The challenge of planned urbanisation. Urbanisation and national urbanisation policy in the Netherlands in a northwest-European perspective
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CHAPTER NINE
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS:
THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF DUTCH NATIONAL URBANISATION POLICY

9.1 Introduction

Since World War II, the Dutch national government has demonstrated a constant concern with the spatial development of the country. A national physical planning policy was gradually designed that is considered as one of the most influential and effective in Europe. An important element of this national physical planning policy has always been urbanisation policy. This involves attempts to determine the dynamics in the distribution of population and activities across the country through physical planning measures. The Dutch national urbanisation policy was built up around a number of constant core concepts of which the combination of ‘Randstad’ and ‘Green Heart’ has become internationally well known. However, there were also several changes in the urbanisation strategy through time: from a strong stress on deconcentration (on a regional as well as a national level) in the 1960s and 1970s, via a period of compact city development in the 1980s and 1990s, towards a new preference for deconcentration (this time only on a regional level) at the start of the 21st century.

The Dutch physical planning policy system and strategy is already in debate for many decades, but never has the discussion been so intense as in the last few years. More and more, the effectiveness of national planning has been questioned. The results of Dutch national physical planning policy in general, and urbanisation policy in particular, lead to serious questions about the relevance of national plans for the spatial development of a country or region.

In this final chapter, we will first return to the main research questions put forward in Chapter 1:

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 urban policy on these developments in the Netherlands different from the experiences of other Northwest-European countries?

The results of the analysis of the effectiveness of Dutch urbanisation policy with regard to population distribution (Chapter 6) and daily mobility (Chapter 8) and the international comparison of the Netherlands with Switzerland, West Sweden and Northern England (Chapter 7) contributed to answering these questions. However, since it is fully acknowledged that it is not possible to determine the exact influence of physical planning measures, the conclusions drawn in this chapter (as well as those drawn in earlier chapters) are largely tentative of character. In addition, the results of these analyses and the theoretical discussion of the chapters 2, 3 and 4 might contribute to a reflection on two additional subjects with large relevance for the future development of Dutch national urbanisation policy:
• Is it possible to realise a pattern of urbanisation in accordance with a strategy outlined in a 'national urbanisation policy'? If it is, what are the conditions that decide about the (potential) success of national urbanisation policy?

• Starting from the answers to the earlier questions and looking at the most recently published national physical planning report (the Fifth Report on Physical Planning), what can we expect of the influence of Dutch national urbanisation policy on the development of the settlement pattern in the next decades?

9.2 Dutch national urbanisation policy and its effects on population distribution

In Chapter 6, the goals of Dutch national urbanisation policy with regard to the dynamics in population distribution were evaluated. This was done in two separate, but complementary analyses. In the first of these analyses, the actual development of Dutch population distribution was confronted with the development one could expect on the basis of the goals set out in the key documents on national urbanisation policy. The area chosen for this analysis was Central Netherlands (see Appendix Map 2), since this was the area where most of the measures of national urbanisation policy concentrated on and where (at least on paper) the most consistent urbanisation policy was implemented since the 1960s. Municipal population growth rates were used as an indicator for the dynamics in population distribution. These trends were then compared to the developments that should have taken place according to the goals of Dutch national urbanisation policy. The main goals to be evaluated were derived from the national planning documents that set the scene for national urbanisation policy between 1970 and 1995 (see Figure 5.1 and section 6.6.1) and, as far as possible, translated into expectations of 'growth', 'stability' or 'decline' for each municipality type that was targeted by national urbanisation policy.

The comparison of the actual development of Dutch population distribution between 1970 and 1995 with the expected development based on the goals of national urbanisation policy in Chapter 6 (section 6.6.3) led to three major conclusions:

1. The degree of success of Dutch national urbanisation policy, expressed in the degree to which the actual dynamics in population distribution matched the goals of national urbanisation policy, seems to have decreased over time;

2. The period in which Dutch national urbanisation policy was most successful was between 1975 and 1985, when the growth centres were realised within the framework of the policy of concentrated deconcentration.

3. However, overlooking the period between 1970 and 1995, Dutch national urbanisation policy might have succeeded in changing the course of population development in some municipality types (most of all the growth centres), but did not manage to change the overall trend of urban sprawl.

In an alternative evaluation of Dutch national urbanisation policy, the degree to which the goals of national urbanisation policy were feasible was the central issue. This evaluation largely answered the question why the policy of concentrated deconcentration was more successful than can reasonably be expected of the current compact city policy. Since the eventual effects of compact city policy on Dutch population distribution can not yet be overseen, as a large part of the building projects within this policy’s framework are still to be finished in the next 5 to 10 years. an evaluation of the feasibility of the compact city policy is more useful than an evaluation of the effects this policy already might have had on recent population distribution dynamics.
Concentrated deconcentration was quite successful in reaching its population distribution goals because in this policy, the national planners provided a generous supply of housing of the type that was asked for by many households. Therefore, the national planners were able to combine general societal interests (avoiding urban sprawl by concentrating suburban extensions in a few locations) with the individual interests of households that wanted to leave the large cities. The success of concentrated deconcentration policy between 1975 and 1985 was raised further through the deep recession of the Dutch economy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the crisis on the owner-occupied housing market that was one of its results. By making large investments in the construction of social housing on the growth centre sites directly after the housing market crisis of 1979, the Dutch government was able to speed up the housing production in the growth centres considerably and attracted many people to these houses that might have bought a house elsewhere otherwise. Meanwhile, however, the national planners were far less able to get grip on the developments outside of the growth centres. In the second half of the 1970s, sub-urbanisation decreased considerably but was still at a quite high level. The 1980s brought a further decrease of sub-urbanisation, but this was probably more due to the worsening of the economic recession than to the effectiveness of national urbanisation policy.

Contrary to the policy of concentrated deconcentration, the compact city policy strongly focused on housing production on locations in the general societal interest. While the inner-city redevelopment locations still met the housing demands of urban-oriented households, the vast majority of houses was (or will soon be) realised on locations just outside the already existing built-up areas of the large and medium-sized cities. These housing areas, the VINEX locations, as they were initially planned, were probably not ‘urban’ enough for the urban-oriented households, and not ‘suburban’ enough for the suburban-oriented households. Considering the tendency of the Dutch housing market in recent years to become increasingly bi-polar of character, with a suburban and a central-urban ‘peak’ (Meulenbelt, 1997; Musterd & Ostendorf, 1998), a concentration of building activities in-between these two peaks seems problematic. In recent years, attempts have been made to adapt the VINEX locations into more suburban, lower-density housing areas to try to meet the demands of the suburban-oriented households to a larger extent. This might increase the success of VINEX areas on the housing market, but the unavoidable consequence will be that the targets with regard to the number of dwellings to be realised on VINEX sites will not be reached and that more houses would need to be built on alternative locations that are not in line with the intentions of compact city policy. Furthermore, the housing demands of the urban-oriented households threaten to be met even less than before.

More in general, both the results of concentrated deconcentration policy and the expectations about compact city policy seem to suggest that it is much easier to reach success with a policy that encourages housing production (and through that, population growth) than with a restrictive policy. Even during the period of concentrated deconcentration, that is often perceived as highly successful (Faludi & Van der Valk, 1990; Dieleman et al, 1999), one could only speak of a partial success. While the realisation of the growth centres largely went according to plan, the policy goals in other locations were not reached. This is most of all true for the building restrictions in the ‘Central Open Space’ and within this area, in the ‘Green Heart’ in particular. As Table 6.5, 6.6 and 6.7 showed, the municipalities in the ‘Central Open Space were among the
fastest-growing municipalities in the 1970s, well above the national average while they should have shown a growth pattern below the national average.

9.3 Dutch national urbanisation policy and its effects on daily mobility

Unfortunately, data on the development of daily mobility in the Netherlands could only be acquired for the period from 1987 to 1997. It would have been interesting to compare the daily mobility behaviour ‘before the growth centres’ with that ‘after the growth centres’. Nevertheless, the situation in 1987 (just a few years after the end of concentrated deconcentration policy) and the development since then as presented in Chapter 8 were sufficient proof of a failure of concentrated deconcentration policy in terms of its spatial mobility goals. The growth centres should have become the activity centres of their own functional urban regions. This goal was to be reached by providing employment and services in the growth centres to such an extent that both the growth centre inhabitants and the population of its immediate surroundings did not need the large cities for work, education, shopping and/or recreation. Instead, the growth centres have become integrated into the functional urban regions of the large cities. The daily traffic relationships between the growth centres and ‘overspill regions’ on the one hand, and the large cities on the other, are among the most intensive daily mobility relationships in the Netherlands. This is largely due to the fact that the development of employment and services in the growth centres, especially the most distant ones, has for a long time lagged behind their population growth. Most growth centres caught up on these deficits during the 1980s and 1990s (Bruinne & Knol, 2001). Meanwhile, however, a large share of the growth centre inhabitants had found a job in or near the large cities, or continued the job they had before in the large city from where they moved to the growth centres. This produced intensive commuter relationships between the growth centres and overspill regions and the large city agglomerations. Most of the commuters travelled by car. The growth of car traffic was not sufficiently recognised as a potential cause for congestion yet in the 1970s. Several growth centres were not connected to the national railway system until a large part of the housing construction had already been completed, while road connections were in place much earlier. The result can be seen every working day in the form of traffic jams around the large cities, steadily growing in length and number.

Instead of acknowledging the considerable scale enlargement of the functional urban regions of the large cities, caused by a combination of increasing car possession and car use and urban sprawl and further encouraged by concentrated deconcentration policy, the national planners decided to choose for smaller-scale urban regions in the compact city policy. While the functional urban regions of the large cities had already expanded to areas with a radius of about 20 to 30 km in the 1980s, the functional urban regions mentioned in the Fourth Report had a radius of about 10 to 15 km. The distant growth centres fell outside of this radius as well as a large part of the former overspill areas. The intensive functional relationships that had grown between the growth centres, the overspill areas and the agglomerations of the large cities since the 1970s were largely denied in the compact city policy. Instead, some of the more distant growth centres were still considered to be the centre of their own functional urban region. Regarding the distribution of activities, one of the major instruments of compact city policy was the policy of so called A-, B- and C- locations for companies, in which new companies were preferably concentrated on locations within the large and medium-sized city agglomerations that were easy to reach by public transport. In combination with the concentration of new housing areas in or close to the large and medium-sized cities (the
VINEX locations), this should have led to shorter commuter distances and a decreasing share of car travel in total commuting. However, as was already demonstrated in a recent evaluation of spatial mobility policy (Martens, 2000) and is once more confirmed by the analysis presented in Chapter 8, neither of these goals was reached. The policy might have led to slight changes in the destination of commuters within the agglomeration, but they were still travelling mostly by car and instead of a decrease in commuting distance, the most recent trend is a further increase. The aim to concentrate employment in or near large and medium-sized cities in itself could of course have reduced commuter distances considerably if the people working in these companies would have lived in or near these cities. In reality, a considerable share of the employees of these companies came from more distant locations, most frequently by car, and this took away much of the logic and effectiveness of the ABC-location policy.

In the process towards the Fifth Report, it looked at first like the Dutch national planners had found the right concept to deal with present-day problems of daily mobility. In a pre-study of the Fifth Report, the 'network city' was introduced as the possible new strategic spatial concept (Ministerie VROM, 1999a). This network city had a radius of 20 to 30 kilometers, more or less matching the size of the regions used in the daily mobility analysis of Chapter 8. However, this concept was criticised by many as being based on an old-fashioned interpretation of daily functional relations in the Netherlands. Therefore, the network city was traded for a larger-scale entity. In the Fifth Report, 'urban networks' were introduced as the new strategic spatial concept for Dutch national urbanisation policy. This concept presupposes a high degree of functional integration of once separate daily urban systems into new, larger-scale polycentric urban regions. With the urban networks, the Dutch national planners react to the supposed trend towards considerably larger daily trip distances that is thought to take place. The national planners especially expect this higher scale level of urbanisation within the 'national urban networks' that are envisaged in the West and South of the country: the 'Delta Metropolis' and 'Brabantstad'. However, as the results of the daily mobility analysis in Chapter 8 shows, there is hardly a sign of the supposed trends of scale enlargement of urban regions and longer trip distances. It is true that daily mobility has increased markedly since the mid-1980s. However, this was much more an increase of the number of daily trips, than of trip distance. Instead of a trend towards scale enlargement of people's daily 'action spaces', therefore, the dominant trend seems to be a stabilisation and intensification of the already existing daily urban systems. Within these daily urban systems, the pattern of daily trips has gradually become more and more complex, with the emergence of various sub-centres next to the traditional centres. With regard to the most recent changes in Dutch national urbanisation policy, one could therefore conclude that while the compact city policy was based on unrealistically small daily urban systems, the urban networks policy seems to be based on unrealistically large daily urban systems.

9.4 Dutch national urbanisation policy in a Northwest-European perspective

The ultimate test for the influence of national urbanisation policy on the Dutch urbanisation process would of course have been to compare the existing situation with a national urbanisation policy, to a situation in which there would not have been a national urbanisation policy. This, of course, is impossible: national urbanisation policy is strongly interrelated with both its societal context and with several other policies, which means that national urbanisation policy cannot be seen as a completely independent, isolated variable.
The 'next best option' used in this study was to compare the development of urbanisation in the Netherlands with that of other countries without a national urbanisation policy or with another approach of national urbanisation policy. This comparative analysis also served to explore whether urbanisation policy on a national level is more or less effective than urbanisation policy on a lower (regional and/or local) level, and if the ambition level of governments to influence urbanisation in general (on whatever government level) is reflected in the eventual influence on urbanisation. The areas chosen for this comparative study were Switzerland, West-Sweden and Northern England. A detailed account of the criteria for the selection of the areas of comparison was given in Chapter 5. Summarised very briefly, the main criteria were that the areas of comparison were, like the Netherlands, part of Northwest-Europe and therefore largely experienced comparable changes in their economic, socio-cultural and demographic structure (Hall, 1993; Champion, 1992); that each of the areas contained a highly decentralised settlement system; that the areas of comparison each formed an example of a different type of planning systems, according to the typology of European planning systems of Newman and Thornley (1996); and that there were considerable differences between the case study areas in the ambition level of national planners with regard to national urbanisation policy.

Before starting the international comparison, the expectation was that Northern England and the Netherlands would demonstrate much less urban sprawl than Switzerland and West-Sweden. This expectation was based on two assumptions:

- Urbanisation policy can indeed influence national and regional urbanisation trends;
- National or regional effects can only be reached when such a policy is coordinated on the level of a country or region.

Northern England and the Netherlands were both affected by a national urbanisation policy throughout the entire research period (1970 to 1995). In both cases, the entire case study area was targeted with the same urbanisation policy, coordinated by the national government. The combination of the formal division of tasks, with a strong position of national government in the planning system, and a high ambition level of the national planners leads to the expectation of a considerable influence of national urbanisation policy in both the Netherlands and Northern England (see Figure 5.4). Of these two, it could be expected that in Northern England the 'match' between national planners wishes and the real development of population distribution would be slightly better than in the Netherlands. While in Northern England one could speak of a planning system that is predominantly 'top-down' in character, the Netherlands shows a combination of a strong national level and an almost equally strong local level (the 'decentralised unitary state').

Switzerland and West-Sweden lacked such a unity in urbanisation policy. In Switzerland, the federal government published advisory visions on the desired development of urbanisation in the 1970s and 1990s. However, the eventual planning actions were left to the cantons. Each of the cantons enjoyed considerable liberty in determining whether a urbanisation policy was required and if so, what this policy should be. In West-Sweden, planning actions were even further decentralised, to the local level. Municipalities have always had a strong position in Swedish politics in general, including physical planning, but since the 1980s, one could even speak of a 'municipal planning monopoly'. While Switzerland still has plans on the regional (cantonal) level, West-Sweden lacks planning
coordinated on both the national and the regional level. Although the possibility that regional governments choose comparable or even identical urbanisation policies independently of another, or that they agree on a joint urbanisation policy, should not be excluded, it is not very likely that 26 regional governments (the 26 cantons of Switzerland) will do this. It would be even less likely that 89 local governments (the 89 municipalities of West-Sweden) would come to comparable or joint urbanisation policy measures. It is much more likely that each of these regional or local governments will choose its own urbanisation policy that mainly serves to safeguard the regional or municipal interests. In such a situation, the various local and/or regional urbanisation policies will often work against each other. The net effect on the settlement pattern and population distribution of the country or region as a whole will probably be either negligible, or counterproductive, promoting developments that are undesirable from a national point of view.

However, although some different accents were found in the population distribution dynamics of the case studies, the main trends were very comparable. Deconcentration dominated the scene in all four case study areas since the 1970s. The deconcentration process was at its strongest in the early 1970s. Cities, especially the largest ones, lost huge amounts of inhabitants during the 1970s but recovered somewhat in the 1980s and 1990s. Still, even while urban growth recovered, it stayed well under the national growth average, while suburban and rural growth was generally well above the national average. Within these shared general trends, two differences worth noting occurred in the geographic scale level of population deconcentration. First, in West-Sweden, deconcentration mainly took place in the immediate surroundings (agglomerations) of the large cities, while in the other three areas it was much more widespread, most of all in Northern England and Switzerland. In the West-Swedish case study, two possible reasons were given for this difference: the quite negative image of the countryside as a living environment in West-Sweden, and the fact that many Swedes own holiday homes in rural or forest areas, which largely takes away the need to look for a permanent residence outside the urbanised areas. In the other case study areas, the holiday homes phenomenon is much less widespread, which is amongst other reasons due to a lack of space to provide these holiday homes on a large scale. Therefore, when people want to escape from hectic urban life in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Northern England, they will more often choose to leave urban areas permanently instead of only for the summer months. Second, while in the other case study areas cities experienced a real recovery in the 1980s with a new period of population growth after decades of decline, the cities in Northern England only managed to reach a zero growth or a reduction of their negative growth rates. This happened in the context of a stagnating population growth in Northern England as a whole, while population growth in the other case study areas was fairly strong during the entire research period.

Looking at the case of Northern England, the earlier statements on the possibilities of national urbanisation policy to influence population distribution dynamics seem to be reconfirmed. Like in the Netherlands, the most successful part of British national urbanisation policy was the realisation of strong growth in a selection of locations, in this case the New Towns. The attempts to limit growth around the large conurbations through Green Belts and the restrictive building policy on the countryside in general were far less successful. The instrument of Green Belts may have led to less construction in the targeted areas, but it did not stop the trend of population deconcentration and it may even have contributed to urban-rural migrations across longer distances ('jumping over' the
Green Belts). Because of the failure of the restrictive part of national urbanisation policy, the result of British national urbanisation policy as a whole was fairly poor despite the realisation of the New Towns. When the other two case study areas, largely lacking national urbanisation policy, are added, the extent to which national urbanisation policy can really change the dynamics in population distribution seems to become even more marginal. Apparently, while national urbanisation policy certainly had some effects on the development of population distribution in the Netherlands and Northern England, it was not sufficiently capable to counterbalance the economic, socio-cultural and demographic processes that contributed to the recent changes in population distribution.

9.5 Effective national urbanisation policy: realistic challenge or impossible ideal?

In section 9.2, one of the main conclusions was that the effectiveness of Dutch national urbanisation policy seems to have decreased considerably after the strategic concept of concentrated deconcentration was traded for the compact city. The most important reasons for this decline in effectiveness were probably the increasing gap between policy intentions and popular housing demands, and the too ambitious ideas about the extent to which physical planning could counterbalance economic, socio-cultural and demographic trends. The policy of concentrated deconcentration was executed under much more favourable conditions than the compact city policy. The slump in the owner-occupied housing market in the late 1970s provided space for the mass production of social housing in the growth centres. The location of these new dwellings in a suburban setting at relatively low costs, mostly aimed at the traditional nuclear family that was still dominating Dutch society though it was gradually losing ground, meant an almost perfect match of housing provision and housing demands. A comparable success might have been expected from compact city policy when it was introduced in the mid-1980s. Again, the circumstances seemed perfect for the type of policy proposed: the Netherlands experienced a severe economic crisis and the awareness of environmental and mobility problems (pollution, congestion, energy consumption) increased. In addition, the continuously rising share of young small households and ethnic minorities, both groups with a more urban orientation than nuclear family, seemed to favour success of this policy. One might therefore wonder why the compact city policy did not work out at all, while the concentrated deconcentration policy can at least still claim that it was partially successful.

Already during the era of concentrated deconcentration policy, stimulating growth appeared to be much easier than restricting growth. Therefore, when the focus shifted more from 'growth encouragement' to 'growth restrictions' in the compact city policy, a decline of success was the logical outcome. Maybe it would have been better to encourage larger-scale new housing construction within the existing built environment of the cities, to an even larger extent as already happened in the compact city policy, in combination with new housing areas in some suburban locations. This might have been more successful in terms of meeting housing demands than the current attempt to offer suburban housing close to the existing built environment. From the outset, the VINEX locations at the city edges seemed to miss both the demands of urban oriented households (too 'suburban') and those of the suburban-oriented households (too 'urban'). In the process from national plan to local execution, most VINEX locations were adapted towards the suburban demands, so with considerably lower housing densities, meaning much less houses will be realised there than initially planned. In this way, the Dutch national planners reacted to a change in the economic climate from recession to growth in
the 1990s. However, apart from the fact that the compact city policy could impossibly meet its initial quantitative housing targets anymore, the success of the VINEX locations became threatened even more because their realisation took too much time. The compact city policy was already announced in a national planning document (the Structure Outline Urban Areas) in 1983, became official national urbanisation policy in 1988, but the first VINEX houses were not produced until 1995. While negotiations on the exact locations, the number of houses to be built, the minimum size of the plots, the connections to public transport and the building contracts were still underway, many alternative new housing projects could be realised at other (suburban and rural) locations. These alternative locations contributed to a further deconcentration of population, and even though this was clearly opposite to the aims of compact city policy, these projects were still allowed.

To make the realisation of compact city policy even more complicated, the policy conditions changed drastically as well. In the 1990s, the traditional connection between physical planning and housing policy was largely lost when housing corporations were privatised and the national government started to encourage an increase of the owner-occupied sector at the expense of the social housing sector. Also on the land market, the traditionally strong position of the Dutch government (especially the municipality) was challenged. Private developers managed to acquire large plots of land on locations where the VINEX housing areas were to be realised. This gave the private developers a powerful position in the negotiations about the realisation of the VINEX projects, and also made it possible for them to force their proposals for adaptation of the VINEX areas (larger plots, lower density) through. The national government did not act to prevent this tendency, because it fit quite well in its general aim to decrease its own role in new housing construction and to encourage a larger participation of private parties. This new political viewpoint came about within the broader context of the decreasing popularity of the idea that Dutch society could be re-created through policy ('maakbare samenleving').

The division of responsibilities within the Dutch planning system might be another source of problems. Traditionally, both the national and the local government level have an influential role in the Dutch planning system. National planners cannot simply impose their plans on local governments and they never intended to try this either. In this respect, the degree to which national policy intentions have in the recent past been expressed in very concrete targets, including the exact building locations and the amount of houses to be built, is striking. To foreign observers, this might have produced the image that the Dutch national government decides on its own where new construction takes place but this is definitely not what happens in reality. In the case of the Fourth Report Extra, for example, the details of housing quantities and locations were determined in covenants between national, regional and local governments. These covenants were reached after a long process of negotiations. However, even this agreement between all government levels involved could not guarantee the realisation of the urbanisation policy targets. The Fifth Report marks a transition in the Dutch planning system that seems almost revolutionary. The national ambitions still seem to be on the same high level as before, if not even higher. However, the implementation and execution of the planning measures to realise these high ambitions are left to the regional and local government level too a much larger extent than before. Also, the possibilities of non-governmental parties to participate in the planning process have increased considerably.

As more parties claim their role in Dutch spatial development (ministries and national, regional and local lobby groups representing various parts of Dutch society, often with
conflicting demands), the need for a coordinating organisation is increasingly felt. Instead, the National Physical Planning Agency gradually seems to have lost its grip on the planning process. The first version of the Fifth Report led to much confusion about the current ambition to direct the spatial development of the country on the national government level. On the one hand, there are still lots of highly ambitious plans in the Fifth Report, which seem to indicate that the national planners still feel the ambition to exert influence on the future spatial development of the country. On the other hand, the responsibility for the eventual execution of these plans is in many cases given to other parties involved in the planning process, especially to the lower tiers of government.

9.6 Future perspectives for Dutch national urbanisation policy

The government proposal for the Fifth Report, published in January 2001, led to several negative and disappointed reactions from members of parliament, various advisory commissions, lobby groups and the popular media. Reading through the main targets of national urbanisation policy, one could question the consistency of the policy and the extent to which all these targets could actually be reached. Although in the process towards this report, the minister of physical planning repeatedly claimed that choices had to be made, the end result rather looks like an attempt to please all parties involved in the planning process. Regarding the national urbanisation policy, two key elements are the ‘contours’ and the ‘urban networks’.

The contours are a potentially very strong instrument to limit further extension of built environment and loss of open land. The draft version of Fifth Report contained ‘red’, ‘green’ and ‘light green’ contours, while in the eventual government proposal, only the red and green contours were left. This would mean that about 60% of the surface of the Netherlands would end up outside both types of contours in the so called ‘balance areas’. It is very unclear what is supposed to happen in these ‘contourless’ areas. Furthermore, the drawing of the contours is left to municipalities that can change them every 5 years. This leads to the question how much power is left for this instrument in the end. More clarity on the status of the contours would be welcome. In fact, if the instrument of contours would be used to its full potential, only one type of contours would be needed. This could be done in two ways. First, the national government could decide to implement only the ‘red contours’. These red contours would then simply indicate the difference between building land and non-building land. All land that would fall outside the red contours should be prevented from any building claim. This difference between building and non-building land is already implemented for some decades in Switzerland. The Swiss experience, however, learns that this division only works when the contours are not open to any re-negotiations or exceptions. An alternative option for the national government is to implement only the ‘green contours’. Areas within these green contours should be prevented from any building claim, while areas outside these green contours could get any possible function. Inspiration for such an approach might be found in the UK, where National Parks are protected through tight building restrictions.

Another crucial element of the intended future national urbanisation policy is the new strategic concept of urban networks. With the introduction of this concept, the tendency towards a further scale enlargement of Dutch urban regions since the 1970s finally seems to be acknowledged. However, the concept as it seems to be interpreted by the national planners so far suffers from many serious problems. First, the scale of the ‘national urban networks’ should be reconsidered. This scale does not seem to relate to daily mobility
patterns very well. As the analysis of recent trends in daily mobility in the Netherlands on a national and regional level in Chapter 8 demonstrated, the ‘national urban networks’ are far too large to match daily mobility patterns of the majority of the population that are supposed to live, work and recreate in them. Functional relationships at this scale level seem to exist only for business travellers and people with high incomes, that can afford to live in one city (or suburb), work in another, go out in yet another city and recreate regularly rather far from their home. Which are the arguments of the national planners for the choice of these large-scale national urban networks? Do they want to adapt Dutch infrastructure to the needs of ‘the happy few’? Do the Dutch planners foresee a considerable scale enlargement of daily life for the average Dutch in the next decades? If so, would it not be more advisable to introduce measures to prevent this from happening? After all, when services like work, shopping and recreation would be distributed on the scale level of the national urban networks, the development of urban fields might become reality. One might wonder if this is an attractive perspective for the Netherlands.

The ‘regional urban networks’ seem much more relevant for the daily life of their inhabitants. In their geographic scope, they more or less match the ‘network cities’ that were proposed earlier in the process towards the Fifth Report (Ministerie VROM, 1999a). However, in the Fifth Report there are so many regional urban networks that most of the country is covered with them, which makes the relevance of these networks as a strategic spatial concept doubtful. Do the national planners really want to include almost all possible locations in the Netherlands in one of the networks? How could this be combined with the ‘national landscapes’ that are supposed to be safeguarded from urban sprawl and with the limits posed to building activities with the red contours? In addition, also for the regional urban networks, it is totally unclear in what way they will be ‘applied’ in the further spatial development of the Netherlands. Will activities be spread within these networks so that each network offers a complete collection of living environments, employment and education opportunities and consumer and commercial services? Does this then also mean that people will have to travel longer distances to get the services they need, because these services might be offered in only one location within the network (because the places in the network should be complementary)? Is the further increase of daily mobility that this might produce, and which will probably mostly exist of car mobility, desirable? One of the major driving forces behind the compact city policy was (and still is, as long as the Fifth Report is not politically accepted) limiting further mobility growth, especially the growth of car mobility. There were valid arguments for such a spatial mobility policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s and considering the rapid growth of car use since then, these arguments only gained in validity. Simply putting the goal of limiting mobility growth aside would not be logical and desirable in the light of the continuity of Dutch national urbanisation policy.

Turning from the content of the proposed policy to the way in which it should be realised, more possible problems seem to arise. The decentralisation of planning responsibilities might bring planning ‘closer to the people’. The other side of the coin, however, is that it will be more complicated to reach an overarching national planning strategy. In Chapter 7 (section 7.5) and section 9.4, the comparison of national urbanisation policies led to two major conclusions: first, that national urbanisation policy at best managed to have only a modest influence on the actual development of urbanisation; second, that the most successful national urbanisation policies found in the international comparison were policies that were coordinated on the national government level. More specifically, the British New Town policy as well as the Green Belts and National Parks could at least be
seen as partially successful, and the same goes for the Dutch policy of concentrated deconcentration. As the examples of Switzerland and West-Sweden proved, when the national government level does not provide a national framework for urbanisation policy, there will generally be large variations between regions and/or municipalities in the extent to which urbanisation policy is pursued, as well as in the targets of these urbanisation policies. It can hardly be expected that a large collection of regional or local governments will reach a consensus on one urbanisation strategy. More likely, each of these regional and/or local governments will defend their own interests and these interests will often be conflicting, resulting in developments that are not in the ‘national interest’. The examples given in Chapter 7 (in West-Sweden, the competition between municipalities for shopping malls in Skåne and the problems with the construction of a highway in Bohuslän, and in Switzerland, the contrasts between the ‘laissez-faire’ urbanisation policy in the canton of Vaud and the compact city policy in the canton of Bern) should give cause to serious concern about the kind of urbanisation policy that a lack of national coordination could produce. Recent developments in the Dutch planning debate give rise to comparable concerns. Looking for example at the most recent plans of a collective of ‘Randstad governments’ (provinces and large cities), building activities in open areas are enthusiastically encouraged. The vision of the Randstad governments, ‘Towards a blue-green Deltametropolis’, describes even those areas that are protected as ‘national landscapes’ in the Fifth Report as potential building sites (Koper, 2001).

Especially in a small and densely populated country like the Netherlands, there will continue to be a need for national government involvement in spatial development. Contrary to the dominant trend of government withdrawal in various policy fields, including physical planning, since the 1980s, maybe the time has come for a return of more intensive involvement of national government in spatial development. However, to have more chances on success than during the eras of concentrated deconcentration and the compact city, this involvement should probably be much more selective than before. Instead of aiming for a comprehensive national planning programme, it might be much more productive to select a number of key issues. The ideal national urbanisation policy would be one that:

- chooses a limited amount of clearly defined priorities;
- makes clear why these priorities were chosen (which collective interest is served with the policy?);
- includes clearly defined and realistic policy targets, instruments to realise these targets (for national, regional and local planners), and control mechanisms to check if the efforts of national, regional and local planners are sufficient to reach the targets;
- offers a national framework of the desired future development of urbanisation, but also offers regional and local planners chances to work out these national priorities in regional and local programmes within this national framework that connect to the regional and local ‘identity’ and needs as much as possible.

One of the key issues that might be selected for such a future Dutch national urbanisation policy is to prevent the further loss of rural and nature areas to urban sprawl. Judging from the reactions to the first versions of the Fifth Report and from the political, scientific and societal debate of the past decades, this is a policy goal that can count on much support in Dutch society. To prevent or limit further urban sprawl, the instrument of contours offers a promising perspective, but only if they are really enforced and maintained and not open to any compromise. The contours could of course be revised
after some time but this period should be quite long to make the instrument effective (so
not every 5 years as is now planned, but for example 10 years). If the current practice of
allowing all kinds of exceptions to national, regional and local plans continues, physical
planning will be taken less and less seriously and eventually lose its relevance in Dutch
society.

In the future national urbanisation plans, the demands for housing, recreation,
employment and infrastructure should still be met as much as possible, but limits should
surely be considered as well. Within the limited space of the Netherlands it is simply
impossible to meet all demands for space. Therefore, national planners should also
sometimes dare to say 'enough is enough' and the demanding parties will sometimes have
to accept 'no' for an answer. Not everyone can live wherever he or she wants and
sometimes, a 'second-best' option should be taken for granted. To get this message
across, the national planners have to communicate better to the public about the 'national'
or 'common' interest that they try to meet with their plans, why this is something different
from the sum of all individual interests, and why all people will be better off when these
common interests will continue to form the core of the Dutch national urbanisation policy
of the future.