

**Stagnating patterns in the public debate about the Common
Agricultural Policy
Barriers in the transition towards socialization and sustainability**

Extended abstract

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been subject to continuous change, the 'health check' in 2008 being the most recent initiative. This 'health check' will comprise a broad discussion about further change of the CAP, and will possibly lead to more fundamental changes of the CAP towards societal values. Underlying these developments are long-term changes in societal values concerning agriculture and the rural area, and ongoing changes in the composition of stakeholders in the CAP-debate. Scarcity of food and an acceptable standard of living have since the second world war been the most important goals for establishing the CAP. But since the seventies, there has been a growing attention for the reverse sides of this growth, resulting in both ecological as well as trade concerns. From an ecological perspective, the CAP has for instance been criticized about environmental pollution, loss of nature areas and rural area decay. From a world trade perspective, the CAP is seen as a trade distorting policy leading to among others oversupply of agricultural products, depression of world prices, increased competition for producers, which is especially worrisome for the poorer countries, and poverty.

In this transition process towards societal values, the numbers of stakeholders participating in the debate have strongly increased. But the scope of the debate, as well, has broadened from agriculture towards the more general theme of 'what are we going to do with the rural area'. From their concerns, new stakeholders plead among others for a fundamental revision of the role of agriculture in the rural area, for a transition towards an agricultural policy that is more heavily embedded in social underpinnings and more sustainable, for reduction of trade distortions and for a

redistribution of CAP-finances in favor of ecological values. But other stakeholders as well put claims on the rural area, for instance for purposes of recreation, construction work or tourism.

Realizing transitions towards more sustainable agriculture and vital rural areas not only calls for new policies but also for new ways of policymaking. Up to the end of the twentieth century agricultural policy came into being in the so-called iron triangle of the Ministry of Agriculture, farmers' organizations and agricultural specialists from Parliament. The iron triangle itself, as a neo-corporatist arrangement for policy development, became the subject of criticism and was pointed out as an important reason for environmental problems in the agricultural sector. More open debates with societal stakeholders were considered to be helpful to break through this arrangement.

In the Netherlands, different new stakeholders were invited to participate in official and unofficial debates about the future of Dutch agriculture and the Dutch input in the health-check discussion. The large variety in stories, arguments and interests that they put forward, results in a highly complex debate. We studied why realizing effective debates was so difficult and how to improve the quality of the debate.

We used the configuration theory to study values and expectations of the groups involved in the debate as well as fixations and interaction patterns. This theory assumes that people tend to talk most with other people within the same group. As a result, they tend to share their values and convictions with others in the group and develop *configurations* consisting of fixed groups of people that share the same perspectives on reality. When people in a configuration focus strongly on affirmation of their own perspectives and do not allow for alternative meanings anymore, they

may develop *fixations*: fixated convictions, for instance about the situation, about what is needed or about other players in the field. People are often not aware of these fixations, but they express them in interpersonal relations, sometimes causing dysfunctional interaction patterns that are difficult to be break through. These patterns arise especially when people from different configurations talk to each other from their assumptions, like the configurations involved in the CAP-debate.

The study consisted of three phases:

1. Document analysis aimed at (1) identifying the core topics in the debate, and (2) gaining insight into the actor groups involved, their perspectives, values, convictions and wishes and their mutual relations.
2. Questionnaire research meant to (1) test perspectives and convictions from the document analysis and to (2) gain insight into the extent in which these perspectives and convictions are shared among groups of actors and where we could speak of the existence of configurations. Moreover, questionnaire research offered (3) possibilities for retrieving fixations.
3. Survey feedback and Open Space-sessions. Insights from the first two phases were discussed with different actors involved in the debate. Conversations in the Open Space provided data for a deeper analysis of values and perspectives and of patterns in mutual relations. Moreover, the meeting served as a first attempt for intervention because the participants reflect together on the impact of interaction patterns.

Our results showed that the debate about the CAP is characterized by and large by 7 main configurations with strongly conflicting wishes. Farmers for instance look for opportunities to reduce government intervention, to obtain space for scale enlargement, growth, and entrepreneurship. Farmers from another configuration wish for a continuation of payments and contend for preservation. Nature and environmental organizations strive for a redistribution of payments in favor of ecological values. Others strive for an open World Market, abolishment of subsidies and 'laissez-faire' policy or, quite the opposite, strengthened government intervention,

among others on the subject of a fair market that guarantees participation of third world countries. Moreover, we found that stakeholders unintentionally create patterns in mutual interactions that cause stagnation in transitions. Examples are (1) asking for change of the CAP, but at the same time shying away and asking for stability; (2) having ‘cosy conversations’ with like-minded people, thereby excluding new stakeholders; (3) fixation on CAP-content and exchange of official standpoints, making key dilemma’s undiscussable; (4) striving for univocity, but through that, increasing complexity because of the large variety in standpoints of different stakeholders. See Figure 1 for an example. We describe these patterns, elaborate on the underlying fixations and suggest some interventions for unlocking the debate.

Figure 1: Pattern ‘cosy conversations with like-minded people’ and ‘fixation on CAP-content’

