The challenge of planned urbanisation. Urbanisation and national urbanisation policy in the Netherlands in a northwest-European perspective

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Citation for published version (APA):
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

"The Netherlands is decidedly the most planned country among the European nations. Only a few democracies of the world can match the planning apparatus of the Dutch government. Such a state of affairs is a product of circumstances created by harsh environmental constraints, a challenging history, conflicting socio-cultural forces, hard economic necessities, and the size of the country."

(Dutt & Costa, 1985, p. 1)

1.1 The Netherlands: a planner’s paradise?

Many foreign visitors of the Netherlands are amazed about how planned the country appears to be. At first sight, the country seems to be dominated by straight lines, agricultural land divided in rectangles with mathematic precision, sharp contrasts between city and countryside, and houses neatly arranged in rows, blocks and neighbourhoods. The Dutch themselves seem to be proud of this image of the Netherlands as a planned country. A popular proverb even states that ‘God created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands’. This proverb mostly relates to the struggle against the sea and the land reclamation for which the Netherlands are known worldwide. The early roots of Dutch planning history also derived from its position on the crossroads of Europe, functioning as the main entrance to continental Europe since the 16th century, and the fact that the Netherlands is a fairly small country with, especially in its western part, a high population density (Dutt & Costa, 1985; Faludi & Van der Valk, 1994; Needham, 1989).

While some tourists might be impressed and others frightened by such a high degree of planned development, planning researchers seem to be united in their praise for Dutch physical planning. The citation of Dutt & Costa (1985) at the start of this chapter was illustrative for a more general admiration from foreign observers of Dutch planning. Peter Hall (1977) included the Randstad, the ring of cities in the West of the Netherlands, in his analysis of ‘world cities’. In his case study on the Randstad, Hall is clearly impressed by the Dutch physical planning policy, more specifically the national urbanisation policy. This policy was built up around the concepts Randstad and Green Heart, the latter being the relatively green and open area enclosed by the Randstad ring of cities. Burke (1966) studied the way in which the Dutch national planners tried to meet the increasing space demands of a growing population and a flourishing economy while safeguarding sufficient space for nature and recreation areas. His comparison of various local, regional and national government initiatives to influence the spatial development, though critical at some points, presented the Netherlands as hardly less than a ‘planner’s paradise’.

This foreign admiration for Dutch planning in general, and national physical planning in particular, is certainly understandable when the ambition level of the national planners is considered. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the Dutch National Physical Planning Agency has produced a series of national reports that were supposed to bring about significant changes in the future spatial development of the Netherlands. In these reports, the planners were far from modest: they aimed at national, regional and local government influence on the settlement structure, the infrastructure, regional and national economic development, and the protection of various natural resources. All this
was to be realised in a coordinated way, in one comprehensive physical planning policy. In the 1960s and 1970s, the National Reports on Physical Planning were even more or less seen as ‘blueprints’ of the future spatial design of the Netherlands. Later, this was considered to be not only too ambitious, but also no longer wanted. The idea that Dutch society could be ‘re-created’ through social policy lost its appeal, citizen participation in the planning process increased and the notion of ‘blueprint planning’ was left behind. However, looking at the content of the national plans produced since the 1970s, not so much seems to have changed in these high ambitions after all. Underlining its lasting ambitions to influence the spatial development of the Netherlands, the National Physical Planning Agency recently published a brochure in which the development of Dutch physical planning throughout the 20th century and the future perspectives were summarised (Ministerie VROM, 2000). The list of ‘basic principles of future spatial policy’ that was later included in the Fifth Report of Physical Planning (2001) is impressive:

- ‘Vibrant and complete cities’: cities are considered as a core element in the further socio-economic development of the Netherlands and should be integrated in regional, national and international networks to a higher extent;
- ‘A robust countryside’: the countryside as an area to live, work and recreate, in which alternative income sources are offered to compensate for the reduction of agricultural employment;
- ‘Sustainable economy and renewable energy’: encouraging a further spatio-economic development in which economic growth is realised without increasing the burdens on the environment.
- ‘Mobility and infrastructure’: aiming for a balance between infrastructure, environment and maintaining the prominent position of the Netherlands in international transport.
- ‘Sustainable mainports’: the further development of Schiphol airport and Rotterdam seaport should be realised while taking account of environmental effects.
- ‘Water management’: ‘(...) making use of natural water systems instead of fighting their disadvantages’ (Ministerie VROM, 2000, p. 31)

All these targets are to be coordinated in one integrated policy approach of the future spatial development of the Netherlands, in which the Fifth Report of Physical Planning is supposed to function as the overarching policy document for the various policy fields that are involved.

Apart from the Department of Housing, Physical Planning and Environment, also the Departments of Transport, Agriculture, Economic Affairs, Education, Social Affairs and Internal Affairs are to some extent involved in parts of the above policy agenda. To make political life for the national planners even more complicated, also within their own department there are competing interests between the planners and the sectors for housing and environmental policy. Once the national planners have managed to reach a compromise that satisfies all these parties, they still have to convince regional and local government levels, as well as various lobby groups, that their approach is the most useful one. Can one plan really have this coordinating capacity? If this would be the case, the Netherlands would truly be a ‘planner’s paradise’.

Needham (1989) indicates that it is probably not so much the plan itself that brings about a coordinated Dutch physical planning strategy, but much more the exceptional talents of the Dutch to reach compromises. Foreign planning researchers are often amazed about the
contradiction between the high ambition level of the formal planning system, with its (at first sight) clear hierarchy of national, regional and local plans, and the limited powers to enforce the realisation of these ambitions. The Dutch solution to this problem is "(...) an extensive and fine-meshed network of co-ordination and consultation between the physical planning at the various levels and between the physical and sector planning (Needham, 1989, p. 13).

Be this as it may, even if this high degree of coordination could be reached through negotiations, the success of national physical planning still stands or falls with the extent to which the effects of economic, socio-cultural and demographic trends encourage or frustrate the desired future spatial development of the Netherlands. Unfortunately, this is an aspect of the discussion on the effectiveness of physical planning in which contributions of Dutch (and largely also foreign) planning scientists have in recent years been as good as absent.

1.2 The spatial future of the Netherlands: a societal, political and scientific debate

The self-esteem of most Dutch planners, both in planning practice and in planning science, has surely not always been as high as it seems to be in recent years. In the early 1980s, Dutch physical planning was thought to be in crisis. Several planning scientists were highly critical about the lack of effectiveness of the Dutch physical planning policy. Glasbergen and Simonis (1979) analysed the feasibility of several elements of the Dutch national physical planning policy: did the results of national physical planning policy correspond with the initial goals, and could the plans be realised with the means available? Their conclusions cast heavy doubts on the extent to which Dutch national physical planning was realistic in its goals and intentions. Some years later, Nozeman (1986) reached quite negative conclusions as well in his study of the contribution of recent new housing projects in the Utrecht region to the realisation of national urbanisation policy targets. Faludi & De Ruijter (1985), in their essay 'No match to the present crisis?', blamed Dutch planning for 'the absence of a coherent body of planning thought', the counterproductive effects of 'disparate traditions' and the 'institutional fragmentation' that these traditions produced. This critical view on Dutch physical planning was a reflection of a crisis of confidence in the Dutch planning community. In advisory documents of that time physical planning policy was described as having no problem-solving capacity, no grip on other fields of policy and no identity. The answer proposed by planning scientists and implemented by the National Physical Planning Agency was a more 'execution-oriented' approach. The Fourth Report was supposed to contain statements not only on policy principles, but also which actions should be taken to realise them (Galle, 1992).

Turning to the early 1990s, a revolution seemed to have taken place in the debate on Dutch national physical planning. The dominant tone changed from pessimistic to highly optimistic. A crucial role in this change was played by the introduction and enthusiastic reception of the concept of 'planning doctrine'. Faludi & Van der Valk (1990) described the policy of concentrated deconcentration, especially the realisation of the growth centres, as a success story based on the gradual development of a so-called planning doctrine. This can be described as an interrelated whole of discussions and actions to reach a desired spatial arrangement of an area. The interpretation of the policy of concentrated deconcentration as a success story is especially remarkable because the same Faludi was still highly critical of Dutch physical planning policy in general only five
years earlier. The concept of concentrated deconcentration, an attempt to prevent urban sprawl by offering large-scale new housing areas on a selection of sub-urban locations called ‘growth centres’, formed the core element of this policy from the 1960s until the mid-1980s. Shortly afterwards, Faludi & Van der Valk (1994) published their analysis of the evolution of Dutch physical planning in the twentieth century with the daring title ‘Rule and Order’. The first sentence of the book’s preface leaves little room for doubt about the positive opinion of the authors: “This book is about an art in which the Netherlands excels: strategic planning.” (p. xiii). In both books, the authors argue that Dutch physical planning has gradually developed a consistent and effective apparatus to influence the spatial design of the Netherlands. Apparently, contrary to the argument of Faludi and De Ruijter (1985), there was a ‘coherent body of planning thought’ in the Netherlands after all. Dieleman et al (1999) followed this line of thought and argued that Dutch physical planning policy, especially national urbanisation policy, has already been based on the same spatial design principles for more than three decades: compact urban development, containment of suburban expansion and the spatial concepts of the Green Heart and – to a lesser extent- the Randstad that were already introduced earlier (section 1.1).

Nevertheless, criticism on Dutch planning arose once more towards the end of the 1990s. In the popular media, much criticism could be heard on the current compact city policy, and most of all on its housing component: the VINEX locations. These large-scale locations for new housing were claimed to become too monotonous, too mono-functional and too large-scale before they were even completed. Remarkably, an evaluation of the proceedings of the compact city policy was undertaken before the first VINEX houses were constructed (Needham et al, 1994). Although the evaluators showed their admiration for the accomplishment of the national planners to reach an agreement with all parties involved on the realisation of VINEX-locations, they also gave some clear warning signs. In their view, the realisation of the VINEX locations happened too slow, the provision of so many houses in such a short period could cause problems on the housing market, and the realisation of the VINEX programme could be troubled by changes in the land market under changing economic conditions. The policy makers themselves seemed to be dissatisfied with the preliminary results of their compact city policy as well. In 1999, a merciless evaluation of the National Physical Planning Agency appeared, dealing with the results of its own national physical planning policy. A confrontation of planning goals and the preliminary outcomes led to various negative scores, especially with respect to the realisation of building projects on the planned locations and building restrictions on other locations (Ministerie VROM, 1999). Shortly afterwards, a working group of the Dutch parliament published a highly critical report on recent development of Dutch planning policy. The main tendency of this report was that there was a huge gap between the goals and the results of physical planning policy. This gap was, amongst other reasons, due to the habit of renegotiating restrictions on all government levels and the long period between the acceptance of a plan on the national level and the execution on the local level (Werkgroep Vijfde Nota, 2000). Apparently, despite the high hopes of the Fourth Report as being a much more ‘execution-oriented’ document (Galle, 1992), this new approach has not produced much better results than before.

Meanwhile, the Dutch national government seemed to undermine its own physical planning goals. Since the new ‘purple coalition’ (a combination of socialist and liberal-democratic parties) came to power, a new entrepreneurial spirit has apparently invaded the Netherlands. Many large-scale investments have been announced, mainly argued as
necessary to retain or improve the Dutch position in the international economic competition. Furthermore, investments in spatial development seemed to be ever more adapted to the demands of citizens and companies. Many of these large-scale investments produced spatial effects contrary to the compact city policy. Only by some, the ‘necessity’ and inevitability of all these investments was questioned:

"The plans are covered with a mist of 'faits accomplis', 'structural necessities' and 'pressure for development and adaptation'. One million one-family houses should be produced because people 'happen to' want to live suburban. The necessity of new highways is, apparently, beyond dispute. Also, it 'happens to be' unavoidable that companies settle (...) along highways and away from public transport connections" (Hajer & Halsema, 1997, p.13; translation by author).

In this respect, another example worth noting is the campaign of 'Milieudefensie', a non-governmental organisation that is arguing for more restrictions to the loss of agricultural, natural and recreation areas to new extensions of the built environment. This campaign, revolving around the catchy slogan 'Trek de groene grens' ('draw the green border') caught quite some attention in the debate towards the issuing of the Fifth Report (Zagema, 1999).

However, these critical accounts of the recent development of Dutch physical planning have remained exceptions in the recent debate on the further spatial development of the Netherlands. As far as there have recently been critical comments on recent and future physical planning policy, these comments mostly came from politicians, lobby groups and journalists. One might wonder what happened to the scientific planners in this debate. Since the 1980s, when several scientific planners demonstrated their concerns about the effectiveness of physical planning policy, Dutch planning scientists seem to have become more concerned with the planning process before the plan is published, than with the process from plan to realisation. The central issue of concern for most Dutch planning researchers seems to have become how to reach consensus between all parties involved in the process towards a plan. What happens with this plan once it is completed and politically accepted is largely ignored. Apparently, most planning scientists are either not interested in this part of the planning process or they assume that once all parties involved have agreed on a plan, it will be realised without further obstacles. Three exceptions to this rule are worth noting. First, Wissink (2000) put the influence of a planning doctrine on the planning process in perspective. While the planning doctrine approach is valuable in demonstrating how the goals of physical planning policy are 'socially constructed' in a negotiation process, it might view the planning process too much from the position of the professional planners and be focused too much on how these professional planners can maintain their position in the (Dutch) planning debate. Second, looking at the 'match' between policy intentions and outcomes, Martens (2000) clearly demonstrated the failure of national spatial mobility policy in the 1990s, especially the policy on the location of firms. Third, De Klerk (2001) argued for tighter connections between land use planning and empirical research of dynamics in socio-spatial configurations.

Dutch urban, regional and economic geographers are specialised in this type of research, so it is not surprising that some of them have recently taken a more critical position towards the results of physical planning in their country. Musterd and Ostendorf (1996), for example, focused on the two core concepts of national urbanisation policy since the 1960s. They argue that concentrated deconcentration was only partially successful. The success was that the planned amount of houses was produced on the planned locations:
the growth centres. Moreover, people actually moved to these houses because they met their housing demands to a high extent. However, the national planners did not manage to prevent that meanwhile, sub-urban growth outside the growth centres continued. Moreover, because economic growth in the growth centres was far less than population growth, the policy produced large-scale commuting between growth centres and the large city agglomerations, which led to severe congestion problems. While Musterd and Ostendorf could not evaluate the outcome of compact city policy yet, they indicated that it would probably not be successful because the gap between policy intentions and popular housing demands had become too wide in this policy. Bontje and Ostendorf (1999) worked out this argument in more detail, in their analysis of the 'match' between policy intentions and outcomes and the degree to which the national planning goals meet societal and individual space demands. In addition, Dieleman et al (1999), mentioned earlier as being quite positive on the development of Dutch national urbanisation policy in general, still expressed serious doubts about the degree of realism of compact city policy, especially with regard to its daily mobility goals.

New fuel to the debate was provided when the first concept version of the Fifth Report on physical planning was finally published (Ministerie VROM, 2001). In this report, the government’s plans for the spatial development of the Netherlands until 2030 were outlined. The concept-Fifth Report introduced many policy changes. Apparently, the dissatisfaction of the national planners with the compact city policy was such that they wanted to forget about it as soon as possible. The new strategic planning concept for national urbanisation policy was ‘urban networks’, a concept that meant a clean break with all former compact building intentions. In fact, extensions of the built-up areas were allowed to take place all over the country. ‘Contours’ were introduced as a new instrument to limit further urban sprawl, but instead of selecting locations where building was to be concentrated (like in the concentrated deconcentration policy and the compact city policy), every municipality could now draw its own contour within which new construction would be allowed. Some areas received extra protection against urban sprawl: they were destined to become ‘national landscapes’. However, the way in which these areas were to be kept as ‘open’ and ‘green’ as possible was not made very clear. More in general, the first concept version of the Fifth Report produced many questions on how the ambitious national policy intentions were to be realised on the regional and local level. While the national planners announced an impressive package of goals and intentions, they also announced that most of these goals and intentions should be realised by the provinces and municipalities. Therefore, while the Fifth Report still expressed a high ambition level of the Dutch government to influence the future spatial design of the Netherlands, this was hardly accompanied by concrete measures or instruments that justify this high ambition level.

1.3 Research questions

This study is about the degree to which Dutch physical planning has been effective in the recent past and what we can expect of this policy in the near future. Because physical planning policy as a whole is a too broad field to analyse in terms of effectiveness, the choice has been made to limit this study to national urbanisation policy, which has always been a core element of national physical planning policy. Two aspects of this policy are studied in more detail: the policy on population distribution, and the policy on the distribution of activities.
This, of course, immediately raises the question what is meant with the effectiveness of a policy. In planning science, the degree of effectiveness is often measured in terms of 'to what extent did plans on a higher government level influence plans on a lower government level' (Bukkems, 1989). Although this is certainly an important precondition for an effective application of, for example, national policies on the regional and local level, it does not guarantee that the goals of the national plans are eventually reached. When all parties involved have agreed on a planning strategy but no concrete actions are taken afterwards, the policy can certainly not be considered effective (Glasbergen & Simonis, 1979; Nozeman, 1986). An alternative view on planning success raises the question 'imagine what would have happened without planning'. This view has recently been very dominant in Dutch planning science. Several academic planners and geographers suggest that if the West of the Netherlands had not been consequently targeted with strategic spatial concepts such as Green Heart and Randstad, most of the open space would have been lost to urban sprawl (Faludi & Van der Valk, 1994; Dieleman et al, 1999). The large problem is of course that this suggestion cannot be tested in any way since we do not know what would have happened without planning. It is certainly possible and imaginable that the West of the Netherlands, or the Netherlands as a whole, would have seen much more urban sprawl without national urbanisation policy, but this is only one of the possible developments that could have taken place.

Instead, in this study, a (national) plan is considered effective when the goals set out in the plan are really reached. The main criterion of effectiveness, therefore, is the match between policy goals and policy results. From the national documents on urbanisation policy since the 1960s, several concrete policy goals regarding population distribution and functional relations within urban regions can be derived. Statements have been made on the desired population development of categories of municipalities and/or regions. Some categories of municipalities and regions were supposed to realise a significant population growth, while other categories of municipalities and regions had to limit their further growth as much as possible. Also, the national plans contained various attempts to influence the daily mobility relations within and between functional urban regions. The development of daily mobility was mostly targeted through a set of measures to change the distribution of activities within functional urban regions. An example of this type of measures is the 'ABC-location policy' with which the national planners promoted the location of firms near railway stations and intersections of railways and highways. In some cases, these population distribution and daily mobility goals were explicitly mentioned in the national plans; in others, the goals were more implicit (more in the form of 'intentions' than of concrete goals). However clear or vague the eventual policy goals may have been, this study starts from the assumption that it is possible to evaluate the degree of success of Dutch national urbanisation policy through a confrontation of the policy goals and intentions of this policy with the concrete dynamics in population distribution and daily mobility.

The main research questions of this study are:

1. To what extent did Dutch national urbanisation policy influence the most recent developments in Dutch population distribution?
2. To what extent did Dutch national urbanisation policy influence the most recent developments in Dutch daily mobility patterns?
3 To what extent are the recent developments in population distribution and the influence of national urbanisation policy on these developments in the Netherlands different from the experiences of other Northwest-European countries?

The answer to these questions is sought with the help of a theoretical framework in which the disciplines of urban and economic geography and physical planning meet. On the one hand, in urban and economic geography, explanations of the dynamics in population and activity distribution tend to underestimate the possible role of welfare state policy in general, and physical planning policy in particular. On the other hand, planning theory might be too optimistic about the degree to which physical planning can really produce changes in spatial development and largely ignores the role of economic, socio-cultural and demographic changes in this respect.

1.4 Structure of the book

In the following three chapters, the theoretical framework of this study is worked out in more detail. In Chapter 2 a selection of the most influential theories on the development of population distribution and the factors contributing to this development is presented. Economic growth and economic restructuring have often been singled out as the most important explanatory factors for population distribution dynamics. In addition, several social scientists have pointed at the influence of recent dramatic changes in the socio-cultural and demographic structure of the population in Northwest-Europe. The possible influence of various kinds of welfare state policy, among which physical planning, has so far been largely absent from this theoretical debate.

In Chapter 3 the focus is shifted from the distribution of population to the distribution of activities and the urban form this has produced over time. Throughout the twentieth century, many attempts have been made to express the development of cities and urban regions in models and concepts. A clear tendency in these models and concepts was to consider the phenomenon of urbanisation on a regional scale to an increasing extent. Gradually, the geographic scale of these regions became larger and larger. The extent to which the large-scale concepts that dominated the most recent urbanisation debates like ‘urban fields’ and ‘urban networks’ still refer to the daily life of the people that are supposed to live, work and recreate in these areas is doubtful.

In Chapter 4, the debate on the possible role of physical planning in general, and national urbanisation policy in particular, in the development of the distribution of population and activities in the Netherlands and Northwest-Europe is discussed. Especially in the period after World War II, most Northwest-European countries have launched national policy initiatives to influence the further spatial development of their territory. As almost all of these countries are heavily urbanised, it comes as no surprise that national urbanisation policy formed a core element of their national physical planning policies. The attempts to influence the dynamics of population and activity distribution in Northwest-Europe varied from country to country, but two approaches were applied in as good as all countries in some form. The first is the attempt to prevent urban sprawl by building large-scale new housing areas in a selection of locations, while imposing restrictions on building elsewhere; the second is the concentration of new housing and employment in and around large and medium-sized cities, again combined with building restrictions elsewhere. Strategic spatial concepts such as ‘concentrated deconcentration’ and the ‘compact city’ played an important role in the development of these policies. However, in the recent
theoretical development of planning science, the role of these concepts and other means to produce an effective planning policy has received most attention, while the degree to which such a consensus resulted in concrete changes in spatial reality was largely ignored (see also section 1.2).

In Chapter 5, the methods of empirical analysis used to answer the research questions mentioned in section 1.3 are discussed. Chapter 6 contains an analysis of the influence of national urbanisation policy on the development of population distribution in the Netherlands. This policy influence is analysed in two ways: first, by confronting the goals and intentions of national urbanisation policy with the actual dynamics in population distribution; second, by looking at the degree to which the goals and intentions of national urbanisation policy were feasible (see also Bontje & Ostendorf, 1999). In addition, the discussion on the future spatial development of the Netherlands during the process towards the publication of the Fifth Report on Physical Planning is shortly summarised and discussed.

Chapter 7 is a collection of three case studies on the effectiveness of national urbanisation policy elsewhere in Northwest-Europe. The case studies are Switzerland, West-Sweden and Northern England. These cases are compared to the Netherlands to explore to what extent Dutch national urbanisation policy has really been as unique in its effects on the distribution of population as Dutch and foreign planning researchers often seem to think. The comparison of the Netherlands with the three international cases also serves to get more insight in the possibilities to influence the distribution of population through national urbanisation policy in general (Bontje, 2001).

In Chapter 8, the focus is once again shifted from population distribution to activity distribution. The recent development of daily mobility patterns is used as an indicator for changes in the distribution of activities on the scale level of functional urban regions. Through such an analysis, recent theoretical assumptions of a considerable scale enlargement of daily life in the Netherlands could be tested. Concepts like the 'urban field' and 'polynucleated urban regions' (discussed in Chapter 3) have recently become popular among Dutch academic geographers and planners as well as among Dutch national and regional professional planners. The results of the daily mobility analysis give reason for serious doubts about the relevance of these large-scale urban regions for the daily 'activity space' of average Dutch people (see also Bontje, 2000). Also, the data on daily mobility give some insight in the degree to which the functional relations within and between urban regions have recently developed like the Dutch national planners would have wanted.

Finally, in Chapter 9, the main conclusions of the study are presented and on the basis of these conclusions, the future plans of the Dutch national planners as presented in the first version of the Fifth Report will be critically discussed.