

# Dutch provincial sustainable strategies: ambitions and differences

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## 1. Introduction

The paper poses the question; *How have Dutch subnational governments taken up the challenge to institutionalize sustainable development and design sustainable development policies?*

In the Netherlands the subnational government and regional authority is known as 'province'. The Netherlands is a decentralised unitary state. The administrative system comprises three levels of government: about 450 municipalities (*gemeenten*), twelve provinces (*provincies*), and the central government. The unitary nature of the state is based on agreement between the three layers of government, not on central government alone. The lower levels are responsible for their own affairs and to a limited extent can take their own initiatives. This freedom of initiative however, is restricted by the constitutional obligation to account for legislation passed by higher authorities.

The provincial authorities are responsible for directing and implementing the various policy areas which are beyond the scope of local authorities. Examples include: environmental management, water management, physical planning (public), economic and social policy, countryside policy, public and youth welfare work and culture. Once every four years, the population of each province directly elects its representative body, the Provincial Council. The Provincial Council prescribes and monitors the provinces' policy and financial frameworks, and appoints an executive board, the Provincial Executive, which executes provincial policies. The Chairman of both the Provincial Council and Provincial Executive is the governor (Queen's Commissioner). The governor is appointed by the government at the Provincial Council's recommendation. As head of provincial authorities, he (or she) is responsible to the Provincial Council. Besides this, he has some state duties. One of these is coordination of government departments active in the province.

To understand how provinces picked up sustainable development we first to look in four developments:

- the emerge of environmental management in the Netherlands;
- the role of provinces as implementers of national environmental policy plans and strategies;
- the role of provinces in implementing the strategies for sustainable development;
- the cabinet wide approach to sustainable development.

Then we will discuss a number of explanatory factors who explain the content and institutionalisation of provincial sustainable policies.

## **2. The emerge of environmental policy in the Netherlands (1972-1987)**

### **2.1 The local roots of environmental policy**

Many people think that environmental protection is something of the last decades. But the first forms of environmental protection go back to city regulation in the Middle Ages and even earlier. What is interesting in these first forms of environmental protection is the role of government. Environmental protection concerned the typical situations where city government interfered in the relations between individual citizens, often neighbours. If one citizen was hindering other citizen by his activities, like leather tanning or butchering animals within the city walls, city government interfered as a kind of arbitrator. Of course there were also general regulations with regard to the general interest for health and safety protection like the prohibition to throw death cattle in the city canal or for the use of open fire in the city.

With the industrial revolution the relation between citizens changed. Now one of the neighbours could be an industrial activity. In the first environmental laws the role of government was still that of a referee trying to settled nuisance problems between neighbours. These first environmental laws in Western Europe date back to the Napoleon times of the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The basic principle of these laws, allowing certain activities within restrictions set by permits to protect the neighbours interest, was the backbone for environmental policy till the 1960's and 1970's. For nearly one and a half century environmental policy in the Netherlands was the Nuisance act since 1815, were municipalities had to settle the nuisance problems with permits.

### **2.2 National government takes the lead**

In the 1970's the playing field changed. After the first wave of attention for environment at the end of sixties and for instance the Stockholm conference, for many the 'real' environmental policy started. National governments took more responsibilities, administrative capacity was build and new laws formulated to express the new found insight in the complexity of ecological problems. Civil society explicitly asked for a stronger role of government. There was a strong first wave of awareness of environmental problems in the Netherlands. For instance the report of the Club of Rome was very widely sold in the Netherlands.

The starting point of the new environmental policy was the founding of the new Ministry of Public Health and Environmental Protection (VoMil) and its first Memorandum on environmental protection published in 1972. The memorandum gave national government a prominent role in environmental policy making and introduced rational comprehensive planning in environmental policy (Coenen and Janssen, 1999). The urgent problem in the fields of water, soil and air pollution were tackled by separate laws introducing generic rules and norms and focussing on technical solutions. It also introduced orthodox planning rational comprehensive planning in many of these laws. A type of planning which made solutions relatively independent of the political and social context.

Not only the new ministry of VoMiL but also many other ministries became involved in environmental policy through part of their own policies like water management, infrastructure, agriculture. The result was a highly fragmented policy both institutional as procedural.

The compartmental approach meant distinct policies and laws for the environmental compartments water, soil and air. This was not just in content but also fragmented in institutions and rules. The new laws had also another consequence. In the 1970s local authorities lost much of their autonomy in environmental affairs. This is related to the issue of (environmental) expertise. In a small municipality the number of environmental experts is always limited. In the 1970s the responsibilities for the big companies were taken away from the municipalities and given to the provinces in the new compartmental laws.

### **2.3 Policy integration**

The Dutch environmental legislation from the seventies - and the same goes for many other countries - had the character of a reaction to acute problems, and directed itself mainly to the separate sectors of environmental policy in which these problems manifested themselves most clearly, such as air and water pollution. The problem with this was that, as a result of such a sector-oriented or compartment-oriented environmental policy, there was insufficient recognition of elements of commonality in the policy, and that there was not enough attention to the shifting of problems from one sector of the environment to another. The sectoral environmental policy offered little opportunity for tackling environmental damage spanning several compartments, or able to hop between them. In addition, such a sectoral environmental policy can lead to internal conflicts in the environmental policy, which undermines its effectiveness and legitimacy. In the third place, environmental policy with a strongly sectoral orientation delivers a greater administrative burden as a result of the co-ordination required. These problems form the core of the motivation for what is known as the internal integration in environmental policy - the integration between sectors of the environment.

Provinces were seen as very well placed in solving integration problems between sectors given their responsibilities in many of these laws. The need for integration and co-ordination was more and more felt in the Netherlands in the early eighties and there was a call for more consistency in policy target groups of policy, accumulation of effects and related causes. On the provincial level environmental problems in different sectors or environmental compartments, concerned often the same substances, common sources and the same areas.

### **3. The implementation of national environmental policy plans**

#### **3.1 The four NEPP's**

In the mid 1980's we saw the introduction of the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development is broader than just environmental protection and also involves social and economic development. Sustainable development changes the role of civil society in environmental protection. Agenda 21, the world global action plan from the RIO conference, stresses the idea that sustainable development is not possible without close co-operation with all relevant stakeholders.

Dutch environmental policy is being conducted according to a long-term strategy laid down in National Environmental Policy Plans (NEPPs). The goal of Dutch environmental planning is sustainable development (Bennett 1991, 1997, Van Geest en Ringeling 1994). Soon after the publication of 'Our Common Future' in 1987 (WECD 1987), the Dutch government adopted the concept of 'sustainable development' as the major overall guideline for Dutch government policy. The concept was then incorporated into the first NEPP (NMP 1989). Since then three other NEPPs have been developed. NEPP-2 in 1993, NEPP-3 in 1998 and the last one, the fourth NEPP was created in 2001.

NEPP's are comprehensive plans that cover the whole range of environmental compartments (waste, air, noise, etc.) and related policy sectors (traffic, housing, spatial planning, etc.). Environmental policy integration was also addressed by using specific cross-cutting themes (e.g., acidification, the manure problem, and groundwater depletion) to bring out the linkages between sectoral policy fields. All the other ministers are involved in the policy design. The first NEPP was consigned by four ministers; the most recent NEPP by seven different ministers. the first three NEPPs meant continued and intensified attention to traditional environmental policy. The main goal of the first NEPPs was to reach technical solutions for environmental problems within a single generation. The starting point for the first NEPP was analysis in the report 'Care for tomorrow'. This report showed the seriousness of many existing problems and the need for significant reductions given the environmental carrying capacity. The NEPP-1 and NEPP-2 take quite a technocratic view of sustainable development: the restriction of trends within a given environmental carrying capacity. The focus in the first NEPPs on the technical and managerial reduction of emissions and the stress in the third NEPP on decoupling economic growth and negative environmental impacts, frames the interpretation of sustainable development in these first documents as 'ecological modernization' (Jänicke and Weidner, 1997)

The NEPP-4 introduced the concept of persistent environmental problems. Some problems such as waste, we have more or less under control: if we have the funds and technical means they will be solved in the next decades. Other environmental issues such as climate change have turned out to be more complex than originally thought; tackling them will require radical social changes that cannot be brought about in one generation. Problems are no longer solved by planning, but through social change initiated by planning. Despite decades of environmental policy development and implementation some problem issues solving shows shown insufficient progress in meeting acceptable levels of pollution, or necessary patterns of sustainable production

and consumption. These issues are agriculture, transport (mobility), energy and the management of natural resources and biological diversity. NEPP-4 presents a thorough analysis of the causes of failing policy, calling for breakthrough technologies as well as societal behaviour. Permanent solution of these four issues requires a systematic change in thinking and attitudes, which is a matter of decades rather than years. NEPP-4 introduces 'transition management' as a new long-term policy concept, aimed at bringing around these breakthroughs in 20 to 30 years.

Although all the national policy documents mentioned above are called strategies or plans for sustainable development the mainly concern the ecological dimension of sustainable development. But we see a clear move from more traditional environmental management and an interpretation of sustainable development as ecological modernization, towards a conceptualization in the classic Brundtland formulation.

In the first NEPPs links with the economic, and especially the social pillar of sustainable development were weak. NEPP-1 and NEPP-2 emphasized the ecological dimension of sustainable development. They both focus strongly on reducing environmental impacts rather than promoting social change. NEPP-3 pays more attention to the economic dimension of sustainable development and looks more closely at the social trends needed to decouple continuing economic growth from increasing environmental pressure. NEPP-4 added a clear social dimension by giving priority to quality of life and social welfare. In these years several attempts to establish a relation with the social dimension of sustainability failed, largely due to disinterest with ministries primarily responsible for that dimension, like the social affairs, health and education (Coenen, van de Peppel and Fuchs, 2001).

### **3.2. Provincial environmental policy plans**

The NEPP's made environmental policy plans a crucial element of environmental policy making. Policy planning was not a new phenomenon in Dutch environmental policy. Various environmental laws contained planning obligations for the provinces in fields like solid waste, water quality, soil conservation, etc., since the seventies. A new system of plans was introduced in the chapter on plans of the Environmental Management Act which integrates all sector plans in a single strategic environmental policy plan in relation to a single operational implementation plan (Coenen and Janssen, 1999)

These new integrated plans was part of a new environmental policy system that was distinctly different from the previous 20 years of environmental policy development. Rather than focusing on air, soil and water as individual entities of environmental quality, the new strategy called for comprehensive, integrated and long-term approaches, following a thematic perspective and defining 'target groups' of producers and consumers to negotiate improvements beyond legal requirements. Closing the loops of materials in production cycles, saving material and energy and improving product and process quality were key elements of this strategy. Provinces copied the themes and approaches into their environmental policy plans. For provinces as an integration element particular the area based approach was important. Already in the older compartmental law there were some elements of area policy. But this was about environmental policies directed on specific area. Area based policy can be an integrative tool where there were complex problems which

made it insufficient to start from on function, one theme or one administrative level. This type of integrated area policy was voluntary. Particular important was the flexibility in the allocation of resources and national grants created by national government in 1996. Provinces could make integrated vision of an area with an action program and involvement of all stakeholders (Padt, 2007).

### 3.3 Financial tiers

Until the end of the 1980s, local and regional environmental management was seen as an autonomous task for municipalities and provinces, to be paid from the general municipal and provincial budgets. When finance appeared to be a major barrier in the process of implementing sustainable development, it was recognised that capacity building on the regional and local level could only be achieved through additional funds. In the nineties funds have been provided under a government-sponsored programme called 'Funding the Implementation of the National Environmental Policy Plan' (FUN)-program (both from 1990 to 1995) as well as their successor the supplementary contribution scheme.

These schemes offered funding but also created schemes of tasks in implementation plans to be implemented by all provinces and municipalities in exchange for extra money. After 1998 the national government created more room for provinces and municipalities to encourage them to play a stronger role.

### 3.4 Comprehensive plans

A core task of Dutch provinces is spatial planning. Since the Spatial Planning act (1965) provinces have to draw up regional spatial plans (streekplannen) and integrate these with municipal plans for their territory. Till the late 1980s these spatial plan were the main vehicle for the integration of policies on the physical environment. Since the introduction in the law on environmental protection (Wet Milieubeheer) of a Planning Chapter in 1993, the Dutch planning framework contains two different tracks of policy planning at three levels of government. They are both historically related to the physical environment, but based on different planning laws, although since the seventies environmental law has known separate plans sectoral plans. Apart from these plans there are also separate tracks for water and nature. In these sector plans, like water and nature conservation plans on the national and provincial level also address parts of the environmental planning track.

**Table 1 The Dutch environmental and physical planning system**

Level of government		Environmental planning	Spatial planning
National		National Environmental Plan	National Spatial Plan
Provincial	Strategic	Environmental Policy Plan	'Streekplan' (provincial land-use plan)
	Operational	Environmental programme	
Municipal level	Strategic	Environmental policy plan	Structural plan
	Operational	Environmental programme	'Bestemmingsplan' (local land-use plan)

For the national and provincial level a system for integration was created where plans 'leap frog' over each other which means that when changes in one plan is introduced this will lead to changes in the other related plans. Because this procedural construction was seen as unsatisfactory provinces started looking for alternatives. 'Leap frogging' only meant preventing contradictions between policies and not positive interaction and integration between spatial, environmental and water themes (Padt, 2007). A number of provinces opted for drawing up comprehensive provincial environmental plan, so called POP's, which involved the whole physical environment.

## 4. National strategy for sustainable development

### 4.1 The road to Johannesburg

In January 2001 the Dutch cabinet decided to start working on a 'national strategy for sustainable development'. Until that moment there had been no efforts in the Netherlands to draw up such a strategy over and above the existing National Environmental Policy Plans mentioned in the previous section. Although the Dutch were active in preparing Rio and the conference itself it did not lead to a national strategy. After Rio the Ministry of Environment undertook an analysis of Agenda 21, in order to assess the policy shortages. Although the study showed many elements that were not managed under Dutch law or policy, the overall political reaction was that the Netherlands was doing quite well. The NEPP's for instance meant we would not need a national sustainable strategy (NSSD). There was no dedicated follow-up process to address shortages. However, in the years that followed UNCED, the Netherlands did develop additional policy in response to other parts of the Rio legacy, notably climate change and biological diversity.

This first initiative for a Dutch NSSD was started in the run up to the Johannesburg Conference, that would review the Agenda 21 implementation by the United Nations in 2002. A NSSD team was formed in 2001 that developed a first draft strategy within a year. But after internal debate the Cabinet decided to take note of the draft rather than agree to it for political reasons and upcoming elections. The decision downgraded the strategy to a so called survey. The document was published as the first National Survey of Sustainable Development. The project team was asked to make a second survey to assess the activities of civil society and the support of possible partners in the development and implementation of future sustainability strategies. This resulted in the Survey of Civil Society Initiatives in 2002. This document too was subsequently 'noted' by the Cabinet, as it was about civil society action and not about the Cabinet's position.

After the national elections in May 2002 in August 2002 a new Cabinet started its four-year term with the immediate task of travelling to Johannesburg for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). After the Johannesburg conference the Cabinet decided to move forward with an action-oriented program on sustainable development,

The national strategy was written and agreed in Cabinet in 2003. Titled 'Sustainable Action', the document presents a coherent package of activities that the national government will undertake to advance sustainable development within Dutch borders in a structural manner. It is an action programme that reflects the political will to act domestically on the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

The national strategy describes long-term ambitions for the five themes (so called WEHAB) that emerged from WSSD: water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity, as well as demographic developments, mobility, sustainable production and consumption, and knowledge-based economy. It also eludes on the role of government in sustainable development. Government should be *mobilizing* all partners in society to make production and consumption sustainable, *illustrate* government's actions and processes by setting a good example itself and *learn* from and with partners.



## 4.2 Provinces and the NSSD

National politics wanted an action-oriented document, rather than another attempt at an overall visionary strategy. Further the NSD had a strong focus on the specific actions of the national government, because the main purpose of the document was to illustrate what the national government was going to do (differently) because of its commitments to WSSD.

Since 2001 in the process to coming to a Dutch NSSD, civil society was invited to comment and discuss the content. Also municipalities and provinces were explicitly invited to contribute to the preparation and formulation of the National Strategy. But there was serious criticism on the result. According to many stakeholders the action program did not reflect the important actions of partners in civil society the program did not offer enough opportunities for cooperation with partners in civil society.

In the 2001 draft of the NSSD the role of provinces is explicitly addressed, particularly in chapter 7. National government requires municipalities, provinces, and water boards to draw their own strategies for sustainable development, in addition to implementing the national strategy. The national government recommends the other government layers to build upon experiences from recent years.

The response of the provinces was very different. On the provincial level most authorities have created some form of sustainability program. But in contrast to the provincial environmental policy plans it copies much less the priorities and themes of the NSSD on the provincial level. The national government survey combined environmental themes (climate, water, biodiversity) with other themes (population, knowledge) in one document to express the range of sustainable development. Guide for policy development is a so-called sustainable development matrix.

	Economic aspects	Social-cultural aspects	Ecological aspects
Here and now			
There			
Then			

This guide was used in some provinces and particular the key issue of the coherence between the ecological, social and economic sustainable development.

What was picked up by the provinces was the new role of government in sustainable development as formulated in the NSSD. In the NSSD process it was already conclude that as provinces and municipalities are closer to the general public, their role in meeting the ambitions is also very important. The Program Learning for Sustainable Development was an important mechanism as well as funding source for mainstreaming sustainable development on the regional and local level.

### 4.3 Learning for Sustainable development (Leren voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling).

The provincial role has been strengthened with the implementation of the national project Learning for Sustainable Development, that started in 2001, because an important part is run by the provinces, that fund regional and local initiatives aimed at raising awareness and influencing decision making processes.

This specific program aims to enhance learning processes on sustainability in many issues, and helps students, professionals, organizations and individuals to identify and make sustainable choices. Participants in decision-making processes work together to resolve problems, carefully balancing the interests of people, nature and the environment, and the economy, in perspective of global responsibility, future orientation and sharing of values.

Learning for Sustainable Development facilitates sustainable decision making by:

- explaining and concretising the concept of sustainability (e.g. by publishing essays or developing continuous learning strands)
- bringing the parties involved together at all levels in order to work out concrete issues (organising workshops, starting up networks, supporting websites for sharing knowledge)
- offering training and coaching to participants in the program (participating in processes designed to embed sustainability in the structure and administration organisations, for example)

The three pillars of the Dutch Learning for Sustainable Development Program are:

- *Learning individuals*: this aims to ensure that all school-leavers and graduates are able to make an active contribution to sustainable development. This pillar addresses ESD (Education on Sustainable Development) in all curricula. The target group is the educational system on all levels.

- *Learning organizations*: this aims to help civil servants acquire the competences to make responsible ecological, social and economic decision-making and prevent responsibilities being shifted to other places or generations (the global dimension and the future dimension). The target group is the public sector:

- *Learning society*: this is primarily aimed at provincial scale. Working towards a sustainable society concerns us all. The provincial network of Learning for Sustainable Development directors allocates resources (money and expertise) to facilitate (social) learning processes between stakeholders.

The Provinces have all translated the national program translated into their own Provincial Ambition statement.

## 5. **Cabinet-wide approach to sustainable development** (*Kabinetsbrede Aanpak Duurzame Ontwikkeling KADO*).

The EU Sustainable Development Strategy (2006) commits member states to completing (at least) a first National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) by June 2007. The EU proposes that Member States undertake voluntary evaluation of one another's sustainable development strategies on a regular basis, in the form of so called peer reviews. The Netherlands was the first Member State to sign up to this arrangement. In the spring of 2007, Finland, Germany and South Africa evaluated the Netherlands' strategy, based on a background document outlining the content and process of the strategy and discussions held with those involved. The peers were asked to review the existing Dutch NSDS and to make recommendations on how best to develop a new Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS) based on their own and other international experiences.

The three countries discussed their conclusions and recommendations with various people, including with the Minister for the Environment and Spatial Planning. The final assessment of the peer review can be found in the final report, which is entitled 'A new Sustainable Development Strategy: an opportunity not to be missed' (RMNO, 2007).

The review committee was critically about the Dutch 2003 strategy. They conclude that many unsustainable trends in The Netherlands persist and that these trends require a coherent, systematic and integrated response, which combines initiatives in different policy domains and short term and long term perspectives. According to the reviewers the Action Programme on Sustainable Development 'Sustainable Action' (2003) is not such a response and is not a sustainable development strategy (SDS) because the focus is dominantly environmental, and the social dimension and economic sustainability are missing. Further it is a set of actions without a framing vision, a set of guiding principles and quantitative headline indicators.

For the perspective of the provinces the conclusion is important that as a result, activities led by different actors (government, business, civil society) are not linked. The reviewers call it a government's plan that's lacks ownership in society or the business sector. Effective cooperation between government departments and levels is missing. Integration, synergies and trade-offs between policies and goals are lacking. The authors recommend developing a new sustainability strategy for the Netherlands, which involves organizing a process with a strong emphasis on communication, rather than producing a strategy document. This would enable the political course being pursued to be linked in to changes happening in society and to initiatives of other parties. Working together on such a 'sustainability process' would focus the actions of all interested parties and increase synergy, cohesion and strength. The report contains a number of concrete recommendations regarding the social process; the recommendations are aimed at linking developments in the field of sustainable development more closely.

The peer review report was an important source of inspiration for the government for the following steps on a new Dutch sustainability strategy. This new strategy or program is now known as the cabinet-wide approach to sustainable development (*Kabinetsbrede Aanpak Duurzame Ontwikkeling, KADO*).

In May 2008, the Cabinet submitted details of its approach to the Lower House of the Dutch Parliament in the form of a letter. In this letter a so called three-pronged approach or interconnected tracks:

- 1) a substantive focus on six selected themes;
- 2) the government as a leading player in sustainable operational management;
- 3) an active role in the public dialogue on sustainable development.

The government-wide approach to sustainable development brings together six themes from government policies that are important for sustainability, and links the national and international agendas on each of these themes, giving priority to innovation and making the most of opportunities for the Netherlands. In the 2008 letter themes were water/climate adaptation, renewable energy, bio fuels and development, CO2 capture and storage, biodiversity, food and meat and sustainable construction and renovation.

In addition, the government has commissioned Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and the three national planning offices to develop a Sustainability Monitor (Monitor Duurzaam Nederland) which was first published in February 2009.

A second letter was sent to parliament in April 2009 on the progress of the cabinet wide approach. The progress letter added the themes sustainable globalisation and climate, biodiversity, innovation for sustainable development.

Not all themes presented in the KADO are of equal priority for the provinces. Some of the international themes presented under track 1 are less relevant for the provinces, but also global problems have causes in the provinces and the provinces have to contribute to the solutions. For instance for the climate problem the provinces can contribute through renewable energy, energy saving and climate adaptation. Track two is about the greening of national government. Track 2 is also picked up by provinces as a government layer that has to be a leading player in sustainable operational management/housekeeping. In the third track which asks for an active role of government in the public dialogue on sustainability, the provinces already play a leading role through the program 'Learning for sustainable development'.

## **6. Factors determining the provincial sustainable strategies**

All national plans and strategies in the last 20 years give a role to local and regional government. The policy theories, approaches and themes on the national level have been very influential on the provincial level in the last 30 years. But this influence differs quite over the years. One can not say that that provincial sustainable policy simply mirrors national policies. We will analyse here a number of factors:

- the general and specific in sustainable development degree of provincial autonomy;
- social-economic conditions;
- cooperation between provinces;
- the political context;
- international factors.

### **6.1 The general degree of provincial autonomy**

At one time, the provinces made up the most powerful governmental layer in the Netherlands (de Vries 2004). Their position has declined over the years and recently the position of provinces in The Netherlands has come under pressure. Very low turnouts at provincial elections, their invisibility among the public, their ambitions that stretch far beyond their responsibilities as provided in law (De Vries 2009).

The catchword in the national government Coalition Agreement from May 2007 is the administrative crowdedness. In the eyes of the municipalities provinces were to often complicating, duplicating, and standardizing instead of coordinating the local policies. The Coalition Agreement mentions explicitly the possibility to reduce the number of governmental layers involved in certain policy areas to a maximum of two. Provinces should do only those things they are required to do by law and to refrain from all of those policy areas in which other governmental layers have prime responsibility. The provinces replied (De Vries, 2009) that by law the responsibility to manage and govern developments within the province is left to the provincial government itself. Provinces are allowed to develop any plans they desire for the benefit of the inhabitants living in their territory. However, there are only a few specific tasks for which provinces have the prime responsibility by law. So the provinces are quickly accused by the municipalities of unwanted interference.

The agreements between the national government and the provinces have been incorporated into the so called Administrative Agreement (BANS) between the Minister of the Home Affairs and the Interprovincial Consultation organization (IPO). This Administrative Agreement contains the agreements between the national government and the provinces in the following areas:

- administrative and financial relationships;
- investments made by the provinces in the formulation and implementation of national goals;
- decentralization of functions and financial resources;
- deregulation and reduction of administrative burdens.

The core tasks of provinces lie in the spatial economic domain. The agreement confirms the role of the provinces as area director of integral regional spatial policy. Where the national government set up national frameworks in the areas of for instance land use, mobility and the economy, it is the provinces which, at the regional level, draws long-term development and the policy agenda.

## 6.2 Specific autonomy

First of all the content of provincial unsustainable development policies is strongly influenced by national themes, priorities and approaches. There are no obligations to closely follow national policies themes except when provinces are co-implementers of certain national policies. In the implementation of the first NEPPs there were strong financial ties. We noted already before the NEPPs primarily addressed the environmental dimension although with increasing relations with the economic dimension.

There is also a strong institutional component to this. From the beginning of modern environmental management and later sustainable development other ministries responsible for other policy areas got involved in their own environmental policy formulation. Many themes can be subsumed under sustainability, because this touches almost all areas of society and policy. Within the ministries many fields of sustainable policy are developed. Examples include sustainable energy policy with the Ministry of Economic Affairs, sustainable building policy with the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment and sustainable agriculture with the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. Each of these policy fields has developed its own ambitions, financial mechanisms, institutional arrangements, academic and societal counterparts, and international networks. These departments are mostly about the physical environment. The ministries in the social domain (Health, Welfare and Sports; Social Affairs and Employment; Education, Culture and Science) do not see sustainability as a driver for their policy development. If the social dimension of sustainable development gets attention it is aimed at developing countries, rather than developed countries.

KADO brings the different ministries together, but many themes are very international. The minister stated in her 2008 letter to Parliament the following: *We cannot solve the biggest problems (global biodiversity and climate) by focusing only on what we can do in the Netherlands. We also have responsibilities beyond our own borders, especially in view of the large quantity of raw materials and goods that the Netherlands imports. Like other rich nations, the Netherlands has a responsibility to combat further loss of biodiversity and to reduce its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. With other EU countries we will take steps to reduce our ecological footprint.*

Given the example set by national government the perception that sustainability is all about the environment remains is not only persistent on the national but also on the provincial level.

An unexpected trigger for sustainable policies at the provincial level was the sale of the provincial shares of the power companies Essent and Nuon because of the liberalisation of the energy market in Europe in 2009. Nine provinces received a total of EUR 13 billion. Already 3 billion of this money is earmarked for the construction of roads, dikes and OV-features. But many provinces also plan to use part of the money for renewable energy and sustainable innovation.

## 6.3 Cooperation between provinces

The provinces have worked together for the last twenty years on the implementation of environmental policy under the coordination of the IPO (Interprovincial Consultation) organisation. Joint activities in interprovinciaal context were undertaken on similar tasks in the more classic environmental tasks like permitting and enforcement. But in the implementation of the interprovincial Strategic

environmental agenda 2005-2008 (SMA), its motto, "running sustainability", indicates the new priority for persistent environmental problems.

The new key approach lies in cooperation in the region, on the basis of a regional vision and an integral approach. The environment is the added value in other policy areas such as traffic and transport, land-use planning and economy. On July 1, 2008, the new law on land-use planning (Wro) entered into force. With the new Wro, there is the necessary, also in the area of the environmental contribution to land-use plans. In the new public philosophy takes each layer is the responsibility for own policy (the principle of subsidiarity). In the new system, the regional environmental objectives, environmental ambitions and the responsibilities in this respect, much clearer. Passing of aims and problems to lower or higher authorities or to neighbouring communes or provinces is no longer on the agenda, but at the same time, ask the system to more concrete objectives and ambitions.

#### **6.4 Socio-economic conditions**

The content of provincial policies is influenced by the waves of growing awareness in the general public, bringing 'environment' and 'sustainable development' at the top of the list of issues the Dutch worry about.. This was the case in the beginning of the seventies when environmental management set of and also with the introduction of sustainable development end of eighties and beginning of the nineties.

In the last years media attention for sustainable development is relatively low. General media like newspapers and television pay lesser to the overall issue, although news about climate change, loss of biological diversity and depletion of the ozone layer will be published or broadcasted. In the past five years the Dutch business community has picked up corporate social responsibility fast in response to continued pressure from civil society as well as from internal pressure from their own work force or shareholders. In the KADO-approach this is also an area where government can set the good example. In the KADO specific attention has been paid to internal management and procurement policies of ministries. These is about environmentally friendly as well as socially sound products and services used by ministries, but also about heating, cooling, water use, construction material, etc. in the internal management of government buildings.

#### **6.5 Political context**

The programs of political parties generally mention a sustainable future. But there are big differences between the parties in the willingness to take practical action and invest in measures. So it is not surprising that the quality and scope of provincial programs depends highly on the political interest of the ruling provincial political coalition.

In the recent national elections sustainability development as issue was clearly overruled by economy. Although the former cabinet said in their response to the financial and economic crisis with the stimulus spending programme 'Working on the Future', that the government does not want to restore the economy to the way it was before, but rather to use the crisis to bringing equilibrium to an economy that was riddled with instability. But after the June 2010 elections the fear is that much of the economic recovery targeted could go at the expenses of the environment and that development will not be sustainable.

## **6.6 International factors**

The international UN documents and obligations did influence provincial policies indirectly through their translation in Dutch national policies. Themes with a strong global component like climate and biodiversity play a role on the provincial level. Policies are focussed on the consequences on the regional level, for instance climate adaptation, and causes on the regional level, for instance working on renewable energy. Some provinces played a role in implementing Agenda 21, mainly stimulating municipalities to draw up LA21' (Coenen, 1999).

EU policies were very influential on the provincial level as far as it concerned sectoral policies with strong regional consequences like Natura 2000 and the Water Framework Directive.

In general EU policies makes regions more important. But the question is if a Dutch province is always the right scale of a region on a European scale. Provinces cooperate in landsdelen, a cooperation between a number of provinces.



## 7. Conclusions

*How have Dutch subnational governments taken up the challenge to institutionalize sustainable development and design sustainable development policies?*

There is no obligation in Dutch law obligation to take on sustainable development. It is the provinces own political choice to decide on the need or opportunity to work on sustainability. There are no laws or regulations dealing with the issue of sustainable development that clearly regulates institutional which government layer is responsible for what or in terms of content what needs to be done and achieved. In line with the national development we see that plans and visions become less important in favour of working with projects on sustainability.

The basis for many provincial polices lay in their role as co-implementers of laws, particular in the more classic environmental management tasks, in voluntary agreements in terms of administrative agreements often on the level of the IPO and financial tiers in spatial and area polices. Provinces are also often co-implementers in sectoral policies like on water, infrastructure, regional economic development and innovation, energy, etc of other ministries that take o sustainable development During the last 25 years we see that provincial sustainable development policies went from convergence, much resembling each other, to more divergence. In the beginning themes and approaches from the national level policies were followed. But like national level this was strongly focussed on the ecological component of sustainable development. Although over time more and more the relation with the economic pillar was stressed.

The Dutch provinces are well placed to play a role in the physical environment given their role in environmental management, water management, infrastructure planning and regional economic development. Further they are closer to the population than national government. They are also larger and have more capacity in terms of resources and knowledge than most municipalities.

Given their classic core business in spatial planning, the area and spatial component of sustainable development is important for provinces. This strengthens the idea that sustainability is all about the environment. Provinces do have responsibilities given by law in the social domain. Examples are tasks with youth care and juvenile institutions. Dutch provinces have always developed policies in the social domain were don't have any responsibilities in the law housing, welfare, culture, health care, sports, and poverty. Provincial sustainable development is not mainstreamed in these social polices.

On the provincial level most authorities have some form of sustainability program. The 12 coordinators meet regularly as a group under the auspices of the IPO, the service organization of provincial authorities. These coordinators are placed in environmental departments.

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