

Delegitimated as non-professional: community representatives in partnerships

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Abstract

This paper addresses unequal participation in rural partnerships in Achterhoek, a region in the East of The Netherlands, where public, private and community representatives are involved in the spatial reorganization of agriculture. We argue that being seen and accepted as a 'professional' can be an important political resource besides financial and organizational resources. We show how professional identity is constructed through the use of particular technical and scientific knowledge and through reference to 'the other', the non-professional, in this case the community representative. We conclude that community representatives are marginalized through exclusionary mechanisms of the construction of professionalism.

Keywords

Professional, citizen, partnership, governance

1. Introduction

Over the past decades governance in rural areas in Europe has changed. This has been indicated as a shift in rural governance from centralism and state-led policy initiatives to policy formation and delivery by a combination of public and private stakeholders with a growing role of the local and regional level (Winter 2002: 33). In The Netherlands various experiments with decentralization of policy delivery towards partnerships in rural regions emerged during the nineties. The policy rhetoric of this 'area based policy' has highlighted the closer link to communities and the citizens to whom the policies are targeted. Generally, the composition of committees or partnerships is legitimized through pointing at the broad cross section of organisations that represent different local interests.

Different empirical studies however, show that many partnerships are poorly accessible especially for community or civic 'representatives' (Geddes 2000, Bock & Derkzen 2006). This has been identified as a problem of democratic legitimacy, since inclusion is a cornerstone of arguments to establish a body of largely unelected participants (Shortall 2004, Hayward et al 2004). Moreover, if access is gained, citizens are said to have a disadvantaged position. It has been noted that, "community partners" lack administrative resources and "are often unused to operating effectively within bureaucratic processes." (Geddes 2000:793). Atkinson argues that even the context and the sheer presence of

professionals, officers, politicians constrain community representatives (Atkinson 1999: 62). Representatives of civic groups therefore risk to become 'peripheral insiders', being at the table but unable to influence central issues (Taylor 2000: 1022, Lowndes and Skelcher 1998: 325). Their main argument is that community or civic representatives cannot participate in a meaningful way because they lack institutional support and financial resources (Taylor 2000: 1025-1027). The principal solution to the identified inequality has been to support those 'weaker' members by means of institutional support, training and education. We agree with the inequalities identified by different authors. We will argue however that there is an additional constraint for community representatives.

We will show that the construction of the category of 'professional' itself is an obstacle for community representatives because professionalism is an important political resource. For this category assumes a residual category, the 'non-professional', or 'amateur' i.e. the civic or community representative which "serves to define and legitimize professional identity" (Fournier 2002: 118). Professionalism has strong symbolic value; it "(...) has the 'capacity to bring into being that which it names'" - that is, the authority attributed to professionals (Butler 1994: 33 in Fournier 2002:118). Legitimation of professional identity moreover is based on the use of abstract and objective or 'scientific' knowledge (Lyotard 1984) and on a certain kind of 'articulateness' that can constrain people who are not used to this mode of speaking (Young 2000). It is important to look at the construction of professional identity because this shows that it is not only about "the resources that communities are able to bring to bear to redress previous imbalances of power" (Taylor 2000: 1025). It is also about to which extent community representatives are perceived as capable in that particular social setting that determines how their contribution and their resources will be evaluated.

The following empirical part of this article gives account of how being seen as a professional governor is a political resource and how being a community representative is not in local rural partnerships in Achterhoek, in the mid-east of The Netherlands.

2. Methodology

The analysis is based on a case study in the region *Achterhoek*, part of the province of Gelderland, in the mid-east of The Netherlands. The region is chosen because a year after the partnership started, a (formerly absent) membership for community representatives was created after intensive lobby of rural women from Achterhoek who took most (3 of 4) seats and participated without being delegated by an organisation as average citizens. Achterhoek is positioned in between the provincial and municipality administrative levels; it roughly consists of one fourth of the eastern provincial territory and incorporates 30 municipalities.

In Achterhoek four *gebiedscommissies* (referred to as partnerships) are active in local spatial planning for the reorganisation of agriculture. The state obligated partnerships to define spatial 'zones', boundaries of specific spaces where agriculture or nature or other functions can predominate with the aim to lower environmental pressures of agriculture. The process therefore can be characterized as a land reform, a strongly politized process, with as ultimate consequence that some farmers could be forced to move to another area. The composition of the partnerships consists of local government, interest organisations,

private sector and community representatives. Document analysis includes minutes of meetings and policy documents. Interviews were conducted with all members of one partnership and with community representatives of two other partnerships as well as with two civil servants of the provincial government. Besides this, several meetings of two partnerships were observed.

The subsequent sections will give account of how professionalism is constructed through analysis of 3) occupational background of members, 4) specific legitimating knowledges and 5) the way professional identity is created through the 'other'.

3. Occupation of partnership members

There are four local partnerships in Achterhoek. Representatives in the partnership represent an interest, generally defined by the state in generic terms such as 'agriculture' or 'water'. However these generic terms are represented by interest organizations that have a specific stance to 'agriculture' or 'water', representation therefore is not as politically neutral as the generic terms imply and means moreover organizational representation. Partnerships in Achterhoek were composed of the following 'interests' and representational organizations:

Agriculture, the provincial division of the National Farmers Union, *GLTO*

Environment, the provincial agency for environment, *Gelderse milieufederatie*

Nature, a national agency for natural parks, *Natuurmonumenten*

Water, the provincial public agency for water, *Waterschap*

Recreation, the Recreation Partnership of the joint municipalities, *Recreatieschap*

Non-agricultural industry, the provincial chamber of commerce, the employer interest organization and recreation entrepreneurs, *Kamer van Koophandel, Sopag, Necron*

Municipalities, the provincial association of municipalities, *VNG*

Quality of life, rural women, *Plattelandsvrouwen*

Rural estates and farmer cooperatives, the provincial association of rural estates and regional association of farmer cooperatives, *GPG, Natuurlijk Platteland Oost*

There are two types of occupational connections to organizations of partnership members. The first one is a paid job with the organization which is represented (5 of 9) and the second one is a board member of an interest organization (3 of 9). At first sight the category of professional seems to be appropriate only for people with a certain kind of paid job or 'profession' on which one can claim expertise. For five partnership members the partnership work is part of their daily job. This is not the case however for the board members of interest organizations who are board members as part of volunteer work. It could therefore be argued that they have the same voluntary or 'amateur' status as the community representative (1 of 9) who is neither employed by nor a board member of an organization.

In practice however, community representatives only are clearly distinguished as non-professionals. More factors play a role, besides formal employment and status derived from

being a salaried expert, in defining professionalism. Important too is how 'professional' you and your organization are perceived. This has to do with the kind of professional knowledge that is required and the way professional identity is constructed. These factors will be discussed in the next sections.

4. Organisation of 'professional' knowledge

Being a partnership member not as part of your daily job is not a restriction for being seen as professional. The lack of professional occupation can be compensated by the extent to which one can display 'professional' knowledge. Firmly rooted in Dutch technocratic planning tradition, the work of the partnerships requires 'professionalism' in the sense of a) juridical knowledge about spatial planning law, b) technical 'objective' knowledge about environmental impacts of activities, c) skills to deal with complexity and information overload and d) resources to feed the partnership with 'scientific evidence' in favour of your argument. A representative, with a job in his interest organisation remarks:

"Juridical aspects of water retention areas, measurements for reduction of ammonia disposition, impact of agriculture on vulnerable habitats, you had to have a lot of background knowledge. We have specialists employed in every field. I have to say in practice, they were the ones who directed me not the other way around." (representative of environmental agency)

The farm union board members, farmers in their daily life, are seen as professionals by other representatives, because they display the kind of knowledge and skills that are required in the negotiation process. They could not display this without specialists within the farm union:

"You have to be able to read the documents and also how to read them diagonally because it is impossible to read all. Of course we have specialists who say what is the most important part to read and they advise us what we can say in the negotiating process." (representative of farm union)

Even partnership members with expertise as part of their job need specialists in their organizations to participate. Community representatives without any organization behind them therefore, felt they were constrained in bringing forward their arguments:

"Other representatives get the headlines and crucial points for discussion delivered to them by their civil servants or employees, it is impossible to go through all the documents and to do it all by yourself!" (community representative for quality of life)

All representatives except from community representatives moreover provided the partnership process with written documents like strategies and research reports to sustain their argument. Not only could community representatives not display the kind of knowledge required, their kind of experiential knowledge didn't fit the process:

"The meetings are full of technical discussions on environmental impacts and definitions. I constantly ask myself what are the consequences for people who live in this area. But it is difficult to relate the technical to the daily life of people here." (community representative for quality of life)

The next section will touch upon the abstract and detached way of articulation and reference to the 'other' through which professional identity is constructed too.

5. Professional identity

Partnership members are expected to behave 'professionally' in the political negotiation process which means that members are expected to argue in abstract and detached ways for the common good and leave personal stories and emotions out. The chairperson of the main partnership intervenes whenever the process becomes too personal or too emotional:

"We are not going to add up the demands of all parties; we never talked in terms of 'parties' in the first place. We are actors in a process where we try to get our joint vision on paper." (chairperson)

Furthermore, professional identity is constructed through reference to 'the other'. Reference to the non-professional makes clear that partnership members see themselves as professionals because they are able - unlike others - to participate in a meaningful way.

"For a lay person in the process it is hardly comprehensible how the content of the plan we are making is being formed." (representative farm union)

Community representatives themselves confirm being the 'other'. They do not label themselves as professional but as 'just average citizens', whose voice is equal or more important than of those professionals who are there 'only' as part of their job:

"If you are partnership member because your boss decided you had to, you are able to make more rational decisions as when you are living in this area. The decisions they make do not affect them, they will get paid anyway, their life won't change because of it." (community representative for quality of life)

6. Conclusion

Though literature is pointing to inequalities in available resources for members of partnerships, the resource of belonging to the category professional has not been identified as a factor determining inequality. The empirical study of rural partnerships in Achterhoek, The Netherlands, shows however that professionalism is an important political resource for representatives of partnerships who are accepted as such. The identification as non-professionals weakened the position of community representatives and devaluated their contribution. It undermined their self-confidence and their belief in what they initially defined as their mission and their legitimacy: bringing to table experiential and social knowledge of the effects of spatial planning for the people in the area. Step by step the added value of their civic experiential knowledge and its status as different lost credibility even in their own eyes. The dominance of professional knowledge and identity put the much claimed advantage of 'new' rural governance, of close links to local communities in another perspective. It reconfirms the exclusivity of the rural political arena that is said to be open to civic participation but is not ready to change the rules of the game.

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