

ENVIRONMENTAL CO-OPERATIVES AND THE DUTCH GOVERNMENT¹

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1 Introduction

The principal problem posed in developing environmental policies is the mismatch between the ownership and management of land and the spatial characteristics of watersheds, landscapes and valuable habitats. Gottfried *et al.* (1996) term this the “economies of configuration” problem because intervention at this scale typically requires collaboration across farm holdings, i.e. between contiguous land managers. One example of the need to address the “economies of configuration” problem is the European Commission’s instructions to Member States to implement the Water Framework Directive at the catchment level.

2 Dutch Environmental Co-operatives

The first environmental cooperative was established in 1992 as a self-help group with voluntary membership. There are now about 125 environmental cooperatives in the Netherlands; the exact number depends on the definition used. Oerlemans *et al.* (2004) estimate environmental cooperatives have almost 10,000 members, about 10% of all farmers and 40% of all agricultural land, about a quarter of members are non-farmers as more than half environmental cooperatives offer non-farmer membership.

They can be described as local organisations of farmers and often non-farmers who work in close collaboration with each-other and with local, regional and national agencies to integrate nature management into farming practices by adopting a pro-active approach based on a regional perspective.

Each environmental cooperative has a strong emphasis on locality and context in their portfolio of activities (Renting and van der Ploeg 2001). To help select between projects, environmental cooperatives are organised around a traditional structure with an elected board of officers (e.g. chairman, treasurer, secretary, etc). They have their own rules (constitution) setting out their procedures. However, conflicts between members can exist and in extreme circumstances environmental cooperatives have had to withdrawn membership from individuals for the benefit of the remaining members (Polman 2002). The approach most environmental cooperatives took to protect their common interest was to allow each member to participate in those projects they supported, and to opt-out of others. This flexibility ensures only those projects with sufficient support actually go ahead.

3 Environmental management activities of environmental co-operatives²

Environmental cooperatives allow Dutch conservation agencies to develop environmental management contracts with groups (i.e. clubs) of land managers - allowing landscapes to be worked whole rather than piecemeal. Environmental schemes have developed options that allow joint applications by neighbouring farmers, which allows connectivity between habitats and the development of linear features across land under different management and ownership, forming corridors, stepping stones, and allowing enhanced management of habitat edge effects. Environmental cooperatives represent a new form of social organisation (Wiskerke *et*

¹ This is a much shortened version of a paper first published as Franks and Mc Gloin (2007a). Further details of the evolution of Dutch environmental policy can be found in Franks and Mc Goin (2007b). Details of the structure and organisation are reported more thoroughly in Franks (2008).

² For details of the survey methodology see Franks and Mc Gloin (2007a).

al. 2003) which have become the most important vehicle through which farmers contribute to the evolution of agri-environment policy.

4 Some benefits of environmental co-operatives to the Dutch government

Our research showed environmental cooperatives delivered clear benefits of their members, the environment and to the rural economy (Franks and McGloin 2007a). Our focus here is the benefits they delivered to the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture. Environmental cooperatives,

- lower government transaction costs;
- are an identifiable representative group for institutional access;
- are a single contact point for dissemination of information;
- increase engagement through local accessible networks;
- increase engagement through collective applications;
- improve the quality of application, as farming members are commonly advised on what schemes are appropriate and how to apply;
- help initiate projects that require a critical mass of participants;
- help to form trust-building networks;
- help undertake local monitoring.

5 The Dutch government and the development of environmental cooperatives

Dutch environmental cooperatives became established because groups of farmers were willing to contest the views of ecologists and policy makers. Key to their expansion was the support of the Dutch government: for example it,

- granted official “governance experiments” status to the first environmental cooperatives, making available start-up grants to pay for technical advice and independent scientific monitoring;
- responded to an European Commission request to cease paying farmers indirectly through environmental cooperatives (based on concerns that such payments needed to be made directly to farmers) by making payments directly to environmental cooperatives to compensate for overhead costs;
- revised its agri-environment programme (Programma Beheer) to include options incentivising joint submissions from environmental cooperative members;
- gives priority to joint rather than individual applications to agri-environment schemes;
- gives financial support to Natuurlijk Platteland Nederland, an umbrella organisation for environmental cooperatives;
- allows Natuurlijk Platteland Nederland access to regular policy meetings which assess the effectiveness of environment policy and examine new policies and schemes: thus farmers are represented at the centre of the policy making process.

6 Conclusions

Environmental issues increasingly need to be addressed at the landscape- and catchment-scale which raises questions about the institutions necessary to generate policies that cross land under different ownership and management. Environmental cooperatives’ record of delivered benefits, and the strong support of the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, provide evidence that working landscapes whole rather than piecemeal improves policy design and enhances policy delivery. However, a fundamental requirement of co-operative actions is that individuals willingly work together, so such organisations need to develop and maintain clear incentives to collaborate. The emphasis must remain on farmers and other rural

dwellers taking the initiative and forming community of interest groups - with the Ministry investing effort as necessary to assist environmental cooperatives overcome key hurdles (such as start-up costs).

Critical to environmental cooperatives' success is their ability to set their own locally-based, participatory agenda. By drawing membership from interested local farmers and other rural dwellers, environmental cooperatives engage with those agencies charged with the implementation of environmental and rural economy policy, empower local people, and bring decision-making to a more local level, all of which are among the UK government's (and Defra's) declared policy objectives.

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