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## **National policies in decentralised spatial planning**

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### **Introduction**

In the Netherlands, the national government started a major decentralisation scheme in spatial planning for rural areas. With the introduction of the Investeringsbudget Landelijk Gebied (ILG, Investment fund for rural areas) in 2007 the national government delegated the implementation of national policies to the provinces, the regional level of government in the Netherlands. This Dutch example fits in a trend towards more decentralisation in spatial planning that can be seen in other European countries as well. Despite this decentralisation trend, the national government is not receding from rural spatial planning completely. In most countries it is believed the national government should remain to play an important role, to make sure national spatial interests are protected. Therefore new planning systems need to combine decentralisation with the remaining influence of national policies. The systems that arise from this dichotomy differ from country to country.

To gain more insight in the above described dichotomy, this paper studies the new spatial planning systems of three European countries that have recently gone through a decentralisation process in rural spatial planning: the UK (England), the Netherlands and Denmark. It explores how the driving forces for decentralisation and the remaining influence of the national government have shaped the new spatial planning systems.

### **Rescaling in rural spatial planning**

The recent changes in the spatial planning system in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe can be described as a rescaling of spatial planning. Rescaling of spatial planning is the process in which the task division between the different government levels is changed. Rescaling takes into account both aspects of the dichotomy, the decentralisation and the remaining influence of the national government.

The debate on the organization of spatial planning can be found in many countries. An example of decentralization in spatial planning can be found in the UK, where Scotland and Wales were given high degrees of autonomy, and in England where new regional institutions were formed to deal with economic and spatial planning (Lovering, 1999, Jones and MacLeod, 1999). A second example of a country that recently changed the task division is Denmark, where a new regional level has been introduced for strategic spatial planning, and the leading role in operational planning diverted from the provinces to the municipalities (Gjerding, 2005, Ravesteijn et al., 2005). Other examples can be found in Poland, Germany, Norway, Sweden and Greece. A wide variety of systems has been developed, but all involving some shifts of powers towards lower governments (Snickars et al., 2002, Sagan and Halkier, 2005, Gualini, 2004).

Decentralization in spatial planning is fuelled by three developments in spatial planning. The first driving force is related to a general trend in society: the call for more citizen participation in decision making. With a more participatory approach an attempt is made to close the gap between policy making and the public (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2006). The second is the focus on an integrative approach in which spatial planning is expected to play a coordinating role between different sectors and different government levels (Gallent et al., 2008). This integrative approach leads to different form of plans: the integrative area oriented spatial plans, instead of plans for a whole country on one spatial aspect only. The third driving force is the movement towards a more development oriented spatial planning, in which planning is seen as a initiator of positive developments instead of a restrictive planning, which only tries to keep unwanted developments out . It is believed that for a successful development planning, local knowledge is of crucial importance and therefore decision making should be close to the area in which the developments should take place.

Participative planning, integrative and development oriented approaches, all three, in their own way, lead to decentralization in spatial planning as the regional and local levels are perceived as the best equipped to deal with these approaches in spatial planning. These are not developments of the last few years, and many of them have been used on a small scale or in pilot projects. But as the new spatial planning systems are most often debated upon for years, it is only in the last few years that the spatial planning acts, based on these developments, came into force.

Although power and responsibilities are divided among more actors, and the central government has lost some of its traditional powers, the role of the central government has not necessarily declined. New powers and instruments are used to influence decision making by other actors. The central government remains to be a powerful actor in spatial planning despite the decentralization (Allmendinger, 2000, Gallent et al., 2008, Deas, 2006). The changes in the planning system are instigated by the national government and are often specifically designed to improve effectiveness of national planning policies. It is the national government that decides to decentralize some of its powers, and it is also the national government that can take these powers back, if the outcome of the planning processes are not in line with national policies. Therefore the role of the national governments in regional planning processes should not be overlooked (Allmendinger, 2005, Alterman, 2001).

This paper will discuss if and how these developments in spatial planning have shaped the new spatial planning systems, and where and how the dichotomy between decentralization and the powers of the national government can be found. Three countries that recently underwent a change in the spatial planning system are studied. The country studies do by no means give a total overview of the changes of the new system. They will just describe those changes that are based on the above mentioned driving forces for decentralization and the role of the national government to show how the dichotomy between decentralization and national level interference can be found in the spatial planning systems.

This document and literature study will be the basis for a larger research project on the dichotomy between decentralisation and national influence in rural spatial planning. It is meant to help further specify research questions.

## **The Netherlands**

The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) issued an influential report on spatial planning in the Netherlands in 1999 (WRR, 1999). Following this report a new spatial planning act was drawn up. This Act went through a long series of debate and consultation before it came into effect in July 2008 (VROM, 2003, VROM, 2006). The introduction of the ILG followed from the same WRR report, and came into effect in January 2007 (Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal, 2006). Together these two form the new legal framework for spatial planning in the rural areas.

### *Participative approach*

In both the new spatial planning act and the ILG the need for more participation in spatial planning processes is acknowledged. The main way this is taken up in the planning system is by decentralizing tasks and responsibilities to the regional and local level of government. Planning processes should be placed on the right level of government, meaning as close to the public as possible. This shift is most clearly seen in the ILG where the national budget for rural development has been devolved to the provinces.

### *Integrative Approach*

The integrative approach is clearly seen in the ILG. Integrative planning is one of the key words of the ILG. Sectoral budgets of the national government are combined into one budget. The provinces can use this one budget for integrative spatial planning, combining goals of the different national departments into one development plan. The provinces, which have to reach these national goals can also bring in their own goals and money in the same budget so that all spatial developments in a region can be planned for as a whole.

### *Development Oriented Approach*

With the ILG the development oriented approach has gained footing in the Netherlands. The ILG is made to facilitate the area oriented development planning. The provinces in this system are responsible for developments in the rural areas, by guiding the existing initiatives but also by initiating them. The spatial planning act gives room for these development oriented approach, by special arrangements, which gives the provinces and national government the opportunity to draw up spatial plans, including land allocation plans, that are necessary for developments of national or provincial importance.

### *Role of the national Government*

The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) is responsible for spatial planning. Following from the spatial planning act it makes a structure plan, which is a strategic and communicative document, with no binding powers. The national government also issues general directives that apply to the whole country and specific directives, aimed at a specific province, municipality or area. All directives need to be followed by the lower governments it is applicable for. If the national government feels that certain issues of national importance cannot be safeguarded by these directives they can make a land allocation plan for a specific area, which overrules all other land allocation plans of lower governments. For the ILG the national government sets the goals that are to be met by the provinces through area oriented development planning. These goals are taken up in contracts with the provinces.

## England

In 2001 a green paper was issued by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR, 2001) "Planning: Delivering a Fundamental Change" followed by a policy statement of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister "Sustainable Communities – Delivering through Planning" (ODPM, 2002). The last step in the reform of spatial planning is the "Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004" (ODPM, 2004). This Act was revised again in 2008, but the general planning system of 2004 was left intact. For rural areas the Rural Strategy 2004 of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is the leading document (DEFRA, 2004).

### *Participative approach*

Although it is mentioned that the old planning system already had an extensive consultation program, the need for a more participatory planning system is widely acknowledged. In general the possibility for a more participatory process has been created by devolving powers to the regional and local levels, both in the spatial planning systems as well as the Rural Strategy. By planning at the lowest possible level participation stakeholders should become easier for the stakeholders. Consultation and participation processes are obligatory for decision making on all levels of government. It is on the local level that this is most clearly. In the Local Development Frameworks of the municipalities a Statement of Community Involvement should be taken up, clearly stipulating how stakeholders and the general public should be involved in decision making.

### *Integrative Approach*

The integrative approach can be found mainly in the Rural Strategy 2004. One of the main issues in this strategy is to rationalize funding programs, by reducing the number of funding programs from around 100 to 3. Further DEFRA will work together with the Regional Development Agencies (RDA's), Small business services, etc to join up services. And finally, many environmental agencies are be combined into one integrative agency: Natural England. The Regional Spatial Strategy is also an integrative plan, combining all sectoral issues with spatial dimensions. Here as well the RDA's play an important role.

### *Development Oriented Approach*

In the Policy Statement of 2002 there is a plea for a culture change in spatial planning in England. The new culture of spatial planning should 'promote planning as a positive tool, which grasps opportunities' instead of the old culture which was 'too often reactive and defensive'. This positive way of planning for development can be mainly found on the regional level. The Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS), which are drawn in close cooperation with the RDA's are the main instrument for supporting sustainable development. The Rural Strategy 2004 also aims at a development approach. Here as well, the regional level will be the main level for execution of DEFRA's policies, which aim at development of the rural areas.

### *Role of the national government*

The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is responsible for spatial planning. With the spatial planning act (last revised in 2008) Planning White papers and the Planning Policy Statements (formerly the Planning Policy Guidance) the national government

sets the framework for spatial planning in England. All regional and local plans need to be in line with these national guidelines. The Secretary of State, has to give his approval to the Regional Spatial Strategies and the local development plans, to make sure national guidelines are followed.

## **Denmark**

The Danish spatial planning system has been reformed as part of the larger reform process of the local government structure. This major reform process started in 2002 with the installation of the reform committee. In 2004 the plans for the reform were made public, and after a period of consultation and preparation the reform came into effect in January 2007 (Strukturkommissionen, 2004, The Commission on Administrative Structure, 2004). This reform comprised of both a restructuring of county and municipal borders and redivision of tasks and responsibilities. Following the general reform a new spatial planning act was drawn up by June 2007 (Ministry of the Environment, 2007a, Ministry of the Environment, 2007b). For rural Planning the National Strategy for rural development in Denmark was drawn up in 2007 by the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries (DFFA, 2007)

### *Participative approach*

Participation of citizens is part of the main basic principles of the local government reform. All issues that directly affect the citizens should be governed at the municipal level to ensure possibilities for public participation. In the spatial planning system this can be found in the fact that rural spatial planning is brought from the county level to the municipal level. For planning processes of all government levels participation procedures are taken in the spatial planning act.

### *Integrative Approach*

The integrative approach is also to be found in the replacement of rural spatial planning to the municipal level. Urban and rural planning should thereby be placed at the same level to ensure that they are in line with each other. It can also be found in the regional development plans. This new type of plan is meant to integrate all sectors with spatial relevance. Developments in these sectors should thereby be more coherent. The rural spatial strategy with the important role for regional growth forums, is also aiming at an integrative approach. For this purpose a national rural development network is established, with participants from a wide range of sectors, including the different ministries, regional and local governments, but also from stakeholder organizations.

### *Development Oriented Approach*

The new Danish spatial planning system introduces a new type of plan in Denmark. This is the development plan. This development plan that will be made by the regions should focus on the preferred development directions of the region. The regions are thereby given a new role, they are supposed to become the instigator of development. This is a new role in spatial planning in Denmark which used to be focused on a restrictive approach. The region is the only level where this developmental role of spatial planning is so clearly indicated.

### *Role of the national government*

The Ministry of Environment is the responsible ministry for spatial planning. The ministry must produce a national planning report after each election of parliament. The national planning report is the guideline for spatial planning in the municipalities. In addition to this report the Minister has to publish an overview of national interests in spatial planning, every four years, again to be used by the regional and municipal authorities when they draw up their own spatial plans. All municipal plans will be assessed by the national government, if they contradict national or regional interests, the Minister is obliged to veto the plan. Besides this guiding of municipal and regional planning the Minister can issue national planning directives for specific projects or developments. With these directives the Minister can supersede the municipal authorities.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The question of this paper was how the three main developments in spatial planning have shaped the new spatial planning systems in three European countries and what the role of the national government is in these new spatial planning systems.

The participatory approach can be found in all systems, but more as a general principle than as a direct driving force for a specific role division between governments. Planning processes should be placed as close to the citizens as possible, preferably on the municipal level. At the same time however, do the national governments have strong powers to intervene in these local processes by setting directives and in the Netherlands even by taking over the making of a land allocation plan. It is not clear from the planning acts what should be regarded as of national importance and what would allow for a national involvement in these local processes (Kersten, 2005). Therefore uncertainty remains on whether in practice the new organisation of spatial planning will support a more participatory approach.

The integrative approach can be mainly found on the regional level and specifically on the specific rural planning strategies. Only in Denmark the general planning system has been changed in such a way that integration on the local level is improved. Although for the more strategic plans, a more integrative approach is mentioned. However, the national government still has a very sectoral approach. In England, Planning policy statements and guidances are mostly issued per sector. The same is true for the national ILG goals in the Netherlands, which in addition are so detailed that little room is left for a creative integrative planning processes (Visitatiecommissie ILG, 2009).

In England and the Netherlands a plea is made for a culture change in spatial planning towards a more development oriented approach. In Denmark the approach is less strongly advocated. But when looking at the organisation of spatial planning the approach can in all three countries mainly found on the regional level. It is the regional governments that have to be instigators or initiators of development. Other levels of government still focus on a more restrictive approach by land allocation, issuing directives and granting permits. Regional governments in all three countries are however not very strong governments and the way they will be able to take up their new role is very uncertain. In Denmark and England the regional governments responsible for spatial planning are relatively new, whereby in Denmark the regions lack statutory powers in spatial planning (Baltzer Nielsen, 2005). In the Netherlands, there is uncertainty on whether the provinces have the capabilities to fill in this role (Kersten, 2005). So although development planning is shaping planning systems it is placed on the level of government with the weakest powers in spatial planning.

Although in general the driving forces of decentralization, participatory, integrated and development oriented planning, have been used to reshape the new spatial planning systems, there are many counter forces indicated as well. This mainly comes down to one more underlying assumption that the national government needs to have a strong supervising role, to protect the landscape from 'unwanted' developments, to protect national interests and to speed up decision making on projects of national importance. All kinds of mechanisms and instruments are used to ascertain that the national government can intervene if deemed necessary. So, despite the fact that the change toward a more participatory, integrated and development oriented spatial planning has been given a place in the new planning systems, this choice is not made with full confidence by the national governments.

### Future research

This paper is based on document and literature study only, no empirical data is used. Therefore the main question remaining is how this dichotomy will work out in practice. On paper the national governments in all three countries have far reaching powers, but what needs to be studied is whether and how they will use these. And whether the use of these powers affects the new approaches to spatial planning. In the study on planning practice special attention should be given to the regional level of government as it is mainly on this level of government that the new approaches are taken up, but it is also the level of government with the most uncertain statutory position.

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