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Chapter Five

Bridging a divide?

Local initiatives in a multi-level policy context

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This paper is based on a PhD research “Worlds Apart; The Interactions of Local Initiatives and Established Policies” (Buizer 2008). The PhD research contained three cases. This paper focuses on the two of these which involved forest policies.

Abstract

This paper presents two case studies about private actors aspiring to realize their innovative ideas on land management and design in two small areas in the Netherlands. One case involves an area that is to be partly forested in line with operative policies to establish a large urban green structure; the second case is an area that is part of a national ecological structure and already primarily consists of forest. However, in both areas various groups and organizations were seeking to implement alternative land uses and taking action to promote their ideas. It was clear from the start that the ways in which the initiators of these ideas gave meaning to the areas differed from the ideas enshrined in existing policies. The case studies show that there was ample innovative potential at the local level and that ideas do get implemented with considerable effort, due to factors such as personal zeal, perseverance, trust and empathy that developed in people “in the field.” However, an analysis of the cases also shows that there has been only limited discussion about the possible wider policy implications of these local innovations. Thus, the study revealed an asymmetry between local innovative potential and an apparent lack of responsiveness on the part of established policy. The study used the policy arrangements approach, consisting of 1) an analysis of the relationships between discourses, actor coalitions, rules and resources at the level of day-to-day interactions between the initiatives and established policy, and 2) an analysis of the relationship between these day-to-day interactions and an assumed more general, structural process of sub-politicization. The study concludes that there was a simultaneous occurrence of sub-politicization and depoliticization which both have significant impacts on the direction of green space policies and determining who can participate in them.

1. Introduction

Governments often express the wish to involve citizens and civil society organizations more closely in policy development. This applies to issues at the neighborhood level, such as how a street, a square or a park should be designed, and it also involves issues at a larger scale, such as who will manage green space in the future and how. Governments attach various labels to these ambitions, such as: “interactive policy development,” “co-responsibility” and “new division of roles between governments and society.” But what are their full implications? Various authors agree that the state of the art in interactive policy

making is still generally poor in terms of concrete influence on outcomes (Duyvendak and Krouwel 2001, Goverde and Lako 2005, Edelenbos and Klijn 2005, Cornips 2006a, 2006b). Others have emphasized that, rather than questioning the effects of interactive policy making, it is more important to question how all participants in interactive policy making processes—including politicians or officials—use it as a power instrument to further what they want. With good reason these authors emphasize that the question has an empirical nature and therefore there are a great many answers (Van den Arend 2007). This paper, although based on

empirical data and touching on aspects of power, approaches the issue from a different angle.

Rather than taking “interactive policy making” as a point of departure, this paper approaches the issue from the opposite direction, focusing on substantive innovative initiatives by private actors that target alternative management of green space. The first case, Biesland, concerns an agricultural enclave situated in the midst of towns and recreation areas in the Randstad, in the western region of the Netherlands. Part of the enclave is projected to become part of the Balij Bieslandse Forest. There is only one active farmer left in the area, and—together with researchers, civil servants and a few local residents—he worked out a concept of “nature-oriented” farming, expecting that this would convince policy makers to consider it as a viable alternative to expropriation of some of his farmland for afforestation. The Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (ANF) promised early in the process to finance half of the plans, provided that the other half would be financed by regional parties. The Minister also stated that the European Commission should approve payments to the farmer before further steps could be taken. Indeed, the initiative was supported financially by regional administrators and politicians. However, the process got stuck in Brussels and there was a danger of its progress being blocked in the region as well. In the second case—Loonsche Land—a theme park, the Efteling, and two nature conservation organizations reached an agreement about the development of a joint land use management plan. The initiative came about after years of conflict between these parties over the building of lodging and accommodations in an area of woods and fields bordering the Efteling theme park; this conflict led to legal cases that went right up to the Council of State. The new plan included the possibility of development in some parts of the area, as well as measures to enhance the nature value of the area as a whole. According to the local initiators, this would be achieved by cutting down forest and improving the conditions for the growth of heather, which is a threatened ecosystem in the Netherlands.

Both initiatives came primarily from private actors, although the government and a complex network of communication channels between citizens and/or civil society organizations, businesses, politicians, managers, researchers and civil servants also played a role in the ensuing processes. In the Biesland case, collaboration grew up via a chance encounter between a farmer, a volunteer and some researchers. In the Loonsche Land case, a private party and civil society organizations wanted to break an impasse when facing the prospect of yet another long-running legal battle. Both initiatives were subject to decision-making processes at different levels of government.

The paper addresses the confrontation between these initiatives and established policy. It pays specific attention to the circumstance that the initiators had to challenge established forest policies at some point in time. This study asks what factors influenced the development of both the policies and the initiatives and also looks at possible broader impacts of the local processes in a multi-level policy context.

The author’s own experiences in various contract-research projects laid the foundation for the PhD research which forms the basis of this paper. These projects were commissioned by government institutions (national government, province and municipality) and by a private company. In terms of methodology, the study consisted of various activities: participating in meetings, following the exchange of e-mails, frequenting kitchen table discussions, talking during occasional car rides and constantly communicating through phone calls. These elements all gave insights that allowed detailed descriptions of what had happened, of emotions accompanying key events in the process and of strategic thinking of actors involved. In one case in-depth interviews were included to complement field experiences.

In the following sections, section two explains the theoretical framework that was used. Section three sums up the results of the study. Conclusions in section four focus on the more general question of “what’s next.”

2. Policy arrangements approach

Introduction

The research used the policy arrangements approach developed by Arts, Van Tatenhove and Leroy (Arts and Leroy 2006, Van Tatenhove et al. 2000, Arts and van Tatenhove 2004, Arts and van Tatenhove 2006). A policy arrangement is defined as a temporary stabilization of the substance and organization of a policy domain (Arts et al. 2000). The policy arrangements approach aims to elucidate change and stability of policy arrangements by analyzing the interaction between everyday policy practices and the overarching structural processes of “political modernization” such as individualization and Europeanization. Every day policy practices are described with reference to four dimensions: discourse, which relates to content; actor coalitions, resources and rules of the game, which relate to organization or in other words process. The assumption is that these four dimensions can help clarify how change—or indeed stability—comes about in policy arrangements. In the research on

which this paper is based, the dimensions are used as “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1954), which means that they provide guidelines as to what to focus upon but do not impose narrow definitions.

Methodological challenge

The four dimensions pose a methodological challenge because the dimensions require that they be distinguished from each other. This is not a new problem in scientific theory and methodology. This can be explained with sociologist Anthony Giddens’ “Structuration Theory.” Structuration Theory has been an important inspiration for the policy arrangements approach, which involves a similar methodological challenge. Giddens (1984) claims that too many attempts to explain social change have focused on the behavior of actors or on the potential and limitations that structures such as rules and resources provide or impose. He asserts that these possibilities or impossibilities come about through an interaction between the two, and that there exists a “duality of actor and structure.” Neither the actors nor the structures are omnipotent. There has been serious debate as to the feasibility of researching the interaction between actor and structure: if they influence each other so much, how can we distinguish between them (Archer 1995, Stones 2001)? What becomes of the time dimension if actor and structure cannot be differentiated in terms of time (Archer 1995, 1996)? Here the relationships between the four dimensions are looked at from the point of view of Archer’s “analytical dualism” (Archer 1995, 1996). Analytical dualism means that actor and structure should be treated as distinguishable. According to Archer, it is only in such a way that the relationship can be studied at all. The policy arrangements approach elaborates the duality of actor and structure in two ways. It does so first by means of the four dimensions which together form everyday policy practices. Obviously, “actor coalitions” represent Giddens’ actor or agency. Discourse coalitions, rules and resources stand for Giddens’ structure. Together, these four dimensions shape a policy arrangement. Second, the policy arrangements approach elaborates the duality in terms of the interaction between these everyday policy practices and structural processes. In conclusion, the methodological challenge that follows from Giddens’ “duality of structure and agency” is inherent to the policy arrangements approach as well, but by looking at the four dimensions as related, but distinguishable entities (i.e. analytical dualism), this challenge can be met.

The following sections explain the four dimensions and then continue to specify and explain the assumed structural process, sub-politicization, that is the focus of this paper.

Four dimensions to understand day-to-day policy practices

The main message behind the concept of discourse is that social reality is not neutral; it is given meaning in many different ways. A commonly used example of this concept in discourse theory or discourse analysis is about a forest.

“A forest might be an object of intrinsic natural beauty, an obstacle to the building of a motorway, or a unique ecosystem, depending on the horizon of classificatory rules and differences that confers meaning to it.” (Howarth 2000: 9)

Discourses, also known as systems of social relations according to Howarth (2000:8), do not stand on their own. They are organized into historically formed rules, into the allocation of resources or into the way in which actors form coalitions. Therefore, rules, resources and actor coalitions form the other three dimensions of the policy arrangements approach in addition to discourse. These other three dimensions refer to the practices in which discourses are embedded. Actor coalitions are people or organizations which join forces around a certain discourse: in other words they form a “discourse coalition.” The concept of resources encompasses all resources necessary to achieve a goal, for example money, knowledge or number of members. Achieving the goal can be very difficult, if not impossible, if there is a shortage of resources or if a certain group lacks access to resources. The “rules of the game” are the formal and informal rules which influence the process and are used by the actors in all of their activities.

To look at discourse in relation to these three practices—setting rules, organizing resources and forming actor coalitions—bears resemblance to a Foucauldian type of discourse analysis. Authors who have been inspired by the French philosopher Michel Foucault argue that the analysis of discourse should not just be a linguistic affair but should also include the study of what they call discursive practices. Otherwise discourse analysis does not facilitate a deeper understanding of political action (Hook 2001, Hajer 1995). This understanding of discourse, not just as a linguistic concept but also as something institutional and practice-related, makes it possible to pursue an enquiry into the meanings, the hidden conceptual frameworks and the consequences of these for institutional practices, as well as into the way that these practices in turn influence the conceptual frameworks. (For an overview of approaches to discourse analysis and an application to global forest policies see Arts and Buizer, 2008.) Following these theoretical lines of thought and the accompanying concepts, the empirical data from the cases needed to be interpreted in terms of these questions: what discourse prevailed in the relevant forest policies at different levels and what discourse prevailed in the

initiatives? What practices, in terms of coalitions, rules and resources, went along with these?

Structural process: sub-politicization

The focal concepts which were used in the analysis and explained above do not provide answers with regard to the question of how day-to-day practices—as they are described by means of the four mentioned dimensions—relate to more general structural processes. There are a great many structural processes, such as individualization, globalization, commercialization, etc. Ulrich Beck's sub-politicization theory is a natural choice to uncover the factors influencing the development of both the policies and the initiatives and to understand the possible broader impacts of local private initiatives in a multi-level policy context. According to Beck, it is in the context of the present day risk society that sub-politicization takes place. In Beck's own words, this means that "There are even opportunities for courageous individuals to 'move mountains' in the nerve centers of development" (Beck 1994: 23). Centralized management takes a back seat, and consumers can wield an influence through their spending power, as they did for example during the discussion about dumping the Brent spar oil rig. Inspired by the media campaign of the environmental NGO Greenpeace, consumers decided to refrain from buying fuel from Shell, the owner of the oil rig, in order to press for onshore dismantling. Their boycott was successful: Shell decided to bring the oil rig to land. Beck argues that these are signs of sub-politicization: Greenpeace and the consumers unveil the lack of power and legitimization of the prevailing political order and start to exert direct participation in political decision-making (Beck 1996, 1997). Other observers speak of political displacement or dispersion (Engelen and Sie Dhian Ho 2004). The formal representative system that has long been established in the Netherlands is no longer the only political arena; instead, political ideas have begun to emerge from many other places as well. This paper examines the two cases in the light of this posited political development and asks this question: how exactly do the cases exemplify sub-politicization?

In short, the main aim of the research is to expand understanding of innovative, local initiatives by private actors and their interactions with established policies. In this paper the more specific question is how two local initiatives to effect change in land management and design interacted with operative mainstream forest policies and with what results, both in the two areas as well as in a broader context.

3. The main results

Although there were differences, there turned out to be several striking similarities between the cases. The most salient of these similarities is the way that the cases reveal the great potential for innovation among private parties. Getting their ideas onto the agenda and ensuring they were carried through required a lot of stamina, creativity and adaptability. Without these driving forces, it would not have been possible to obtain the necessary authorization and financing. In contrast to the question often posed within government as to how to stimulate support among citizens for policy implementation, these examples suggest that the real issue is how to involve governments in realizing the wishes of coalitions of private parties.

The following summarizes the results of the study organized by the following themes:

1. Interactions between initiatives and established policy (in terms of relationships between discourse, actor coalitions, resources and rules of the game)
2. Sub-politicization and depoliticization
3. Perseverance, trust, empathy and other social-relational factors

Interactions between initiatives and established policy (in terms of relationships between discourse, actor coalitions, resources and rules of the game)

Although in different ways, both initiatives stemmed from the wish to approach the design and management of a public space in a manner that was not possible within the terms of existing policy. Both cases also had a history of years of unresolved conflict. In the Biesland case, there was an impasse over the conversion of part of a polder—a low-lying piece of land in which water levels are artificially managed to suit agricultural land use—into forest, a plan which formed part of broader greenstructure plans (Randstad greenstructure and Green Blue Streamer). The farmer and a nature conservation volunteer believed that they could create a natural environment that would be attractive to city-dwellers and did not see the need to buy up agricultural land for forest development. In the Loonsche land case, there was a conflict between the Efteling and nature conservation organizations over the building of holiday accommodations. A legal battle was fought right up to the Council of State, contesting the harmful impact of the building plans and the accompanying compensation rights and obligations. In other words, these initiatives

did not come about in a policy vacuum, but in reaction to a policy.

When considering the cases from the perspective of the relationships between discourse, actor coalitions, resources and rules of the game, a number of features become clear. First, there was a lot of potential in terms of discourses and coalitions, with new coalitions being formed and various discourses co-existing. In other words, it was a discursive space, fostered by new coalitions of both non-government and government actors. The divisions did not necessarily exist directly between government and non-government. In fact, the study has revealed the need for greater subtlety in differentiating between them. Civil servants who are involved in the field were particularly active in their efforts to promote these initiatives, even outside of working hours. Their dual role was often very fruitful.

In Biesland, three discourses were very important. The well established nature-oriented or “green structure” discourse and the strong internal market discourse turned out to reinforce each other with regard to who would, and who would not, be perceived as capable of managing nature. Alongside these two, a new approach grew up in which the qualities of the area were central and which managed to combine the priorities of agriculture, nature conservation and access to the area for city-dwellers. In this context, and in defiance of the fear of unfair competition which was firmly embedded in the European policies, the farmer could be paid for his nature conservation activities, such as a closed nutrient cycle. Discourse and coalitions were therefore flexible and could co-exist or even overlap each other.

The flexibility of the rules of the game and resources was much more limited, however. In order to keep the process moving, the content of the initiatives was partially adapted to comply with existing rules. Biesland provides a clear example of this: in the final EU directive approving implementation of the measures, a number of provisions were included which ensured that the initiative broadly tied in with established policy. Similarly, in the Loonsche Land case, initial approaches thought in terms of the area as a whole and of combining various different interests. These approaches were sacrificed to thinking in terms of “compensatory hectares.” This compensation discourse required that for every square meter of trees of a certain age that was felled, 1.66 square meters of trees would need to be newly planted. While this may be perceived as a strong policy in favor of a weak sector, it nonetheless created situations in which there was little motivation to think from the perspective at the other side of the table or to look for alternatives which would perhaps be preferred by both developers and nature organizations, for example achieving a

higher nature value together with building and development activities. The push to translate results into compensatory hectares facilitated approval of the initiative by policymakers, but it also made it more difficult to encourage a new way of thinking. As a result, some of the essential elements of the original idea did not gain a foothold, and there remained an asymmetry between the flexibility of discourses and actor coalitions and the inflexibility of resources and rules of the game. In the end, the existing distribution of resources and the operative rules of the game continued to be geared to buy up land to give it to nature organizations (in Biesland), and to compensate nature values in a way that had led to lengthy legal procedures and not to proactive collaboration between developers and nature organizations (in the Loonsche Land). The main point here is that this asymmetry significantly reduces the chances of the initiatives being able to prove their worth in a wider context, even though the perseverance, efforts and courage of the initiators has enabled them to achieve their goals within their own areas.

Sub-politicization and depoliticization

The question now arises as to what type of politicization is occurring in these examples. Obviously, Biesland and Loonsche Land are interesting cases in terms of Beck’s theory of sub-politicization. Firstly, it is clear from the analysis of the relationships between discourse, actor coalitions, resources and rules of the game that new coalitions of actors create a new discursive space in which they can develop and implement their ideas. This discursive space mainly comes into being in places outside the formal representative system. This does not mean, however, that there is no role for the municipal council or even for parliament: sometimes these institutions can provide just the right support at a crucial juncture. Yet the ideas for these initiatives were largely developed outside of these formal political arenas; they evolved around a farm kitchen table in Biesland or in a workshop on the golf course at the Efteling. What is most striking about these cases is the way people organized themselves, formed new coalitions and developed a new language in order to gain influence over land use and management of the areas.

However, these cases also demonstrate a tendency that would seem to run counter to the trend towards sub-politicization, namely “depoliticization.” The core ideas in these initiatives—the possibilities for farmers to manage nature in new ways in Biesland or opportunities to combine holiday accommodation with nature conservation in the Loonsche Land—were often sidelined by

the conditions prevailing in the system. As a result, procedural detail set the tone for the process.

There was a simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion. The process was inclusive in the sense that the initiatives, even if in modified form, did get a chance to be implemented at local level and show their value; it was exclusive in the sense that the ways in which the initiatives intended to bridge the constraining distinctions that were part of mainstream policies, such as the distinction between nature and forests on the one hand and agriculture on the other hand, between city and countryside, and between nature and constructions projects, were not debated. Based on this observation, it is possible to further refine the sub-politicization theory. The fundamental political implications of the issues at stake were not made explicit, and non-governmental actors had no access to joint decision-making—or even simple discussion—about the issues. The same problem can be seen in the way that legal jargon gradually became dominant as the content of the initiatives shifted in the direction of the established arrangement. There was also a sustained decrease in face-to-face contact between actors. These depoliticization mechanisms led to experiences loaded with negative emotions among the initiators and their supporters, who operated at a distance from the procedures concerned.

Perseverance, trust, empathy and other social-relational factors

The fact that the initiatives did bear fruit, in spite of all obstacles and even though the content was partially adapted to established policy, has a lot to do with a dimension that has not yet been explicitly mentioned here: social relations. Perseverance, trust and empathy may be viewed as aspects or features of the actor dimension, but these social-relational factors deserve special attention. The trust nurtured through the actual contact between people who developed a feeling for a place during their time in the field made it possible to build up long-term relationships. The cases demonstrate various situations in which personal contact on the basis of mutual trust survived quite difficult confrontations. Furthermore, trust grew in the course of intensive collaboration. Stamina, skills in dealing with conflicts, and empathy fostered by face-to-face contact made it easier for those involved to persevere and continue the process to completion. Personal friendships developed, and participants were inspired to continue forward because they were sharing pleasures, disappointments, the feeling of powerlessness and indeed of the sense of combined power.

However, as soon as the chances of implementation of the initiative or emergence of space for policy innovation grew, the discussions

shifted to the level of legal and financial-technical issues, which were very different from what had been important in the field. There was less face-to-face contact too, notwithstanding that the importance of personal contact was repeatedly stressed. In the course of the process, it took more and more creativity on the part of the initiators to find ways of applying their own rules of the game about contact with other actors the field.

Distance between civil servants and people in the field was a particularly significant factor. For example, major final decisions were usually taken by civil servants who did not know the situation in the field, sometimes in locations as far away as Brussels. Furthermore, civil servants regularly change jobs in policymaking ministries. This had drastic implications for the Biesland case since there was frequently little time to build up trust between governmental and non-governmental actors. In contrast, civil servants who did stay in one post throughout the process contributed a great deal to the continuity of efforts: they took on the initial ideas, helped to develop them further and stood their ground, sometimes against their own colleagues. Where there was contact with other actors, these relationships bore fruit in the form of taking the initiatives further. The frequent changing of the guard was very frustrating for the initiators at times, because they repeatedly had to invest in new relationships. Furthermore, a “not invented here” attitude—where actors disclaim ownership of a process if they did not initiate it—hindered the transfer of knowledge about the idea within the organization. The current policy of frequent changes of job is problematic if governments want to ensure that initiatives for policy innovation can come from non-governmental sources as well as from the government.

Clearly the social-relational factors in relation to operative rules of the game need to be considered in order to reach a better understanding of policy innovation.

4. Conclusion

In the field of forest and nature conservation, it is essential that researchers look for local initiatives that are not yet bogged down by established policy. The research presented here suggests that there seems to be plenty of potential for local initiatives, but that the translation of that potential into public discussion of possible improvements to government policy seems to lag behind. In the specific cases studied here, alternative options to existing forest policies were proposed; these were options which could possibly have engaged a wider range of actors to take responsibility for design and management of green space. However, they did not become a topic of wider political debate.

This created a situation where discursive space was at odds with immovability of rules and resources and discourse embedded in these. In this sense not only sub-politicization but also depoliticization were present. This study sheds some light on why this is so. For the time being however, the space for policy innovation is to be found in the discursive space that is created by new actor coalitions. The role of social relational factors such as empathy, perseverance and trust, and also feelings of identity and “not invented here” sentiments should get attention, in addition to the role of discourse, actor coalitions, rules and resources.

This paper does not provide answers with regard to how to deal with asymmetries such as the ones presented here. However, it presents several key issues and questions that should be part of discussions about them. Some of these questions are very concrete: what are the consequences of the distance from the field and the habit of frequently transferring civil servants from one post to another? Does this distance contribute to a lack of political discussion over the implications of a local initiative for existing policy? If trust, empathy and perseverance emerge chiefly from situations in which there is personal contact, what are the implications for a policy of remote control? In view of the multi-level context in which local initiatives mostly come about, how can European regulations, with their own specific embedded discourse, substantially be debated at local level without procedural detail setting the tone? Other questions are more general: if a shift in the content of a local initiative towards established policy is a condition for realizing the initiative, is that desirable? How can the considerable local potential for innovation observed during this study generate wider policy implications? What could that mean for the contents of forest policies? And importantly, how can politicized discussion about the contents of policies which are initiated from below be connected to the formal representative system?

These issues deserve to be addressed and discussed more often by researchers, policymakers and practitioners in order to bridge the divide between established policy and the wealth of ideas generated by local private parties.

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