



# Neo-liberal transitions in nature policies in the Netherlands

## Abstract

In 2010, the national government made drastic changes in nature policy in the Netherlands. The choices they made appeared to reflect a neo-liberal ideology, given the strong emphasis on private responsibility and limited governmental interference in nature policy. One of the changes was further decentralisation of nature policies to the provinces. This paper aims to analyse if the national governments changes in nature policy in 2010 resulted in a process of neo-liberalisation of nature policies in the twelve provinces in the Netherlands in the period 2010-2012.

Based on policy documents and interviews, data were collected on the new character of the national and twelve provincial nature policies. This research was carried out in 2011 and 2012. This data was afterwards analysed in a structured way, by developing a neo-liberal index and categorising the provinces' policies according to this index by the researchers, as an experiment with systematic policy comparison.

The conclusion of the article is that the national government's neo-liberal aspirations in 2010 are mainly related to deregulation, efficiency and an increase of the societal relevance of nature. In addition, it is clear that national decision affects provincial policies, but in diverse, even sometimes opposing, ways. Provinces are on their way to develop hybrid policies and practices in terms of neo-liberalism. In future research, it is worth to explore how the provincial policies develop further, and to look into the factors and mechanisms that cause these diversities.

**Keywords:** nature policy; policy change; neo liberalism; market-oriented policies; multi-level governance

## Introduction

'Neo-liberalism has become an important explanatory concept for understanding what is going on in the world', as was stated by Feo (2008, p. 223). Neo-liberalism is commonly conceptualized as a political ideology that refers to four characteristics: the individual, freedom of choice, market security, and minimal government (e.g. Larner, 2000).

Nature conservation is one of the policy domains that is worldwide characterized by neo-liberal trends, especially after the financial crisis in 2008. Since the 1990s, the commonly applied protectionist model of nature conservation has been challenged by new policy approaches, of which many have been analysed and assessed for their neo-liberal characteristics (e.g. Dressler, 2007; Castree, 2008; Fletcher, 2010). The first manifestation of neo-liberal nature policy is associated with the introduction of private parties and markets as a way of regulating natural resources (Castree, 2008). The growing importance of economic considerations and instruments for nature conservation has emerged from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (Rodríguez-Labajos and Martínez-Alier, 2013).

Also the European Union is encouraging neo-liberal practices with the approval of the European Biodiversity Strategy 2020, aiming to develop markets that capture the economic value of biodiversity and by developing partnerships for biodiversity with a wide variety of stakeholders (European Commission, 2011). This strategy urges to improve and streamline national, European and global monitoring, reporting and reviewing obligations

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related to biodiversity objectives. To reach an overall perspective on these combined policy efforts poses an interesting challenge to comparative analysis, given the contextual variety of the 28 European member states.

A comparable complex situation is taking place in nature policy in the Netherlands. More specific, a variety of nature policy strategies are developed, after a new neo-liberal government came into power in 2010. This government was composed of the conservative - liberal party (VVD) and the Christian Democrats (CDA) as a 'minority government', which could govern with the support of the Party for Freedom (PVV). Presenting the governmental ambitions in September 2010, the guiding principles of this cabinet (called 'Rutte-I'), were Freedom and Responsibility: the aspiration to give citizens' freedom to take responsibility for their own lives and collective goods.

Among other policy domains, the cabinet sets a transformation process in motion in nature policy that entailed elements that seem to reflect the neo-liberal ideology. Nature policy, which was formerly associated with a strong government, top-down and scientific, rational planning, was transformed in the direction of a reduced governmental administration and a market oriented and individual approach (Lower Chamber of the States General, 2010). This new direction has interrupted the decade-long stable policy strategy in the Netherlands, which was based on the concept of the National Ecological Network (NEN), which envisioned larger nature areas being connected in a coherent network and spanning the entire country, for a large part to be realized with public spending and by multi-level governance (see e.g. Lower Chamber of the States General, 2011; 2012).

Large budget cuts and a discontinuation of the National Ecological Network (NEN) shocked the traditional nature conservation institutions (Buijs *et al.*, 2014). This was combined with further decentralization of nature policy to the twelve provinces of the Netherlands. These provinces, who already had a large responsibility for implementing national nature policies, are, from 2010 on, more than before in control of the organization of the implementation of nature policies. However, the national government remains in control of the European and other international commitments in nature policy. Since October 2010, the provinces in the Netherlands have begun to act and to react on the new cabinets' strategy for nature policy, which could lead to a certain degree of neo liberalisation of nature policy in the Netherlands.

The aim of this paper is to describe the impact of the seemingly neo-liberalized decisions at national level on provincial nature policies in the Netherlands. The data are coming from interviews and documents on the discussions and choices that were made by national government and

provinces after the new decisions in nature policy of the between 2010 and 2012. This data was gathered as part of the annual policy review carried out by the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency. To be able to analyse the neo-liberal transitions in national and provincial policies, we develop a 'neo liberal index' that allows a comparative analysis of this data.

The paper begins with a section in which we define neo-liberalism. In the next section we explain the methodology and tailor the neo-liberal concept to the case of nature policy. This methodology is empirically applied to the national and twelve provincial nature policies in the Netherlands in the two section thereafter. We conclude by reflecting on the results and by answering the research question.

## Defining and conceptualising neo-liberalism

It should be emphasized that something such as 'the' neo-liberal way does not exist. Clarke (2008) assumes that there is no rigid neo-liberal definition, but a wide diversity of specific neo-liberal formations takes place. As Clarke (2008, p. 140) states, "Neo-liberalism does not and cannot exist in pure form, but only manifests itself in hybrid formations". Moreover, he states that "Neo-liberalism does not have a static score since it is consistently drawn into new entanglements as it tries to colonize the world" (Clarke 2008, p. 141). In order to be able to illustrate the development of such hybrid formations by the use of a typology, a clear set of elements are to be identified. Many authors agree that neo-liberalism consists of several elements (Martinez and Garcia, 2000; Clarke, 2008; Feo, 2008). The core aspects that determine neo-liberalism relate to four characteristics indicated by Clarke (2008, 141) and are as follows:

- Market logic rationality: the rationality to organize human affairs as market relations;
- Calculating framework of efficiency: vocabulary, norms and ways of calculating value;
- Model of the self-possessed independent individual: people are encouraged to become independent, empowered individuals who take ownership; and
- Question of authority: a shift from 'public' authority towards 'private' authority.

In this section, we describe these characteristics.

### *Market logic as rationality to organize human affairs*

Market logic rationality refers to the idea that the market has become the ideal mechanism to the service provisions of the state (Beeson and Firth, 1998, p.6). This ideology had been expressed in the managerial ideas about the state and public service during the time when New Public Management was coming into being (in the 1990s) and determined how relations between state and non-state actors are organized. Services are provided within business-

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like (principal - agent) relationships between the state and contract partners through, for example, the outsourcing of public services, new deals, framework contracts, direct privatization, partnerships involving finance and creating new markets. In addition, the instruments are used to create new conditions for competition and benchmarking in order to ensure the best service available (Clarke, 2004). These competitions structure the relations between service providers (Newman, 2010) and aspire to select the best or cheapest contractor to do a certain job. In addition, the relationship between public service and citizens becomes oriented by choice. Citizens are considered as consumers or clients who must be allowed to make choices about service provisions. This focuses on freedom to choose results in greater independence and autonomy of service users (Newman, 2010).

#### *The calculating framework of efficiency*

Efficiency is the guiding principle in neo-liberal policy strategies. Hardin (1968) argued that the 'tragedy of the commons' derives from a failure to produce clear, visible relationships between costs and benefit, action and effects. Markets are therefore viewed as exceptional features of modern society, because markets "are expected to convert consumer preferences into prices, uncertainty into risk, need into demand, etc." (Davies, 2010). Therefore, public goods should be expressed in terms of supply and demand, be regulated in a market as well as expressed in a price. In addition, Power (1997) and Clarke (2004) argue that neo-liberalism frames human activities in economic and financial terms. This implies that matters that cannot be interpreted in these terms are ignored or seen as less important. Therefore, frameworks relating to norms that calculate the value of common goods are established, often directed at affordable and feasible policies and to reduce public expenditure. Another aspect is managerial technologies that are usually associated with New Public Management: a series of calculative technologies embedded in specific practices such as budgetary management, auditing and targeting. These technologies depend upon the authority and apparent objectivity of disciplines such as accountancy, economics and management, which had risen to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s (MacKinnon, 2000). The expansion of regulatory practices such as auditing and targeting have since been promoted and legitimized through elaborate rhetoric of accountability and openness.

#### *The model of the self-possessed independent individual*

In a neoliberal regime, people are encouraged to become independent and empowered individuals. This is embedded in discourses about responsibility and involvement. The discourse of 'active citizenship' is prominent in neoliberal practices. Active citizenship refers to citizens as participants who share the responsibility for common solutions as well as participate in public consultation and planning. It also points to a view of the

citizen as a service provider as an alternative to the state. This may lead to strategies that equip citizens "with the skills and capacities to work in partnerships with local governments or to take care of particular services, functions and sometimes the management of previously public resources" (Newman, 2010, p. 33). The latter may include practices, e.g. trainings, etc., to shape this active citizenship. The last aspect of the model of the self-possessed independent individual is the tendency to deregulate. In order to take responsibility, the individual obtains the freedom to act. This demonstrates that the private interests of individuals as well as corporations matter and that burden of taxation and excess of regulation that interfere with freedom and entrepreneurship are removed (Clarke, 2004).

#### *The question of authority: from public authority to private authority*

As Clarke (2004) state that, in neo-liberal practices, the public interest is challenged as it is replaced by the rule of private interests which are coordinated by markets. In neo-liberal thought, "there is no public interest, only private choices" (Clarke, 2004, p. 310). This denotes the dissolution of the public realm with insistence on the primacy of the private. An additional characteristic is that objectives with regard to common affairs are no longer determined by the state, but by private actors. The determination of objectives concurs with a shift of activities, ownership and resources from the public sector to the private sector.

#### *Method: the neo-liberal index*

To analyse the impact of neo-liberal national decisions on provincial nature policies, the method of an index is used. An index is a measurement process that implies a non-metric, ordinal, ordering of data (Deleon and Resnick-Terry, 1999). The definition of neo-liberalism is used as a start to specify the characteristics of neo-liberalism in nature policy. The characteristics are translated into indicators that are given an ordinal value for each of the indicators, resulting in an opportunity to quantify and to compare practices among each other (Sartori, 1970; Collier and Mahon, 1993).

Data on national and twelve provincial nature policies was collected between 2010 and 2012. Provinces are: Limburg, North-Brabant, Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Overijssel, South-Holland, North-Holland, Groningen, Friesland, Flevoland and Drenthe. Senior officers in charge of nature policy at national and provincial levels were interviewed in order to gain an understanding into the ways of thinking, speaking and acting in nature policy after the new decisions introduced by the cabinet Rutte-I. These conversations revealed existing and new discourses, visions and strategies of the government regarding nature policy. Additionally, policy documents were analysed such as:

- National political debates in the Parliament;

- National policy documents and political communications (letters, etc.);
- Provincial debates in the council;
- Provincial policy documents and websites.

These documents enable understanding of the manifestation of intentions, planning and actual shift in policy practice.

It is important to specify indicators for each of the four characteristics of neo-liberalism to fit within the context of nature policy. Each of the characteristics is divided into indicators that are measured on a value-scale from 0 to 1, depending on the absence or presence of the respective practice (See Table 1). For instance, on the characteristic 'market logic in relations', three indicators are specified. Considering the indicator 'conditions for competitive success: competition and benchmarking' is specified. We apply this indicator in each of the provinces and the

national government. When the indicator does occur and is a topic of political debate, the value 1 is given. In the absence of the neo-liberal practice, the regional policy gets the value 0. The value of 0.5 is assigned in the event that the neo-liberal practice is not yet revealed in terms of instruments and practices, but the politicians discuss the topic and intend to develop policy instruments. For example, the province of Gelderland enacted a crowdsourcing competition what means that activities for competition and benchmarking exist, resulting in value 1 on the indicator 'conditions for competitive success: competition and benchmarking'. This procedure to value indicators is carried out for each of the provincial policies as well as the national policy.

To enable comparison of the neoliberal practices, the 'NEO-LIBERAL INDEX' is designed which is an average aggregation of the indicator-values of each of the characteristics. National government or provinces having

**Table 1** Explanation of characteristics, indicators and values of neo-liberalism

Characteristics	Indicators	Value	Value	Value
		0	0.5	1
Market logic in relations	Business like relationships: outsourcing and new business partnerships	Does not occur and is no topic in political debate nor is mentioned in policy documents	Does not occur, but is a topic of political debate or intention of the government	It occurs and is a topic of political debate in the government
	Conditions for competitive success: competition and benchmarking	Does not occur and is no topic of political debate in the government	Does not occur, but is a topic of political debate or intention of the government	It occurs and is a topic of political debate in the government
	A demand oriented nature: nature meets societal needs and citizens' preferences	Does not occur and is no topic of political debate in the government	Does not occur, but is a topic of political debate, or intention of the government	It occurs and is a topic of political debate in the government
Calculating framework of efficiency	Nature is expressed in prize and benefits: market and prize mechanisms	Does not occur and is no topic of political debate in the government	Does not occur, but is a topic of political debate, or intention of the government	It occurs and is a topic of political debate in the government
	Affordable and feasible as leading principles: efficiency solutions or budget cuts in nature policies	Does not occur and is no topic of political debate in the government	Does not occur, but it is a topic of political debate or intention of the government	It occurs and is a topic of political debate in the government – no additional public financing from the government
Model of self-possessed independent individuals	Active citizenship: citizens are addressed and employed as service providers	Does not occur and is no topic of political debate in the government	Does not occur, but is a topic of political debate, or intention of the government	It occurs and is a topic of political debate in the government
	Enabling citizens: strategies to enable citizens to enlarge their capacity to be a service provider, trainings etc.	Does not occur and is no topic of political debate in the government	Does not occur, but is a topic of political debate, or intention of the government	It occurs and is a topic of political debate in the government
	Freedom for entrepreneurial initiative: deregulation	Does not occur and is no topic of political debate in the government	Does not occur, but is a topic of political debate, or intention of the government	It occurs and is a topic of political debate in the government.
Authority: from public to private	Determining objectives: decision making with societal and private partners	Normal public consultation	Bottom up, government follows partners	Complete private decision-making, government is (almost) absent.
	Resources and ownership: a transfer from public to private land ownership	Government controls	Intermediate	Privatization

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a value between 0 and 0.5 on the NEO-LIBERAL INDEX are considered as being little to non-neo-liberal. If the national government or a province values 1, the nature conservation policy basically resembles the neo-liberal ideology. A value near 0 means that the policy is not neo-liberal at all. A value near 1 refers to a policy that is close to neo-liberal. Every in-between value illustrates that the policy regime is hybrid, having some neo-liberal characteristics and having some non-neo-liberal characteristics. A hybrid practice can occur because an administration emphasises certain aspects and ignores others (for example an emphasis on market logic in relations, but no shift of authority, etc.), or because an administration develops a discourse, discussion, debate, but does not (yet) act on it.

## Manifestation of the neo-liberal ideology at national level

The following section describes the neo-liberal characteristics of the national governmental strategy after the proclamation of the new cabinet Rutte-I in 2010. Data is coming from multiple debates that took place in the Parliament. (Lower Chamber of the States General, 2011; 2011a; 2011b; 2011c; 2012).

### Market logic in relations

A topic of debate in the Parliament was how to renew nature policy. This topic mainly focused on the relationship between the national government and the provinces. The national government decides to decentralize nature policy towards the provinces. *On the indicator business like relationships: outsourcing and new business partnerships*, it is clear that the provinces have been in charge of implementing national policy targets for some years by detailed outsourcing contracts containing targets on, for example, the purchase, design and management of specified amounts of hectares of land for the National Ecological Network. With the decentralization, these contracts are discontinued. From 2010 on, the provinces are in charge of the organization and the implementation of the remaining National Ecological Network. The provinces have to realize these national objectives with budgets provided by the national government. The way to guarantee that provinces realize and account for these objectives is a topic of debate. Nevertheless, the European Union still considers the Netherlands national government as being responsible for achieving European nature goals. The new situation does not result in renewing the business like relationships between national and provincial governments, for example by renewing outsourcing contracts with each individual province, resulting in a value 0.5 in terms of establishing *business like relationships: outsourcing and new business relations* (value 0.5).

Related to the indicator conditions for *competitive success: competition and benchmarking* or mechanisms for competition such as tenders on nature management

for actors or societal parties, the national government does not take action or launches activities (value 0), which might be explained because national government does not consider itself as having an active role in nature management; this task is decentralized to regional governments.

In terms of the indicator *demand oriented nature: nature meets societal needs and citizens' preferences*, the cabinet's new direction in nature policy is based on the assumption that the public did not benefit from nor support the 'old' nature policy as it was considered too technocratic, too expensive, and hampering business development. Since the operational responsibility to develop and manage nature lies with the provinces, the national government does aim for demand oriented nature, but does not actively participate in strategies to discover the preferences of society (value 0.5). Analysis of these three aspects illustrates that the cabinet Rutte-I appears to be weak in terms of neo-liberalism on the aspect of 'market logic in relations'.

Aggregating these indicator values results in a value 0.33 with regard to market logic in relations, which means that the national government is not considered to be neo-liberal on this aspect (see Figure 1).

### Calculating framework of efficiency

At the national level, many political parties emphasize the value of nature for the economy, public health, housing values, attractive business surroundings etc. They express that nature should be less of a public affair and financed more through society. The idea that *nature is expressed in terms of price and benefits* and is regulated by *the market and by prize mechanisms* is thus a topic of national discussion. The discourse that nature policy is legitimized by its benefits to people who should also be willing to contribute financially is widely accepted at the national level by both the cabinet parties as well as the other political parties. However, expressing nature in monetary terms is not yet a national practice, even though some politicians suggest ideas such as to introduce entrance fees for nature parks. Instruments to commercialize nature are not developed at the national level (value 0.5).

The cabinet parties CDA and VVD considered nature policy as having excessively burdened public spending, due to the unrealistic ambitions of the ecological network. They propose that available finances must become prevalent over ambitions. *Affordable and feasible policy is a leading principle*, including the indicator *efficiency solutions or budget cuts in nature policies*. The new cabinet does not invest in management technologies based on efficiency and performance management, but the nature policy budget was dramatically slashed, by 42%, as part of the reduction of the public expenditure (value 0.5).

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Aggregating these indicator values results in a value 0.5 on the aspect of the *calculating framework in efficiency*, which is clearly the most neo-liberal aspect of national nature policy (see Figure 1).

#### *Model of the self-possessed independent individual*

The cabinet Rutte-I expresses a discourse of *active citizenship*, which is the indicator *active citizenship: citizens are addressed and employed as service providers*. Political debates show the ideology that society must be able to tell how to preserve and maintain nature and to take a role in it. This is economically motivated (VVD) and combined with arguments that government institutions have a pampered society (PVV). In addition, farmers are considered the best service providers to manage nature (CDA). In order to achieve active citizenship, the national government reduces the public expenditure for nature. Active citizenship is a topic of the national debate, but stimulating this active citizenship, however, is to be executed by regional governments (value 0.5). Furthermore, the national government does not discuss nor takes actions to *enable citizens related to strategies to enable citizens to enlarge their capacity to be a service provider* (value 0).

*Deregulation: freedom for entrepreneurial initiative* refers to spatial planning regimes that have, thus far, regulated activities of other (economic) functions within or close to natural areas. In the Netherlands, these regimes have resulted in conflicts between nature conservationists and farmers regarding European nature reserves (Natura 2000 areas). According to the cabinet, the National Ecological Network claims land that is currently in use for agricultural production, what therefore affected agricultural business development. Deregulation aims to remove these impediments and prevent nature policy to harm private interests, mainly those of farmers. Therefore, the cabinet decides to reduce the amount of land that is spatially claimed for nature development and return the land to farmers, which is the traditional electorate of the CDA. Additionally, the cabinet modifies and simplifies national nature conservation law, for example, by reducing the list of protected species (value 1). Together, these indicators result in a value 0.5 on the aspect model of self-possessed independent individuals (see Figure 1)

#### *Authority: from public to private*

Especially with regard to nature management, the cabinet intends to shift authority and responsibility from existing governmental institutions towards society. The cabinet's intention is a cheaper nature management and the promotion of societal involvement in managing nature, carried out by farmers, volunteers and societal organizations instead of public service.

It is the cabinet's ideology that nature is to become a private matter. The cabinet party CDA states that farmers

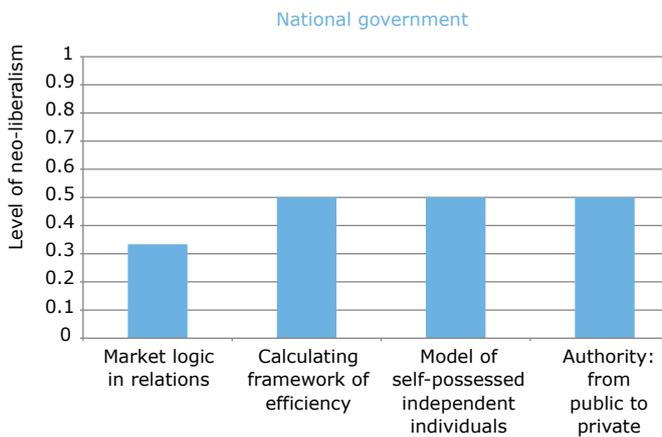
can be just as efficient in attending to nature as can ecological professionals. The perception is that farmland is nature land as well and should be treated as equal to nature reserves that are managed by professional institutes. VVD, on the other hand, argues that public expenditure on nature is excessive. Available budgets rather than biodiversity goals should be a guide in developing nature policy. However, the national government is still responsible for the European nature obligations, realizing the Nature 2000 network. This demonstrates that nature is still considered a public responsibility due to European legislation. Decision making in the early period of Rutte-I occurred between national and provincial governments. There is no evidence at the national level that the private sector is involved in decision making, let alone a transfer of power toward a complete private determination of objectives and decision making. On the contrary, the traditional societal partners were ignored during the period of transition, resulting in the value 0 on the indicator *determining objectives: decision making with societal and private partners*.

The idea of commercialization plays a role in national political debates. It is intended that finance comes from the private sector and the amount of nature under public management is reduced by canceling national ecological corridors. The discussion at the national level includes new ownership of nature land, 'giving nature back to individuals' (CDA) and encourages commercial combinations with nature. A shift of ownership to the private sector (ownership) is, therefore, visible at national level, resulting in a value 1 on the indicator *resources and ownership: a transfer from public to private land ownership* (value 1).

On the aspect of authority, the combination of these two indicators results in a value 0.5 (see Figure 1).

#### *Neo-liberal manifestation of national governmental practices*

From the analysis of national governmental practices, it can be concluded that the national governmental strategy can be labelled as 'neo-liberal' particularly on the aspects of calculating framework of efficiency and the model of the self-possessed individual. The high value of the calculating framework of efficiency can be explained by the leading discourse of the cabinet, 'affordable and feasible', which the cabinet realizes by enacting budget cuts in nature policy and by reducing the ambitions for the ecological network in order to meet the available finances. The high value of the aspect of the model of the self-possessed individual is largely due to deregulation and the reduction of the amount of land on which a nature claim lies in order to reduce the effects on farmers. Despite this, and the intention to reduce the amount of nature under public responsibility, there is a relatively low value on the aspect of the shift of authority from public to private. This can be explained by the lack of involvement of private and



**Figure 1** National government's value on neo-liberal index

societal partners in the decision making of the national government. On the aspect of market logic relations, it is revealed that, despite the cabinets' aspiration to make others more responsible for nature policies; it does not invest in establishing new business like relationships to enact this (Figure 1).

### Manifestation of the neo-liberal ideology at regional government levels

A comparison is made between the nature policy strategies of Netherlands regional governments in response to the neo-liberal actions of the cabinet. In all provinces there have been reactions to the declaration of nature policy changes by the cabinet Rutte-I. These are public statements, political communications or new policy agendas. Some provinces have started to act on the new course; others are merely reacting, opposing or reconsidering their policies (see e.g. Province Drenthe, 2012; Province Gelderland, 2012; Province Groningen 2012, 2012a; Province Friesland, 2012; Province Limburg, 2012, Province Overijssel, 2012; Province North-Brabant, 2012; Province North-Holland, 2012; Province Utrecht, 2012; Province Zeeland, 2012; Province South-Holland, 2012).

#### Market logic in relations

After the proclamation of the cabinet Rutte-I, all provinces are faced with large budget cuts, and have to reconsider the direction of their nature policies. With respect to the first indicator, *business like relationships: outsourcing and new business partnerships*, it can be observed that some of the provinces already had experiences with outsourcing some of the tasks to professional partners. Activities that have recently become part of outsourcing to private actors are land exchange and land development for the National Ecological Network (Limburg- value 1, Gelderland- value 1) and collaborative financial investments (North-Holland- value 1). In addition, a shift has been observed in the types of outsourcing relations. Businesslike relations such as co-financing constructions are increasing as well as activities to commission private parties, including

consultant agencies or expert teams to perform certain tasks (North-Brabant –value 1). South-Holland, Flevoland, Drenthe and Zeeland intend to continue or increase outsourcing activities, often financially motivated, but at the time of our research this was not implemented yet (value 0.5). Also, Groningen, Friesland and Utrecht develop partnership with society by requesting societal partners to contribute and co-finance nature development and management. However, at the moment of the research, these provinces did not make an explicit choice about how to set-up these partnerships (value 0.5). Overijssel, at the time of this research, does not express an intention for new co-financing constructions or new outsourcing tasks for the realization of the National Ecological Network (value 0).

Creating *conditions for competitive success* by using benchmarking or mechanisms to increase competition between parties in nature conservation is another neo-liberal indicator. Limburg intends to evaluate a nature management subsidy scheme based on the best quality delivered (value 0.5), while North-Brabant is willing to commission activities to the most efficient partnership (value 0.5). Also South Holland, as part of an extensive exploration on how to realize goals more efficiently, intends to use tenders (value 0.5). Gelderland wants to select suitable partners to lead nature projects, based on criteria such as proven capability and local support (value 0.5). Gelderland also experiments with a (small scale) crowd sourcing competition among citizens as a component of its nature and landscape strategy consultation. Gelderland selected the best citizen idea to support with public money. North-Holland, Friesland, Overijssel, Utrecht, Flevoland, Drenthe, Zeeland, Groningen do not yet express an intention or instruments to increase competition or benchmarking among private parties in nature conservation (value 0).

Almost all provinces decide to focus their remaining state budgets on realizing the international goals in their (often reduced) ecological networks. Analysis reveals that some provinces more than others perceive nature conservation a way to meet societal preferences and that they should develop a more *demand oriented nature, in which nature meets societal needs and citizens' preferences*. This results in an aim to detect citizens' preferences, for example, with surveys (North-Holland, Utrecht, Gelderland) and dialogue (North-Holland). The provinces Gelderland, North-Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, North-Brabant, South-Holland and Overijssel value 0.5: they recognise areas in which ecological values are top priority, while in other areas, nature should fit more with the needs of citizens, allowing more recreational use and combinations of nature with other societal functions. For example, South Holland chooses to invest provincial budgets in recreational areas more than in nature reserves. The areas in which ecological goals are top

priority are reduced to the international nature goals. Utrecht opts to base its new policy on different nature perspectives, ranging from ecological to mixed used areas. The provinces Groningen and Friesland emphasise that the ecological value of their remaining ecological structures is the basis for their choices, despite that they also express the wish to combine this with other societal goals, but at the time of the transition, they have not yet invested in realizing demand oriented nature types (value 0.5). Overijssel and Gelderland prioritise the ecological network for ecological goals, and outside these areas want to make space for more combinations with societal functions (value 0.5). The other provinces consider the ecological function most important: choices about nature types or management schemes remain primarily determined by biodiversity improvement, as is decided by the public government. The provinces that consider biodiversity values as the main guiding principle for choices in nature conservation are Limburg, Drenthe and Flevoland (value 0).

The aggregation of values for *market logic in relations* clarifies that the neo-liberal Market Logic is introduced in relations between the provincial government and partners in Gelderland (0.66) and North-Brabant (0.66). The provinces with the least neo-liberal market logic relations are Overijssel (0.16), Drenthe (0.16) and Flevoland (0.16) (Figure 2).

#### Calculating framework of efficiency

Following the cabinet's discourse, a shift is observed regarding the indicator *nature is expressed in prize and benefits: market and prize mechanisms*. Some provinces emphasize the value of nature for the economy as well as society. These provinces use valuation of nature to legitimize nature by its benefits to people as an argument to convince other (non-institutional) stakeholders to take responsibility for nature management and nature conservation. From the political debates at regional

government levels, it appears that the value of nature for public health, housing values, attractive business surroundings are emphasized equally or even more than the intrinsic value of nature and species. North-Brabant and Gelderland intend to evaluate the economic value of nature for private actors in order to induce fundraising (value 0.5). Instruments to achieve this include green funds, regional bank accounts for nature projects or green investments. Also other provinces such as South-Holland, Utrecht and Groningen agree to investigate new instruments to collect money (value 0.5). Groningen is looking for a way to develop a regional fund to which companies contribute because of the money they raised by using nature. The other provinces currently value 0 on the indicator nature is expressed in benefits and prize: market and prize mechanisms.

With regard to the indicator *affordable and feasible as leading principles: efficiency solutions or budget cuts in nature policies*, almost all provinces have re-assessed their ecological networks, often motivated by efficiency arguments. Their shared strategy is to earmark the remaining budgets toward the most relevant nature areas and to find less expensive options for nature management. Affordable and feasible has become a leading principle of nature policies in some provinces, such as Gelderland, South Holland and Overijssel. South Holland follows the national strategy and cuts budgets full heartedly and no extra public (provincial) spending for nature remains (value 1). Gelderland, Limburg and Overijssel follow the same argument, but do invest extra provincial budget (value 0.5). Also other provinces state they have to deal with the national budget cuts and emphasize that it is now time to look for more efficient ways to realize nature (Friesland, Utrecht, Groningen, value 0.5). Drenthe did not re-assess the ecological network in the period 2010 and 2012, although we know that it was being forced to do so in 2013, because of

Market logic in relations

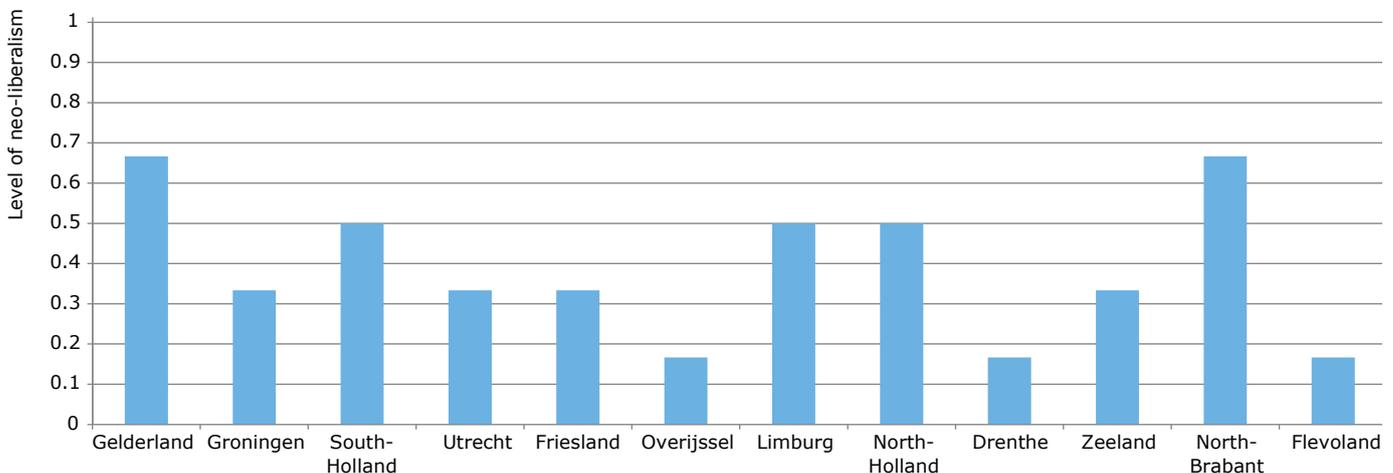


Figure 2 Values on market logic in relations among the provinces

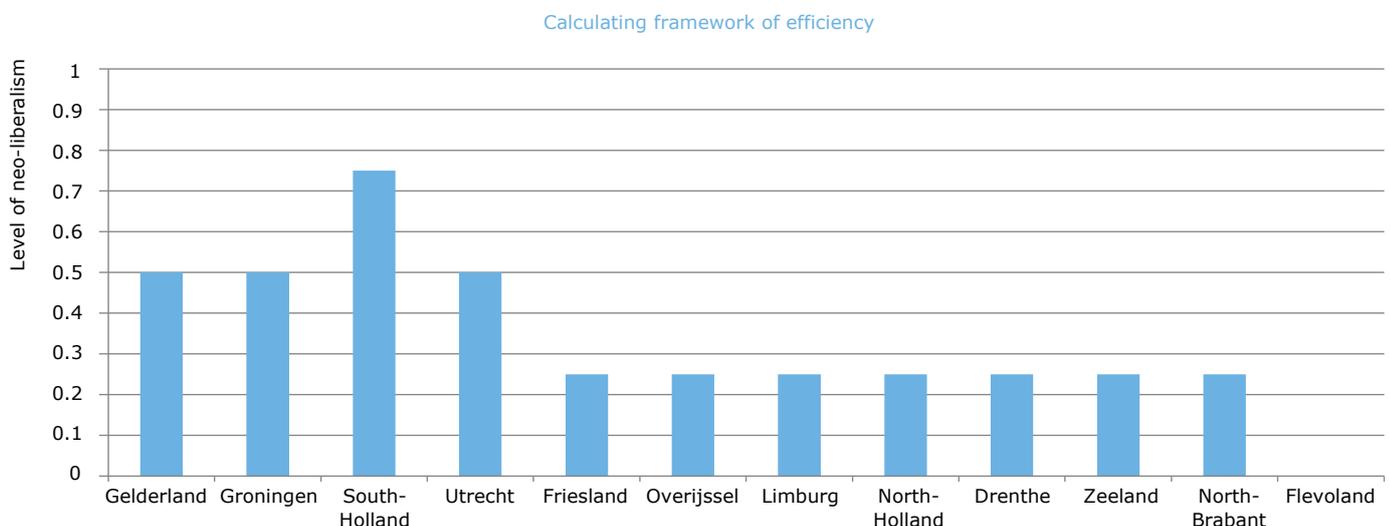
limited budgets. Drenthe aimed to manage the same surface, but was looking for more affordable types of nature (value 0.5). Zeeland did re-asses the ecological network, but keeps on contributing to nature by extra provincial means (value 0.5). The province of Flevoland does not develop strategies to adapt the planning of their nature responsibilities to new budgetary limits, but chooses to fight the national government's decision to cease the co-financing of the national ecological corridor in the province (value 0). Also, North-Brabant does not re-asses its ecological network (value 0). North-Holland did re-asses the ecological network even before the cabinet's policy changes based on the argument of efficacy and feasibility. The province did not re-asses again after 2010 and did not decrease budgets in addition to national governmental budgets (value 0.5).

Manifestation of calculating frameworks of efficiency among regional governments in total reveals that South Holland (0.75) shows the highest value. Most provinces receive an intermediate value in this aspect (0.25). Only Flevoland (0) does not consider efficiency as a central aspect in their nature policy strategy (Figure 3).

*The model of the self-possessed independent individual*  
 With regard to the indicator *active citizenship: citizens are addressed and employed as service providers*, it can be witnessed that most provinces aim to increase active citizenship. Overijssel and Gelderland create a spatial zone in which private initiatives (including citizens) are welcomed that combine economic development with nature management and quality improvement for water, nature and landscape (value 1). Analysis reveals that North-Brabant (value 0.5) focuses in their discussion more on private companies as potential contributors to the execution of nature policies than on citizens. South Holland addresses the responsibility of society, but hardly addresses citizens (value 0.5). North-Holland

(value 1) focuses more on social organizations and Limburg (value 1), traditionally, on volunteers for nature management. Zeeland (value 1) and Drenthe (value 1) also rely on active citizenship as valuable and necessary for nature management. Gelderland, Utrecht and Overijssel ask citizens to contribute to nature policy, for example by developing and managing ecological structures. These provinces are open to accept new nature types, nature activities and commercial combinations that were not previously considered. These three provinces incorporate this intention into their policy plans and develop instruments or actions to invite citizens to contribute to nature development and management. Utrecht considers giving citizens a greater role in the development and management of natural areas and to stimulate active citizenship, but at the time of this research this was not implemented yet (value 0.5). The provinces of Flevoland and Groningen do not express the intention to invite citizens for new initiatives (value 0). Friesland does see the need to rely on more private arrangements for the realization and management of nature (due to financial difficulties) but not specifically citizens (value 0).

The indicator *enabling citizens: strategies to enable citizens to enlarge their capacity to be a service provider, for instance by trainings* show a variety of developments among the provinces. Tools and strategies to enable citizens to develop self-possession strategies vary among the provinces. Limburg has developed a 'learning company' (value 1); North-Holland utilizes a wide range of tools to involve citizens and companies, depending on the process, the objectives as well as the desires of the citizens themselves (design atelier, newsletters, co-decision in steering groups) (value 1). Drenthe has set up a citizens' panel to explore what people think and want from nature. Private initiatives to manage nature are encouraged (value 1). North-Brabant also stimulates



**Figure 3** Values of provinces on calculating framework of efficiency

individuals to determine what they want with nature by participation processes and dialogues (value 0.5). Gelderland intends to create new structures such as dialogue, pilot projects, think tanks and knowledge networks in which citizens are allowed and encouraged to participate in order to increase societal involvement and ownership, but in practice it appears hard to realize (value 0.5). Utrecht intends to invest in knowledge and training of volunteers and education. This is, in the period 2010-2012 an intention that is not yet implemented (value 0.5). Certain provinces such as Flevoland are less innovative in developing new strategies for active citizenship (value 0). Groningen does develop new nature policies together with societal partners but does not intend to invest in capacity building for active citizenship (value 0). Overijssel intends to invest actively in capacity building. During the period that we look at, this was not yet put into practice (value 0.5). Friesland, Zeeland and South-Holland do not intend to invest in capacity building for self-organization of citizens (value 0).

A neo-liberal regime includes less regulation and more freedom for entrepreneurial initiative, which is expressed through the indicator *freedom for entrepreneurial initiative: deregulation*. It is observed that due to the decentralization and cuts in the budgets coming from the national government, all provinces were forced to restructure and decrease their planned ecological structures, resulting in diminishing the area regulated by nature policy. However, Flevoland and North-Brabant have refused to do this and have maintained the original size of nature as being the focus of nature policy. The decrease of the ecological network in almost all provinces reduces the side-effects of claims on land by nature. Consequently, the farmers benefit. Groningen, Limburg, Zeeland, Drenthe, South-Holland, Gelderland en Utrecht and Friesland value 1 because they have decreased their area size of nature policy, thereby reducing nature claims on agricultural

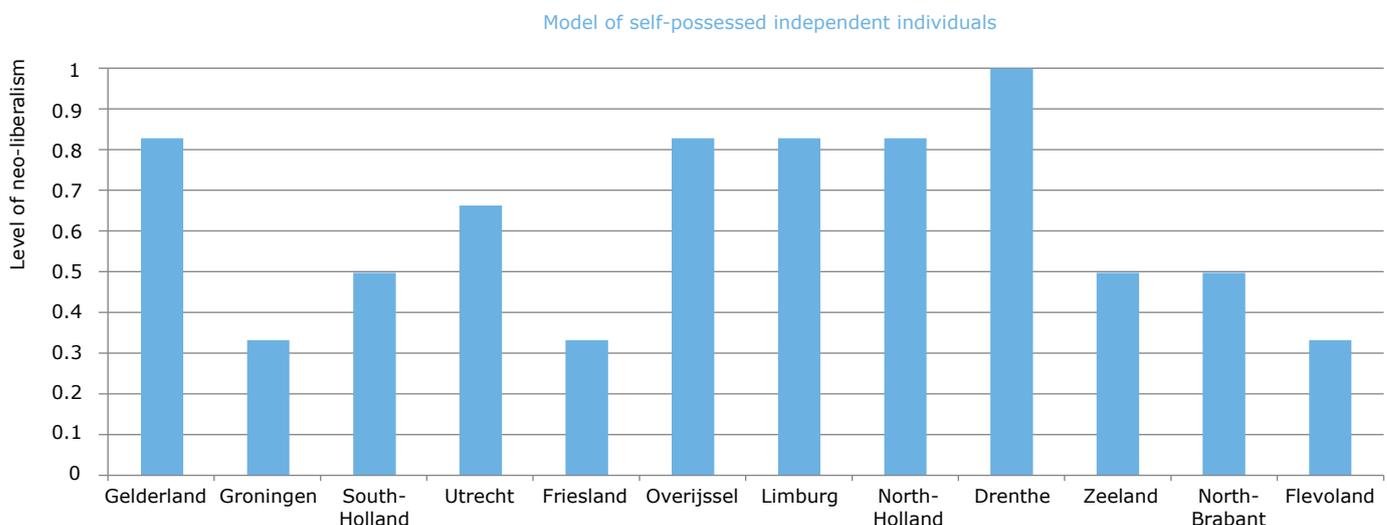
lands. Overijssel makes this argument more explicit (value 1); the reduction of the ecological structure and provincial money for nature is also motivated by being able to sell out farmers. North-Holland has stated that it wants to transform nature policy into a less complex and fragmented policy field, aiming to reduce the large amount of rules (value 0.5). North-Brabant states to simplify the procedures for subsidies (value 0.5), as well as Flevoland, who enacted the simplified subsidy program in January 2011 (value 1). Limburg and Zeeland have reduced the area size, being the focus of nature policy, but did not transform or simplified additional rules (value 0.5). Limburg argues the rules are needed for nature policy. Zeeland argues that a continuous shift in rules is hampering on the ground activities.

The aggregation of the neo-liberal indicators for the 'self-possessed individual' illustrates that most provinces can be considered quite neo-liberal in this aspect. North Holland, Drenthe and Limburg values the highest. Friesland and Groningen are the least neo-liberal on this aspect (Figure 4).

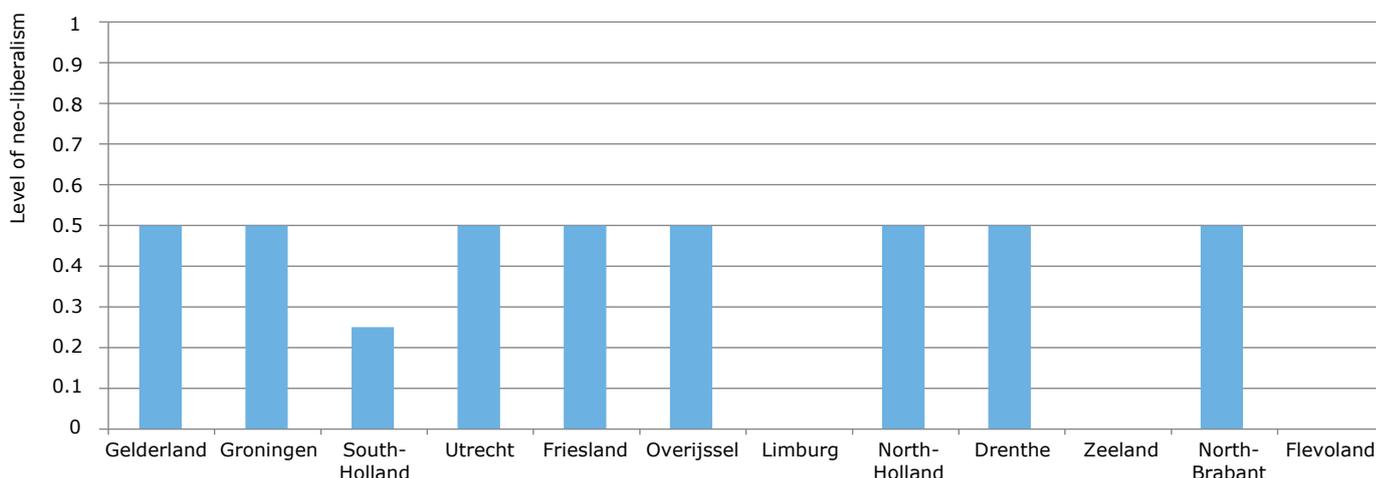
*Authority: from public to private*

Despite the need of most provinces to search for alternative (private) finances, they continue to emphasize that nature is a public good.

None of the provinces allow private partners to autonomously determine nature objectives. Therefore, the provincial values in the indicator *determining objectives: decision making with societal and private partners* are also intermediate. However, there are certain provinces that highly involve their private and societal partners in nature policy development. Groningen, Utrecht, Gelderland, Drenthe and Friesland use Manifests that were created by their societal partners as the basis for new policies (value 0.5). Overijssel first decided on a new policy from a top



**Figure 4** Values of the provinces on the model of the self-possessed independent individual



**Figure 5** Values of provinces on authority: from public to private

down perspective, but is then forced by the public reaction to co-create the new policy together with societal partners (value 0.5). North-Brabant and North-Holland also actively invite citizens to develop ideas to integrate into their policies (value 0.5) and also coordinate interactive town hall meetings. Other provinces are developing new policies conform institutional consultation procedures (South-Holland, Limburg, Flevoland, Zeeland – value 0).

And finally analysing the indicator *Resources and ownership: a transfer from public to private land ownership*, it becomes clear that North-Brabant, Gelderland, Utrecht, Overijssel, Friesland, Groningen and South Holland are willing to shift toward new private ownership, for example to allow more farmers to own and manage nature land (value 0.5). North-Holland uses the adagio that ‘the one who pays determines’ or ‘that the one who benefits pays’ (value 0.5) and is aiming to set up ‘sponsorship construction’. In Drenthe, nature is considered as joint ownership (value 0.5). Limburg continues to take ownership but stimulates municipalities, which are also governmental actors, to contribute (value 0). Flevoland did not express the intention to increase private ownership (value 0). However, no complete shift towards private funding is expected in the aspect of shift of ownership.

The aggregation of aspects of ‘Authority: from public to private’ illustrates that Gelderland, Utrecht, Friesland, Overijssel, North-Holland and North-Brabant are moderate neo-liberal on this aspect with a value 0.5. Limburg, Zeeland and Flevoland are non-neo-liberal with regard to this characteristic (Figure 5). South-Holland has a value of 0.25 on this characteristic.

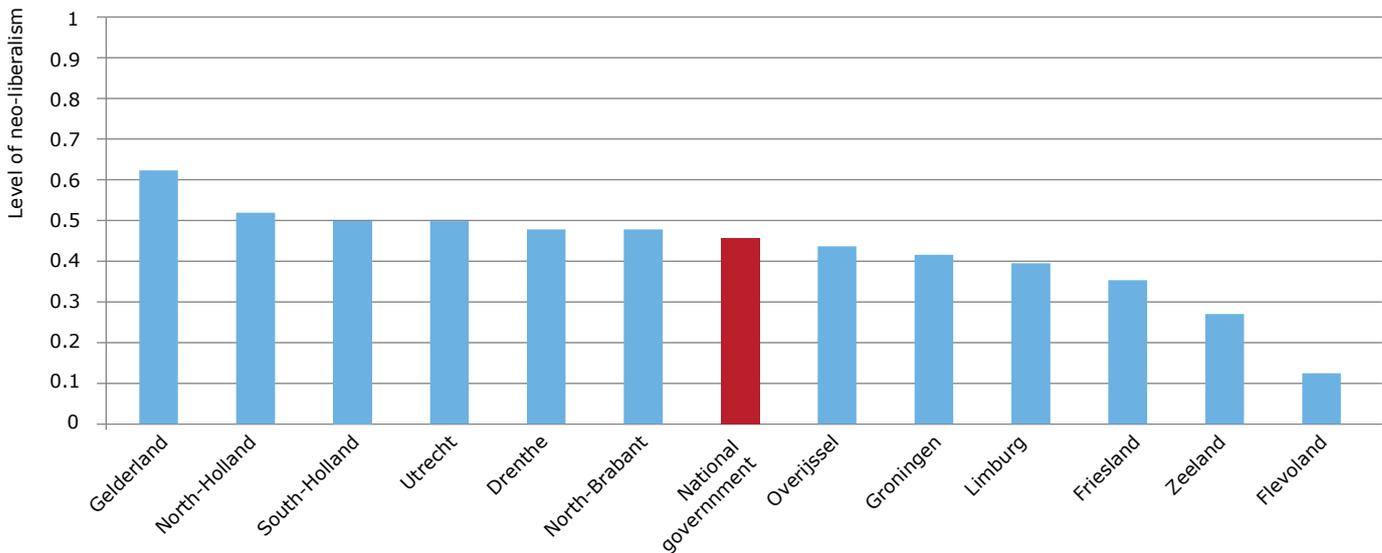
The neo-liberal index is employed to identify the neo-liberal characteristics in provincial nature policy strategies and to determine if they are neo-liberal or

merely hybrids (Figure 6). The figure reveals three groups of provinces. The first group are the provinces that have most neo-liberal characteristics. These provinces should have a value on the neo-liberal index between 0.66 and 1. None of the provinces have reached this value, meaning that this group is empty. The second group are provinces that are considered as hybrids, having some neo-liberal characteristics or intending to develop neo-liberal practices and on the other hand, having some more conservative practices, such as Gelderland, North-Holland, North-Brabant, Utrecht, South-Holland, Limburg, Overijssel, Groningen, Drenthe and Friesland. The third group are provinces, such as Flevoland and Zeeland, with more conservative and traditional characteristics, having a value on the neo-liberal index between 0 and 0.33.

## Discussion

This paper has analysed the effect of neo-liberal aspirations from the cabinet Rutte-I on nature policies in the twelve provinces in the Netherlands (2010-2012) by using a neo-liberal index. It has been possible to specify the new neo-liberal practices of national government and to compare the neo-liberal differences among the twelve provincial nature policies. Although the decisions during the administration of Rutte-I were perceived to be abrupt and very right wing, the analysis has indicated that the national nature policy is very much a hybrid in terms of neo-liberalism. This means that some new neo-liberal elements emerged, but it could not be considered as a full neo-liberal policy as such. Strong neo-liberal aspects of the new national nature strategy are deregulation, the discourse of efficiency and a transfer from public to private land ownership. The other neo-liberal aspects such as conditions for competitive success and strategies to enable citizens for self-possession and determining objectives by private partners receive much less attention in the renewed national strategy.

### Neo-liberal index



**Figure 6** Neo-liberal index of the provinces

The question was whether these neo-liberal aspirations of national government affected provincial nature policies in a neo-liberal way. It is concluded that national policy change forces changes on provinces which leads overall to new practices in all provinces. But the analysis clearly shows that provinces did formulate nature policies with a specific character, which were more neo-liberal than national government in some provinces and less neo-liberal in other provinces. Because provincial governments are now in charge of developing and implementing nature policy, they have more freedom to develop their own policy, according to their own aspirations, resulting in a wide variety. The analysis reveals that real neo-liberal provinces do not occur according to the index. Neo-liberal hybrid governments are in development in six provinces (Gelderland, North-Holland, North-Brabant, Utrecht, South-Holland, Drenthe, Overijssel, Groningen, Limburg, Friesland). In the meantime, two provinces hardly reveal any neo-liberal aspirations Flevoland and Zeeland. During the period of research, they remained more than others in favour of a nature policy based primarily conservation by public and governmental organisations. This ranking is determined by the way of threshold-setting (index value groups: 1 to 0,66; 0,66 to 0,33; 0,33 to 0). However, the seven provinces in group two still show many differences among each other. Gelderland is considerably more neo-liberal compared to Friesland. Even provinces with the same value, as for instance Utrecht and South-Holland, are neo liberal on different aspects, for example South Holland is more neo-liberal on the characteristic calculating framework of efficiency, compared to Utrecht that scores high on the model of self-possessed independent individuals.

It is worth discussing the explanations of the diversity between provinces. It is clear that provinces collectively are

more neo-liberal than the national government on aspects as business-like relations and on shared public-private decision-making with their (regional) partners. A possible explanation is a closer relation of the provincial government with local private actors compared to the national policymakers. In regard to developing management technologies (i.e. looking for new instruments and strategies to deal with the budget cuts in, for example, nature management) provinces value higher and actually put the (national) ideas into practice. This can be explained by the decentralization. In this case, the possible explanation is also that provincial governments felt the urgency to explore alternative ways to finance nature policy. Deregulation values are also relatively neo-liberal in all provinces because all were practically forced to reconsider nature regulation and to partly abandon their ecological networks due to national budget cuts, thereby reducing the spatial claims of nature on agricultural land.

The unilateral and abrupt way of national government's policy change might also have resulted in resistance and reluctance by some provinces to change their way of doing nature policy over the last 20 years. During the period in which the data for this research were collected, the changes were still fresh and negotiations took place between national and provincial governments on policies and budgets. In further analysis, it could be interesting to explore the further developments of provincial policies and explore explaining factors of the diversity that is visible, which might be found in the political ideology of the provincial governments, the total budget available for provincial policies or the type of nature available in the provinces amongst others.

To close the discussion, it is worth to reflect on the success of national policymakers' desire for more

efficiency and deregulation. The analysis clearly reveals that diversity has increased strongly in provincial nature policies, as well as complexity since every province was setting their own policy framework. Would the national decision have had more impact if the decentralisation was jointly discussed and explored instead of being unilaterally implemented without any preparatory debate?

## Conclusion

Following our analysis, the conclusion is that a shift towards neo-liberalism was visible between 2010 and 2012 from a nature policy largely dominated by the public domain, towards a more societal nature policy. Efficiency and cost reduction were important motivations for the new policies; however, what is lacking thus far is a shift from public to private authority. It remains that provinces are the leading actors in determining policy. They coordinate shared decision-making processes, sometimes following initiatives of partners. They invite citizens and private parties to realize nature projects in specific spatial zones for which they set the participation rules. Although nature is legitimized by its benefits to people, it is not yet consequentially regulated in the market and expressed in a price. So what remains, even after the administration of Rutte-I fell in 2012 and is followed by a more left wing administration (Rutte-II, a combination of the conservative liberal party VVD and the social democratic party PvdA), is the conviction that nature policy is not merely a public domain but is currently far from being a private matter. Looking at these practices in more detail, it is concluded that a wide variety of practices are seen among provinces, for instance business-like relations, outsourcing of land exchange and land development to private actors, collaborative financial investments, or consultants performing certain tasks. Another example is the way active citizenship is increased, as for instance creating a spatial zone in which private initiatives are welcomed or by giving citizens a larger role in the development and managing nature areas.

To come to an end, we explore the value of the method for future practices. The method is expected to be a valuable monitoring tool that enables to analyse progress and policy changes over time, when carried out periodically. Therefore, it is recommended to repeat the procedure periodically. The process of nature policy development has continued after the fall of Rutte-I, both at national and provincial levels. While the ideology 'affordable and feasible' is less prominent in the policy of Rutte-II, it has continued the ideology of active citizenship and a more societal embedded nature policy. Also, at the provincial level, the balance between the neo-liberal aspects is a continuous search, in which each province makes different choices. And last, it is worth to experiment with the tool to understand the success of the provincial nature policy, in other words, to use the method in policy evaluation, since it is expected that the method

allows identifying practices that contribute to successful or unsuccessful nature policy in terms of goal achievement. The Qualitative Comparative Analysis tools of Ragin are suitable to carry out this type of policy evaluations.

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