speak on behalf of these groups, but also 'can deliver' what they agree upon in negotiations. Examples are the farmers, the car drivers and households in general. The second National Environmental Policy Plan expresses explicitly serious concern on this subject.

In a survey industrial firms were asked if they know if the municipality were they resident had a green plan and if they were familiar with the content of the plan (Coenen, 1996) 65% (out of 134) could not answer the first question, only one third (32,4%) knew of the existence of a plan. Of this group 52,5 % said that they were also familiar with the content of the plan.

### *Relevance*

According to the national planning framework, local authorities should involve target groups in their planning. In the survey mentioned before industrial firms stated local government as the most important layer of government concerning their environmental policy.

In practice the relevance of local green plans and local target group policy seems limited. The main guidelines of environmental policy are largely determined by the state. The policy is executed mainly by the provinces and municipalities. At municipal level there will be less need to arrive at a common policy formulation. Usually there will be a consensus by the time the municipality is confronted with the problem. At municipal level, the tension between what has already been decided between the central government and a particular branch of industry, always plays a part. For instance both the municipality and the local garage dealer may be confronted with agreements made between the central government and the Association of garages (BOVAG). In practice, a local target group policy can be shaped by including representatives from the target group in a guidance or feedback group, organising an informative meeting with the target group or explicitly consulting target groups through interviews with representatives or requesting a (written) response to planning drafts. But only a small minority of the

municipalities set up more permanent consultation forums, especially with local environmental movement groups.

### *Use of the message*

Is their evidence that the planning message not only reaches the societal actors but lead to some changes? This question is very difficult to answer because it would need to establish a causal link between the message and the behaviour. Here we restrict ourselves to two questions about the conditions for use. Did the actors react to the plan during plan approval and did the plan offer them more clarity about the future direction of government policy?

First we can ask the question, how did the actors addressed by the plan react in the phase of plan approval?

Participation in local green planning processes can be either reaction on the basis of a concept plan drawn up by the administration without the involvement of target-groups or real participation in the preparatory stage of the plan. Research shows that the majority of the municipalities relied on consultation after drawing a concept-plan. A telephone survey in June 1992 (Buil, 1992) showed that only 1/3 out of 60 municipalities (over 25000 inhabitants) actually involved the target groups in the preparatory stage of the planning process. Usually the approach would be to interview the target groups or have face-to-face consultation talks. A written survey held in the beginning of 1993 (Coenen and Lulofs, 1993) showed that 29.8% only had participation in the preparatory stage, 35.1% merely as a reaction on the concept and 21,1% in both stages. Of the local planning processes 14% didn't involve any form of participation.

If we place municipalities that had real participation on a participation ladder (Arnstein, 1969) 9.8% had a citizen consultation group as the highest form of participation and 43 % had at least hearings and information meetings, apart from other forms of participation. Direct interviewing of target groups occurred in 33.3% as the highest step on the ladder, apart from other forms of participation. These numbers show that it was not unusual to involve target groups when drawing up of environmental strategies, but it happened in a minority of the municipalities and the methods were quite limited.

Problem in participation processes was often to get business involved. Especially during hearings all kinds of groups would show up, except business.

The second question is did the plans offer more clarity for the target groups about the future intentions of the planning municipality? The future anticipation-clarity on what may be expected in future of the municipal authorities in a certain policy field with regard to the way in which the environment will be handled within this policy field, is reflected particularly in strategic memoranda and plans in these fields. This clarity is relevant particularly in those policy fields where third parties feel a need for clarity because they are affected by this decision-making. The quantitative study<sup>4</sup> appears to show an increase in strategic, environmentally relevant decision-making.

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<sup>4</sup> Part of the evaluation research on local green planning was aimed at the decision making after plan approval linked with the plans. This research looked into the features this decision making had after plan approval in relation to the aims of the planning system.

The quantitative decision-making study consisted of a contents analysis of decision-making documents of the mayor and aldermen of the case-municipalities before and after the plan was approved

The qualitative study<sup>5</sup> does indeed show increased attention for the environment in strategic plans and memoranda within other policy fields, specifically civil engineering and traffic, as we indicated already under future orientation-anticipation. In a number of other policy fields we find new memoranda such as weed extermination, slipperiness prevention, lasting construction and guidelines for requirement programmes. Future developments with regard to the environment and economics remain relatively unclear. The opportunities for the establishment or movement of businesses are relatively clear, but are strongly dependent on the case municipalities for their implementation. Within legal regulations, such scope can be explicitly used to attract employment for the use of such scope can be explicitly rejected.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

In this paper we discussed the communicative use of the plan as a specific aspect of informing the public. The communicative, external function of plans goes beyond the function of a plan as a State of the Environment-report. It's intention is that third parties will co-ordinate their own decisions and actions to the intended government policy in the plan because of the this consultation. The Dutch targetgroup policy can be considered an exponent of this idea of co-ordinative decision making after plan approval. The planning system operates a very specific external function of plans which concerns the appeal to third parties to co-ordinate their own decisions and actions to the intended government policy in the plan.

For such a external, communicative function to work we stipulated three conditions knowledge of the plan, relevance of the content and eventually use of the message. But important target groups do not participate in the planning. The knowledge among this target groups is than very restricted and the relevance of local policy is doubtful to these target groups. The clarity about the future behaviour to expect form the government is raisen by the green plans. Given the fact that the basic conditions for a communicative use of local plans are only partly met, the influence of local green plans on the co-ordination of decision making between local government and target groups will be very limited.

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<sup>5</sup> The qualitative decision-making study consisted of reconstruction interviews with officials in the seven case municipalities. The interviews were supplemented with the contents analysis of the decision-making documents.

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