

MSc thesis

THE DUTCH FARMERS' MOVEMENT: FRAMING PROCESSES AND MOBILISATION AGAINST THE NATURE RESTORATION LAW

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As the great poet Mary Oliver expressed it: *"to pay attention, this is our endless and proper work."*

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ABSTRACT

Dutch farmers' protests are a longstanding tradition in the Netherlands but have in 2024 escalated into mobilisation against EU-level environmental policy. This master's thesis analyses how the Dutch farmers' movement evolved from the 2019 'nitrogen crisis', sparked by the invalidation of the Dutch Nitrogen Approach Program (PAS), to act against EU-level policy in the case of the mobilisation against the Nature Restoration Law (NRL). Research is rooted in the theory of framing for social movement organisations (SMOs). Analysis was based on ten interviews in total with movement adherents from Dutch agricultural organisations and movement outsiders who were otherwise involved with the NRL, as well as five online positional articles by radical faction Farmers Defence Force (FDF). Results describe four issue frames: 'trapped in the judicial system', 'trapped in the capitalist system', 'competition with outsiders', 'what is the Netherlands?', an overarching shared consensus frame of an untrustworthy government, and a focus on a sense of urgency that facilitated the movement's first protest wave in 2019. I show that the Dutch farmers' movement extended its frame to a higher political level to generate collective action against the NRL, by linking the same frame elements to a new source of blame: the EU. However, while lobbyists from the movement mobilised against the NRL in the EU, protest on the streets remained limited, mainly due to a lack of resonance of the abstract, technical movement frames offered to the movement's internal constituents. Nevertheless, by opening the discursive space for criticism on the NRL, fostering empirical doubt and connecting to anxieties surrounding food security in the EU, the Dutch farmers' movement created political room to lower the targets of the Nature Restoration Law.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Definition
BBB	<i>Boer Burger Beweging</i> , transl. Farmer-Citizen Movement
FDF	Farmers Defence Force
LTO	<i>Land- en Tuinbouw Organisatie Nederland</i> , transl. Agri- and Horticultural Organisation of the Netherlands
NAJK	<i>Nederlands Agrarisch Jongeren Kontakt</i> , transl. Dutch Agrarian Youth Contact
NMV	<i>Nederlandse Melkveehouders Vakbond</i> , transl. Dutch Dairy Farmers Union
NRL	Nature Restoration Law
NSC	<i>Nieuw Sociaal Contract</i> , transl. New Social Contract
MOB	Mobilisation for the Environment
PAS	<i>Programma Aanpak Stikstof</i> , transl. Nitrogen Approach Program
SMO	Social movement organization

1. INTRODUCTION

The Netherlands enjoys a highly productive agricultural output, with many intensive farms. Half of the Dutch land is in use for agriculture (CBS, 2020) and half of that agricultural land is used as grassland, usually reserved for animal feed (WUR, 2023). The highly intensive character of Dutch farming practices comes with negative effects on the environment, the most notable effect being nitrogen overloads from the manure of intensive animal farming which degrade the quality of natural land and waters (Tilman, 1999). This ‘nitrogen issue’ in the Netherlands has been known since at least the 1970s (Frouws, 1994). Calls to curb Dutch agricultural outputs, or protect natural areas from agricultural activities have historically been met with firm resistance from the agricultural sector. Tensions between the Dutch agricultural sector and policy-making have been described in literature for well over two decades, with common claims of policy measures – be it agricultural or environmental policy – restricting farmers’ agricultural efforts (De Weerd & Klandermans, 1999; Frouws, 1994).

2019: THE FALL OF THE NITROGEN APPROACH PROGRAM (PAS)

More recently, Dutch farmers’ resistance to policy change came to a boiling point in 2019. Its underlying cause: Dutch national policy on nitrogen emissions did not align with the European Union (EU) Habitats Directive. This policy, the ‘Nitrogen Approach Program’ (PAS: *Programma Aanpak Stikstof*) gave permission for economic activities in and around Natura 2000 areas and made some activities exempt from (nature) permits such as livestock grazing and fertilisation. Environmental groups stepped to the EU Court of Justice for judgment on the Dutch nitrogen policy. On the 7th of November 2018, the EU Court of Justice advised that this policy did not align with the Habitats Directive. On this basis, PAS got challenged in the Netherlands by a collective of environmental groups, led by Johan Vollenbroek of environmental group Mobilisation for the Environment (MOB). As a result of the lawsuit by MOB against this government policy, the Dutch Council of State ruled on May 29th of 2019 that PAS did not comply to the European Habitats Directive and the Dutch law on nature conservation, *Wet natuurbescherming* (Raad van State, 2019). This ruling nullified the permits that participants of PAS were given, sending shockwaves through the agricultural sector. As a result, the ‘fall of PAS’ delayed and sometimes halted economic activities in and around Natura 2000 areas, as these activities could not comply anymore to stricter nitrogen emission norms.

A ‘nitrogen crisis’ emerged, and spatial developments in the Netherlands were said to be ‘locked down’ (van der Ploeg, 2020). In an attempt to address and solve this nitrogen crisis, an advisor to the Dutch parliament suggested that a national livestock herd reduction of 50% would need to be considered as an option to reduce nitrogen output in the Netherlands (van der Ploeg, 2020).

With grievances of e.g., an elitist government playing with farmers’ livelihoods, restrictions being placed upon farming activities from above and a general feeling among farmers of not being respected (Henley & Jones, 2024; Bosma & Peeren, 2021), Dutch farmers’ discontent resulted in two widespread protest waves: first in the fall of 2019 and again in the summer of 2022. In both protest waves, tractors blocked highways, haybales were lit on fire by roadsides and the Dutch minister for Nature and Nitrogen was personally intimidated at her house (e.g., NOS, 2022). The protests relied heavily on signage and slogans (see figures 1, 2 and 3): upside down Dutch flags indicated the ‘distress situation’ of the



Netherlands; allies showed up on talk shows on TV wearing red farmer handkerchiefs; protest signs with various slogans defending farmers were displayed all around the Dutch countryside.



Figure 2: On the right: Dutch right-wing political commentator Eva Vlaardingbroek commenting on Dutch farmers' protest on Fox News, wearing a 'farmers handkerchief'.

<https://www.foxnews.com/video/63093517151>
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Figure 3: "Use your common sense, keep farmers in this country". Photo by Kees Torn.

Dutch opinion on the protest actions was divided. Moreover, the Dutch farmers' movement has been described by critics as being quite unfocused in its demands, as expressed grievances tended to centre around 'farmers need more respect' rather than a specific policy (van der Ploeg, 2020). Nevertheless, the movement gained widespread support from many non-farmers. The effects of this high level of support from non-farmers to the Dutch farmers' movement can most notably be seen in the Dutch provincial elections in March of 2023. Here, the political party BBB (BoerBurgerBeweging, *Farmer-Citizen Movement*), won the most seats in every of the twelve Dutch provinces. BBB was founded in 2019 to give a counter-argument against the 'negative image' of the Dutch farmers and aims to reconnect Dutch society to its farmers, according to the party's mission statement (BBB, n.d.). Thus, farmers' grievances got connected to the larger Dutch public, and created a front against – inter alia – 'oppressive' nature conservation measures.

2024: PROTEST AGAINST THE NATURE RESTORATION LAW

Two years after the Dutch farmers' protests of 2022, in late February of 2024, European farmers also took to the streets – of Brussels. Farmers (and allies) protested against the Nature Restoration Law. The Nature Restoration Law was proposed in 2022 as a key part of the EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the Green Deal. It would be the first regulation of its kind in giving binding targets on restoring Europe's natural areas, under which agricultural ecosystems would fall, too. Europe-wide in early 2024, farmers were protesting in Brussels for diverging, country-specific reasons (Matthews, 2024), but all could agree that the EU's environmental regulations place a disproportionate burden on agricultural activities and that they do not feel respected by policymakers (Henley & Jones, 2024) – with striking similarity in claims to the Dutch farmers' movement two years earlier. For example, agricultural interest groups such as the biggest Dutch farmers organisation LTO (part of COPA-COGECA in Europe) stated on their website that the Nature Restoration Law would put the Dutch countryside under 'even more' pressure, and argued that that the Law would have far-reaching consequences not just for Dutch farmers but would also 'lock' developments of Dutch infrastructure even further – a reference to the ongoing 'nitrogen crisis' in the Netherlands (LTO, 2023). Moreover, several claims against the Law propagated by European lobby groups from the EU primary sectors (agriculture, forestry, fishing) were spread and enhanced by newspapers and social media starting from the spring of 2023 (Cliquet et al., 2024). The European People's Party (EPP), the largest coalition in the Parliament as of 2024 and typically center-right oriented, shifted position against the Nature Restoration Law despite internal conflict on the Law (Wetzels, 2024). In addition to shifting position, the EPP joined the

online framing campaign against the Nature Restoration Law and started spreading images on social media framing the Nature Restoration Law as e.g., disastrous for ‘European villages’ (Cliquet et al., 2024). While right-wing populist political parties have taken hold of discourses surrounding farmers and nature conservation in ‘the rural’ for longer (e.g., Borrás, 2020; Bosma & Peeren, 2021; Cortes-Vazquez, 2020), these framings on farmers were all of a sudden affecting differently politically aligned actors in the European Parliament, too.

While initially calling for higher targets, the Law was watered down significantly from a conservational perspective. The proposal that was initially adopted by the European Commission in 2022 said that 30% of all degraded habitats must be restored by 2030. Degraded habitats that are now exploited (through human use, such as agriculture) must be restored and given a different use by 2030. Among this fall drained peatlands, which encompass large areas of agricultural areas in the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark (Schauenberg, 2023). However, the Proposal then went through trilogue negotiations of the European Council, the Parliament and the Commission in early November of 2023 (European Council, 2023), in which the measures of the Nature Restoration Law for agricultural ecosystems were significantly weakened. The watered-down law which the European Parliament eventually agreed on February 27th of 2024 – under loud protests by farmers in Brussels – calls for a restoration of at least 20% of the EU’s (former) natural land and sea areas (European Commission, 2024). When it comes to agricultural ecosystems, political pressure resulted in the removal of a restoration obligation to restore drained peatlands situated on agricultural lands (Cliquet et al., 2024); it is now just an ‘effort obligation’. Targets for such agricultural ecosystems have been significantly lowered; moreover, member states will not have to comply if it conflicts with ‘public interests’. An ‘emergency brake’ was introduced for agricultural ecosystems if extraneous events conflict with the food production security of the EU (Cliquet et al., 2024).

The Netherlands is reported to have been especially vocal in arguing against the measures the Law calls for, in light of its ‘nitrogen crisis’ (Guillot, 2023). The Dutch farmers’ movement can be assumed to be the spark for European-wide waves of farmer protests (Henley & Jones, 2024). The rise of the political party BBB and its election win in early 2023 seems to have served as a wake-up call for the EU (Matthews, 2024) – directly afterwards, big EU coalitions such as the European People’s Party (EPP) started doubting on its environmental policy goals and how it would affect the farmer-allied voter base in the lead up to the European elections of 2024 (Wetzels, 2024). Through political discord, resulting numerous amendments and several tight voting rounds, the Nature Restoration Law got caught in a political cross-fire in the fight for support from the agricultural sector and its allies.

Even after concessions were made in their favour, the Netherlands eventually positioned against the Nature Restoration Law in the EU Council after a Dutch parliamentary motion by coalition parties BBB and NSC was passed (*Motie 36 508, Van der Plas & Hertzberger, 29 February 2024*). Right after the Netherlands changed position on the Law, the European Council vote on it – which was scheduled for March 2024 – was indefinitely postponed. Unexpectedly, the Nature Restoration Law was passed in June of 2024 when an Austrian minister delivered the swing vote despite the wishes of her country’s coalition partners (Van Verschuer, 2024).

Though the Dutch sparked the counter-conservation protests against the Nature Restoration Law, the EU’s sympathies towards the Dutch agricultural sector is reportedly not that strong. Other EU member states are said to ‘not mind’ if the Netherlands had more regulatory compliance for agricultural activities, a simple reason of which is quoted to be about competition with other EU agricultural producers (König, 2024). All this considered, still the Nature Restoration Law’s conservational measures were watered down significantly for agricultural ecosystems, especially those ecosystems that are most common in the Netherlands (and Germany and Denmark) like drained peatlands (Schauenberg, 2023; Cliquet et al., 2024). In the lobbying process of the EU, success depends in part on the competing interest groups in the policymaking process (Klüver et al., 2015). Of course, it was not only agricultural interest groups that

participated in the lobbying process – many European ENGOs expressed their (positive) sentiments on the Nature Restoration Law. Still, the Dutch farmers' movement demands are reflected in the Nature Restoration Law's (non-obligatory) measures for farmers. It is likely that many actors within the Nature Restoration Law's policymaking process adhered to the Dutch farmers' frame when it came to negotiations surrounding the protection of agricultural ecosystems.

So far, a direct link between the Dutch farmers' movement elements and strategies at its earlier protest waves in 2019 and 2022 and the mobilisation efforts against the Nature Restoration Law in 2024 has been described by (Dutch) media outlets (e.g. Van de Wiel, 2024). However, this link had not been formally analysed yet at the start of this research in October 2024. It is unclear how the Dutch farmers' movement has evolved over time, through which precise mechanism the Nature Restoration Law became part of the movement and how this inspired mobilisation against this proposed Law.

2. OBJECTIVES

This master thesis researches the collective action against the Nature Restoration Law by the Dutch farmers' movement through theory on framing perspectives for social movements (main articles: Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986). Using this theory, I hypothesize that the frame that participants in the Dutch farmers' movement adhere to is constructed by movement actors and 'packaged' in a way that results in (inter alia) understanding the effects of nature conservation policy on agricultural developments as being problematic and in need of change through collective action. My second assumption is that the frames used by the Dutch farmers' movement evolved over time and have included new issues such as the topic of the Nature Restoration Law and that this inclusion is what may have added to the concessions made in the Law for agricultural ecosystems. Through the theory on framing perspectives for social movements, I research first which frames the Dutch farmers' movement constructed at the start of the movement; then how the Nature Restoration Law got 'absorbed' into this framing, and how it resulted in collective action against the Nature Restoration Law. Thereafter I explore how movement adherents that participated in this process perceive the outcomes of the framing processes on the Law. This research has one main research question with three sub-questions:

How did the Dutch farmers' movement framing evolve to challenge nature conservation policy in the case of mobilisation against the Nature Restoration Law?

- What were dominant consensus and motivational frames of the Dutch farmers' movement at the start of the movement in 2019?
 - Did framing for (potential) internal and external movement constituents differ, and how?
 - Which framing elements are perceived as most resonant for adherents to participate in the protest waves in the Netherlands?
- How were consensus and motivational frames constructed by key movement actors of the Dutch farmers' movement to generate collective action against the Nature Restoration Law?
 - Did framing for (potential) internal and external movement constituents differ, and how?
 - Which framing elements are perceived as most resonant for adherents to mobilise against the Nature Restoration Law?
- When it comes to policy effects, which of the above framing elements is perceived by Dutch farmer movement key actors as most resonant in challenging policy-makers of the Nature Restoration Law?

Regarding the last sub-research questions, assessing the effectiveness of framing processes for social movement organisations (SMOs) on actual policy change is something that has been under-studied. How advocacy from the public (such as through an SMO) determines the outcomes of public policy when it concerns social movement theory is a field that is not very established (Snow et al., 2018), and current research is unclear on what kind of variables in this advocacy process are likely determinants of the outcomes of public policy change (Burstein, 2020b, 2020a). Such analysis of specific determinants – on an in-depth level – has thus been left out of scope in this research. However, asking the question of how movement participants themselves understood their effects on the changes to the Nature Restoration Law could create a path for future research into the effect of social movements on policy change.

The social environments that affected the creation of the EU Nature Restoration Law has been used as a case study in this research. Showing the involvement and opinion of local or national actors and movements on the policy-making process of an EU regulation functions as an example of the broader current policy (and political) context of how the Netherlands – specifically its agricultural sector – relates to the nature conservation policy measures of the European Union. The Nature Restoration Law was chosen because of its recency, its divisiveness in Dutch and EU politics (see e.g., Wetzels, 2024) and because of the potentially beneficial effects such a law could have for the protection and proliferation of European nature. Existing academic scholarship on the Nature Restoration Law has thus far mainly

focused on analysing the contents of the policy itself when compared to other environmental policy goals or regulatory frameworks (see e.g., Kinnunen et al., 2025; Manzoni et al., 2025) and has also focused on exploring potential pathways for its implementation in various ecosystems (see e.g., Jurasinski et al., 2024; Stoffers et al., 2024). When it comes to the social processes underlying the policy-making process of the NRL, or the Dutch farmers' movement itself, very little scholarly research is found here to date. The negotiation process of the NRL has been described in relation to lobbying efforts from (inter alia) the agrarian sector by Cliquet et al., (2024) and individual scholars have reflected on the role of the 2024 European Union farmers' protest on the European Parliament Elections (Matthews, 2024) and on the Dutch farmers' protests (van der Ploeg, 2020). However, no peer-reviewed studies have assessed – in depth – the link of the Dutch farmers' movement with the Nature Restoration Law as of August 2025, thus filling a knowledge gap. Moreover, there has been little research in the theoretical field of framing perspectives for social movements regarding the process and temporal dimension of framing, i.e. how framing can evolve or change for a social movement and the potential influence over policy outcomes this may have over time (Amenta et al., 2010; Snow et al., 2014, 2018). Analysing the absorption of the Nature Restoration Law into the Dutch farmers' movement adds to these theoretical gaps.

3. THEORY

This research analyses the framing of a social movement organisation (SMO), utilizing movement mobilisation theory (main theoretical document used: Benford & Snow, 2000). This theory focuses on certain aspects of framing, and through analysis of interaction between actors – what is put in the frame, what is not – the theory used here falls within the disciplinary and theoretical tradition of frame analysis (van Hulst et al., 2024). The basis of movement mobilisation theory rests on the assumption that the collective grievances of a specific group do *not* automatically translate into action. Rather, Snow et al., (1986) explain that to participate in an SMO – such as the Dutch farmers’ movement – individual alignment to that specific collective action frame is necessary. A ‘collective action frame’ is a frame that interprets certain situations or events as meaningful to act upon for the group that experiences this. The process by which this is done is often described as ‘packaging of slices of “reality”’ that results in a situation being seen from a certain angle (Snow et al., 2018).

‘Constituents’ and ‘adherents’ are used as concepts with the same meaning in this research. I understand them to mean: individual actors who align with the frames proffered by an SMO such as the Dutch farmers’ movement. Moreover, ‘participation’ can be interpreted in different ways as well. In this research, participants of an SMO such as the Dutch farmers’ movement are those who are not only aligned with the frames of this SMO, but more specifically those who act upon this frame by interacting with the interpretations of the frame or engaging in activities that aim to convince others of this frame through e.g., protesting on the street or lobbying in an interest group. Actors within a social movement organisation actively construct and reconstruct meaning and signification (Snow et al., 1986). Because of this, framing for mobilisation can be seen as an inherently discursive process. The process of creating such a frame, that first seeks alignment among adherents, and then mobilises adherents to action, is active and ongoing. Framing for collective action doesn’t have to only be considered as a highly individualized “cognitive structure” but can be conceptualized as something that happens on a meso-organisational level, i.e., on an organisation’s websites, press-releases or brochures, or as something that is created within an organisational structure in order to influence collective action (Snow, 2004).

While Snow et al., (1986) as well as Benford and Snow (2000) both describe various activities and variabilities that are undertaken in framing processes for social movements and collective action, this theory section describes them in order of occurrence: first an active frame is constructed for potential constituents – phrased by Klandermans (1984) as “consensus mobilisation”, after that follows a ‘call to arms’: collective action. Moreover, as will be explained, these steps are subject to variability of the characteristic features of the collective action frames, as well as certain processes that shape the development of the ‘core framing tasks’. For a simplified overview, see figure 4 below. These variabilities and processes are seen as interlinked, but will be discussed separately.

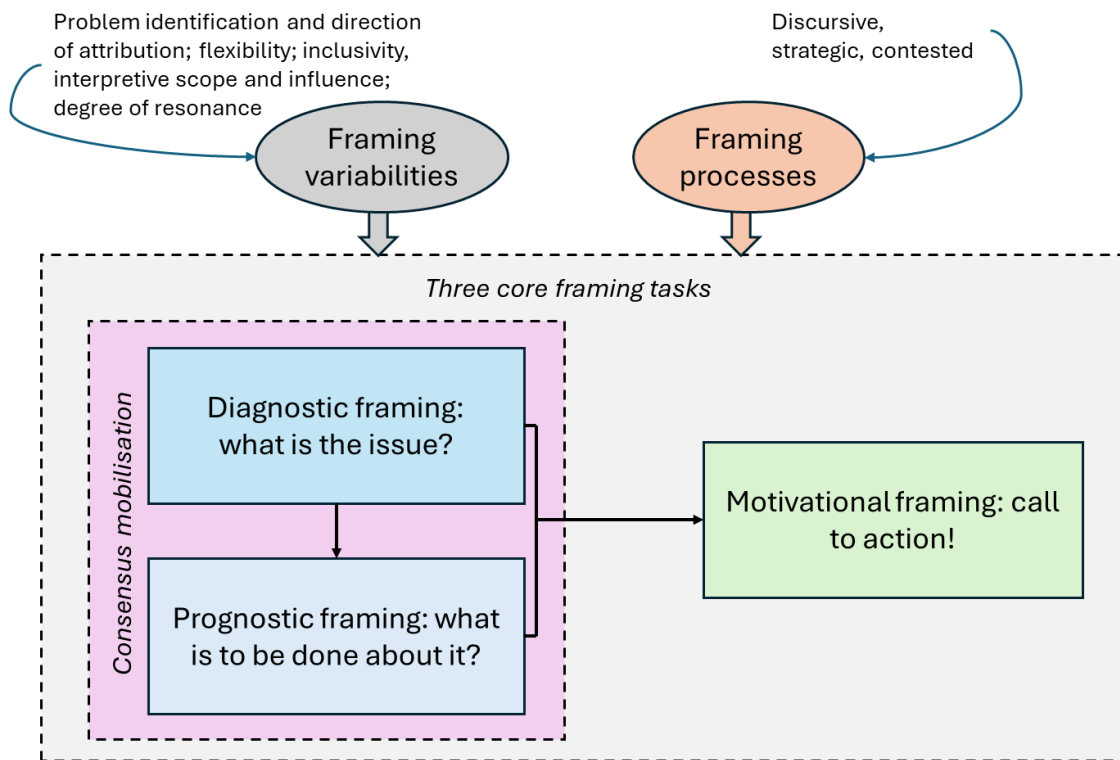


Figure 4: A simplified overview of theory of framing processes for social movements and collective action (own figure)

3.1 CORE FRAMING TASKS

3.1.1 CONSENSUS MOBILISATION

Benford and Snow (2000) propose three core framing tasks that are the “action-oriented functions of collective action frames” as well as the discursive processes that construct and reconstruct these continuously. The first two of these three core framing tasks are diagnostic framing and prognosis framing, which are together described as “consensus mobilisation” (Klandermans, 1984) (figure 4): the parts of the framing process that generate support among potential constituents. Within consensus mobilisation, *diagnostic framing* pertains what the problem, and its cause, is framed to be. Through diagnostic framing, a certain issue will be seen as something that needs to be remedied – as well as who or what caused it. This aspect is a continuous process: organisations’ constituents can be seen to constantly finetune what the issues of a group are and what the meaning of the frame can be in order to fit potential supporters (van der Stoep et al., 2017). *Prognostic framing*, after that, comes with solutions: what is to be done about this situation? Here, solutions are articulated as well as how to carry these out. Within prognostic framing for an SMO, solutions offered by opponents are refuted and deflected, in a process which is also called ‘counter-framing’.

3.1.2 COLLECTIVE ACTION

Whether or not collective action occurs, hinges on the success of motivational framing. Motivational framing is the third and final ‘core framing task’ discussed by Benford and Snow (2000). *Motivational framing* provides the reason and ‘call for arms’ for the SMO to engage in collective action so to improve their situation. It has a focus on discursive elements: ‘vocabularies of motive’, of which there are four:

motivational framing highlights the *severity*, *urgency*, *efficacy* and *propriety* of mobilisation. These elements are socially constructed and constantly under negotiation.

3.2 FRAMING PROCESSES AND VARIABILITIES

3.2.1 FRAMING PROCESSES

How frames are developed and innovated depends on ‘framing processes’. These processes affect all three above described core framing tasks in different ways (on a case-by-case basis). Benford and Snow (2000) define three framing processes that affect the core framing tasks: discursive, strategic and contested processes.

Discursive processes consist of two interactive processes: frame articulation and amplification. Frame articulation connects certain experiences and events so a new “angle of vision” is constructed; frame amplification accents and highlights the issues that are deemed most salient. For frame amplifications, movement slogans can be considered part of this as they symbolize the larger movement in a brief and punctuated way (see: ‘*no farmers, no food!*’).

Strategic processes are the four basic alignment processes described in Snow et al. (1986): frame bridging, amplification, extension and transformation. Frame bridging links people who have similar grievances, but are not organized to act upon this together (yet). Frame amplification – the same term as used in discursive processes, but with a different focus for strategic processes – concerns how support for a specific frame is clarified and reinvigorated. This can be done either through value amplification or belief amplification. Benford & Snow (2000) note that many movements focus on beliefs, cultural wisdom and the like to appeal to potential constituents. Frame extension occurs when an SMO has an idea that does not exist yet in their or similar frames, which results in the boundaries of this frame being extended to include new points of view that are “incidental to its primary objectives, but of considerable salience to potential adherents” (Snow et al., 1986). Finally, frame transformation is the fourth strategic process and results in adherents seeing something, such as the core of the issue, to be completely different through framing. E.g., what was previously seen as a part of life is now seen as completely unjust.

Contested processes in framing show that frames exist in a wider context of other frames that may challenge a specific SMO’s frame. Contested processes have three components: counter-framing by those who oppose the movement (or the media), framing disputes within the movement and the dialectics of how frames and events interact with each other. Regarding dialectics of a movement, Benford and Snow (2000) describe that for example the discourse of a movement may affect the actions of the movement, and vice versa the actions of a movement may affect the discourse surrounding it.

More recent research on framing processes has identified other types that can be used by movements. One such framing process can be classified as a type of strategic framing: *scale framing*. Scale framing can be further classified as a type of frame extension that is best described as a literal spatial extension of frame

In short: framing processes

- *Discursive*
 - Articulation
 - Amplification
- *Strategic*
 - Bridging
 - Amplification
 - Extension
 - Scale framing
 - Transformation
- *Contested*
 - Counter-framing
 - Intra-movement disputes
 - Dialectics with (movement) events

from e.g., a local level to a larger landscape level in order to include new problems or sources of blame, new solutions and redefine what is known or important to a movement (Mansfield & Haas, 2006). To give two examples, Lagendijk et al., (2021) described that energy transition initiatives in the Netherlands are viewed more negatively in rural areas than urban areas due to a lack of strategic spatial framing for those in rural areas; debates about the knowledge of the Steller sea lion were framed using different spatial scales to account for uncertainty (Mansfield & Haas, 2006). Interestingly (and perhaps intuitively), increasing or decreasing the spatial scale of an issue can either upscale or downscale the importance of an issue within a frame (van Lieshout et al., 2012).

3.2.2 INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FRAMING PROCESSES

The concept of ‘internal’ versus ‘external’ framing processes is not one that comes from theory on framing for collective action, but rather assumes that framing efforts differ in addressing the ‘internal’ group and the ‘external’ group, while aiming for the same goal of collective action. The internal group is the group that the issue directly pertains to. The external group are those who the issue does not directly pertain to, but who are still being convinced to adhere to the proposed frame. This research differentiates between the internal group: Dutch farmers who are discontent with policy directed at their business; and an external group: non-farmers.

3.2.3 FRAMING VARIABILITIES

Framing variabilities describe the differences in how collective action frames are constituted. It can be assumed all frames vary in certain ways from each other. Benford and Snow (2000) give an overview of four variabilities for collective action frames: *problem identification and direction of attribution*; *flexibility/rigidity and inclusivity/exclusivity*; *interpretive scope and influence*; *degree of resonance*. *Problem identification and direction of attribution*, quite straightforwardly, describes how a movement identifies an issue and how to move forward on this issue. When a movement has a more specific “causal agent”, it is more likely to resonate than when the problem identification is more general (Ketelaars, 2016). This framing variability can thus be linked to resonance, which is described later in this chapter. *Flexibility/rigidity and inclusivity/exclusivity* describe how ‘elastic’ frames are in incorporating new ideas into their frames. For *interpretive scope and influence*, Benford and Snow (2000) suggest that frames that are very broad in interpretive scope and how those frames influence other movements can be considered ‘master frames’. *Degree of resonance* is the final variable of frames, which describes the effect a frame has on potential constituents and the mobilisation of an organisation.

3.2.3.1 Degree of resonance

While the other three variabilities of frames for an SMO are mostly descriptive, *degree of resonance* concerns the actual effects of a collective action frame on (potential) movement constituents. Because this research aims to (inter alia) find the effects of a specific collective action frame on mobilisation, *degree of resonance* can be considered the most relevant variable in answering that research question. Resonance can explain why some frames seem to be more effective in mobilising (potential) adherents than others. Benford and Snow (2000) identify two interacting factors that account for variation in degree of resonance: credibility and salience.

Credibility regards how *consistent* an SMO’s frame is between what it believes and what it aims to do; whether or not the claims of a frame can be *empirically* verified according to the (cultural) beliefs of the

In short: factors affecting the degree of resonance

- *Credibility*
 - Empirical credibility
 - Speaker credibility
- *Salience*
 - Centrality: beliefs, values, ideas
 - Experiential commensurability: alignment with experiences in day-to-day lives
 - Narrative fidelity to culture or ideologies

(potential) adherents; and how credible *the speakers* for the collective action frame are perceived to be. Regarding ‘speaker credibility’, factors that influence this are e.g., status, knowledge or expertise

Salience, defined as “the fact of being important to or connected with what is happening or being discussed” by the Cambridge Dictionary, has three dimensions that affect it for collection action frames according to Benford and

Snow (2000). These three dimensions are *centrality*, “*experiential commensurability*” and *narrative fidelity* (Snow and Benford 1988). *Centrality* describes if and how movement frames are seen as essential to the perceived daily lives of (potential) constituents in terms of beliefs, values or ideas. *Experiential commensurability*, while similar, describes if the framing of a movement align with the experiences in actor’s day-to-day lives. It is suggested by Benford and Snow (2000) that frames that are abstract or distant from the movement constituents’ daily lives are less salient and are less likely to inspire constituents to mobilisation. More recent research confirms this idea: Ketelaars (2016) found that a higher experiential commensurability results in a higher resonance and likelihood of mobilisation than an a more abstract or technical frame when it came to student demonstrations on various issues. The third (and final) dimension of salience is *narrative fidelity*. This dimension focuses on if a proffered frame resonates with potential adherents’ cultures or inherent ideologies. A positive connection between these cultures of understanding and the proffered frame results in narrative fidelity, which then results in increased salience and – as hypothesized by Benford and Snow (2000) – a bigger likelihood of mobilisation.

4. METHODOLOGY

Other scholars of framing for social movements, depending on topic, do research by doing in-person observations (Reinecke & Ansari, 2021), longitudinal sampling via interviews (De Weerd & Klandermans, 1999) semi-structured interviews with movement participants as well as ‘outsiders’ (Terriquez et al., 2018) as well as analysing print media and (online) social media posts (Hagemans et al., 2024).

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Because academic literature is sparse on both the Dutch farmers’ protest between 2019 and 2024 and the Nature Restoration Law (as previously described in chapter 2), this research has an exploratory function and leans towards inductive research. It is an ex-post analysis of collective action, because the main moments of mobilisation efforts of the Dutch farmers’ movement against national policy as well as the Nature Restoration Law had passed by the time this research period began in September 2024, and the movement did not mobilise during the research period.

The research methodology is qualitative as it relies on analysis of interviews and online articles. Grey (online) literature such as press releases and in-depth journalistic articles about the political processes surrounding the NRL, as well as opinion articles released in scientific journals, were used to understand the context of this time period. Finally, academic literature supports the problem statement, findings and discussion of this research.

All interviews were conducted between the end of October and the middle of December 2024. Data analysis took place from December 2024 to January 2025, after which the results were written down. Between February and July of 2025, I pursued an internship and was unavailable to work on the final product. This research product was finalized in August 2025.

Collected data on mobilisation efforts consists primarily of semi-structured interviews, supported by five online position statements by Farmers Defence Force. To recruit interviewees, I sent out roughly forty emails to interest groups, collectives and established protest groups, made phone calls and consulted one family member in order to find potential interviewees. This family member is a dairy farmer and has contacts with (local) agricultural organisations – more information on this personal aspect to the research topic can be found in my positionality statement later in this chapter.

Although a snowball method was employed, direct contact with organisations also proved to be fruitful for recruiting interviewees. I was unable to find interview participants from ‘radical’ protest group Farmers Defence Force, as such this research utilises five online positional articles by this movement actor that were published in the lead-up to the vote on the Nature Restoration Law, to account for the lack of interview participants from this faction of the movement. These five articles were selected because they all pertained to the farmers’ protests that took place in Brussels in the lead-up to the 2024 European Parliament Elections. All interviewees read and signed a Statement of Informed Consent before an interview was conducted. Annex 1 shows the Statement of Informed Consent utilised for this research. This Statement also details the data management plan.

In short

- Ex-post analysis
- Two interview groups
 - Group A: Adherents of Dutch farmers’ movement frame
 - Group B: Opposing group, to cross-check
- 10 semi-structured interviews in total
 - 7 interviews in group A
 - 3 interviews in group B
- 5 online articles by Farmers Defence Force analysed

4.1.2 DATA GATHERING: RELEVANT GROUPS

The following section describes the characteristics of the organisations that are relevant to this research for interviewee as well as article data, as well as how participants were grouped for data analysis. There are a handful of very established, well-connected agricultural interest organisations in the Netherlands. The interest groups listed below represent a majority of Dutch farmers, so they were selected to be contacted to find interviewees.

- **BoerenNatuur** represents farmers that are involved with agricultural nature and landscape management and helps these farmers implement these nature and landscape management measures. They are to a lesser degree involved with lobby in the Netherlands or Brussels, but they closely follow and try to have a say in the developments of agriculture and landscape management nationally as well as on an EU level.
- **Farmers Defence Force** (FDF) is a Dutch agricultural interest group that was founded in May of 2019, after animal rights activists occupied a pig farm. It was established on the basis of protecting farmers against “barn intruders and an incompetent government” (FDF, 2023). FDF is characterised by an activist, more politically right-wing character than other Dutch agricultural organisations. No research participants were recruited from this group.
- **LTO**, *Land- en Tuinbouw Organisatie*, is the largest agricultural interest group in the Netherlands. More than half of all Dutch farmers and horticulturalists were a member in 2018 (LTO Nederland, 2019). LTO has lobbyists in Brussels and is connected through COPA-COGECA, the largest interest group for European farmers. LTO is comprised of three regional subdivisions:
 - LLTB (province of Limburg);
 - LTO Noord (provinces Drenthe, Flevoland, Friesland, Gelderland, Groningen, Noord-Holland, Overijssel, Utrecht and Zuid-Holland);
 - ZLTO (provinces Zeeland, Noord-Brabant and the region of South-Gelderland).
- **NAJK**, *Nederlands Agrarisch Jongeren Kontakt*, is an organisation focused on young farmers. They have an international orientation and are involved with lobby activities in Brussel.
- **NMV**, *Nederlandse Melkveehouders Vakbond*, a national dairy farm union involved with lobbying in Dutch politics.

THE A AND B GROUP

This research differentiates between two interview groups, the ‘A’ and the ‘B’ group (Table 1), in order to get perspectives from both movement insiders as well as outsiders. These groups were divided before interviews took place by selecting from certain institutional positions – i.e., selecting from interest groups either involved with protecting conventional Dutch agriculture, and selecting from interest groups involved with nature management or nature conservation policy:

- **Group A:** selected on the basis of their involvement with conventional Dutch agriculture. All position themselves against (most of) the nature conservation measures posed in the NRL. In addition, interviewees all define themselves as adherents of the Dutch farmers’ movement.
- **Group B:** also called the oppositional group. They are pro-NRL. Interviewees are not directly involved with conventional Dutch agriculture and were selected on the basis of their involvement with nature management or nature conservation policy. In addition, two (2B, 3B) do not classify themselves as adherents of the Dutch farmers’ movement, and one (1B) was undecided. Participants from group B are otherwise knowledgeable about the Dutch farming community and were selected on the basis of their knowledge of the Nature Restoration Law. In this research they function to cross-check the opinions and frames of the Dutch farmers’ movement.

Table 1: Interviewee code and their connection to the research topic

Interviewee code	Connection to research topic
1A	Dairy farmer, previously involved with LTO Noord - region Noord
2A	Former turkey farmer and involved with LLTB
3A	Dairy farmer involved with LTO Noord - region Noord
4A	Directly involved with lobby in the Netherlands and Brussels for LTO
5A	Dairy farmer and involved with NMV
6A	Dairy farmer and involved with LTO Noord
7A	Involved with NAJK and its lobby in Brussels
1B	Involved with BoerenNatuur as a (policy) advisor
2B	University researcher closely involved with rural sociology and agriculture
3B	Involved with Natuurmonumenten (the biggest Dutch nature organisation, connected to the European Environmental Bureau) as well as its lobby in the Netherlands and Brussels

4.1.3 INTERVIEW PROCESSING

The bulk of data analysis in this master's thesis is based on data gathered from interviews. Interviews were all conducted in Dutch, the interview guideline can be found in Annex 2. Interviews were transcribed mostly in an intelligent verbatim way, in which some 'false starts' of sentences and filler words were removed for readability.

Interviews and FDF's online articles were analysed using the qualitative data analysis coding software Atlas.ti. The processing of interviews and articles with Atlas.ti had an inductive and iterative character, as I had no established framework for deriving data on social movement mobilisations from interview material. As such, the coding of interviews consisted of two rounds:

1. Recurring topics were highlighted and coded under the category '*broad frames*'. A 'broad frame' was assigned when an interviewee or article mentioned a view on a specific topic or theme such as *levels of government, city-rural life, farmers love nature, judicialisation/permits, measuring (conflicts)*, and so on. Not all quotes were directly linked to a broad frame, but a large amount was.
2. Specific code categories relevant to the theory were created based off recurring topics, in this way identifying when an interview or article touched on either a theoretical element of movement mobilisation theory or another relevant element that belonged to the research questions (e.g., the process dimension of framing for a movement).

A total of 2605 codes across 10 coding categories were assigned in the analysis of 10 interviews and 5 online articles. Of these codes, 934 codes were classified to the 'broad frame' category, encompassing 24 distinct topics. Moreover, from these distinct recurring topics, the diagnostic frames were derived, as will be described in chapter 5.2. It must be noted that not all framing element codes (see: *core framing tasks; resonance; contested, strategic and discursive processes; internal and external processes; frame development over time; results of protest and frame at the beginning*) were connected to a broad frame, as this was sometimes not necessary. The 'broad frames' coding category simply served as a stepping stone for deeper analysis.

Importantly, the number of code usage does not equal the number of quotations in this research, as quotations are often encompassed of various codes. Moreover, quotes are of various lengths; some are multiple sentences long whereas other belong to just half a sentence. The number of times a code category

was utilised is therefore simply descriptive, to indicate globally which codes and coding categories were identified most often. It is for this reason that the numbers of ‘total times utilised per category’ in Table 2 for codes are very high compared to the separate identified quotes. Table 2 below describes the code categories utilised in Atlas.ti when analysing the interviews and shows their frequencies.

Table 2: Coding categories and their frequencies

Code category	Number of codes within category	Total times utilised per category
Broad frames	24	934
Core framing tasks	4	623
Resonance	6	379
Contested processes	3	182
Strategic processes	4	174
Discursive processes	2	130
Internal / external framing processes	1	75
Frame developing (over time)	1	39
Results of protest	1	39
Frame at the beginning	1	30

For example, this quote:

“[...] with a farm, private and business are always very much intertwined, so it’s not a director with staff below, no, the farmer is the director, and his wife often – or the other way around, the wife is the director and the farmer is an employee, but yes, that just affects you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, that affects you mentally too. Not just... Not closing the door on Friday afternoon and continuing on Monday. That’s it. And [...] if it becomes very sensitive on a personal level, yes, then people sometimes blow their fuses indeed.” [5A]

... was attributed the ‘broad frame’ sub-codes of *emotions*, *farm as business / income*, and *personal vs. work life of farmers*. Upon deeper analysis it was assigned the codes *diagnostic frame (core framing tasks)*, *motivational frame (core framing tasks)* and *experiential commensurability (resonance)*.

4.2 POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

This master thesis is qualitative research and as such my analysis is shaped by my personal background as a 26-year-old woman from a rural area in the Netherlands, with close family members who work (or used to work) in conventional dairy farming and have historically been involved with regional agricultural organisations. This familiarity with the research topic granted me access to individual farmers and ‘organisers’ within this conventional farming community. I am personally concerned with the protection of natural resources and ecosystems and was aware that interviewees could interpret me as someone who opposes their views or values. However, my positionality allowed me to approach my interviews with empathy for Dutch farmers, while recognising that our views on solutions may differ.

5. RESULTS

5.1 RESULTS STRUCTURE

Results are described utilising the theory of framing for SMOs, using a similar structure as visualised in figure 4, which has been repeated below for clarity. First in chapter 5.2, I describe how the ‘broad frames’ codes created the dominant diagnostic frames, as well as which movement actor or outsider described most which diagnostic frame. Then, the research objective is structurally answered in chapter 5.2, 5.3, 5.4 and 5.4 by describing, in order, the three core framing tasks of diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames (Benford & Snow, 2000) of the Dutch farmers’ movement in relation to its absorption of the Nature Restoration Law as a movement topic. Importantly, the ‘prognostic framing’ section is split up into two individual sub-chapters (5.3 and 5.4), to account for the large amount of data derived from the topic of ‘counter-framing’ and ‘contested framing processes’ which falls under the prognostic framing task. Finally, chapter 5.6 shows a results overview graph of the three core framing tasks (figure 6, p. 48).

All throughout these core framing tasks, other framing elements (*framing variabilities* and *framing processes*, see figure 4) are present and will be described as how they relate to the main diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing processes. These other framing elements described in this research are *frame variabilities*, in which resonance (the effects of a collective action frame on movement adherents) is predominantly highlighted, as well as *framing processes*: strategic processes (the four basic ways in which adherents create a movement frame to get others to align to it), discursive processes (which shows the ways language is used to e.g., construct and highlight a movement’s issues), contested processes (how frames interact with competing frames and frame elements), how internal movement actors and ‘outsiders’ were involved in framing processes, and the temporal aspect of a framing process (how a frame or frame element developed over time).

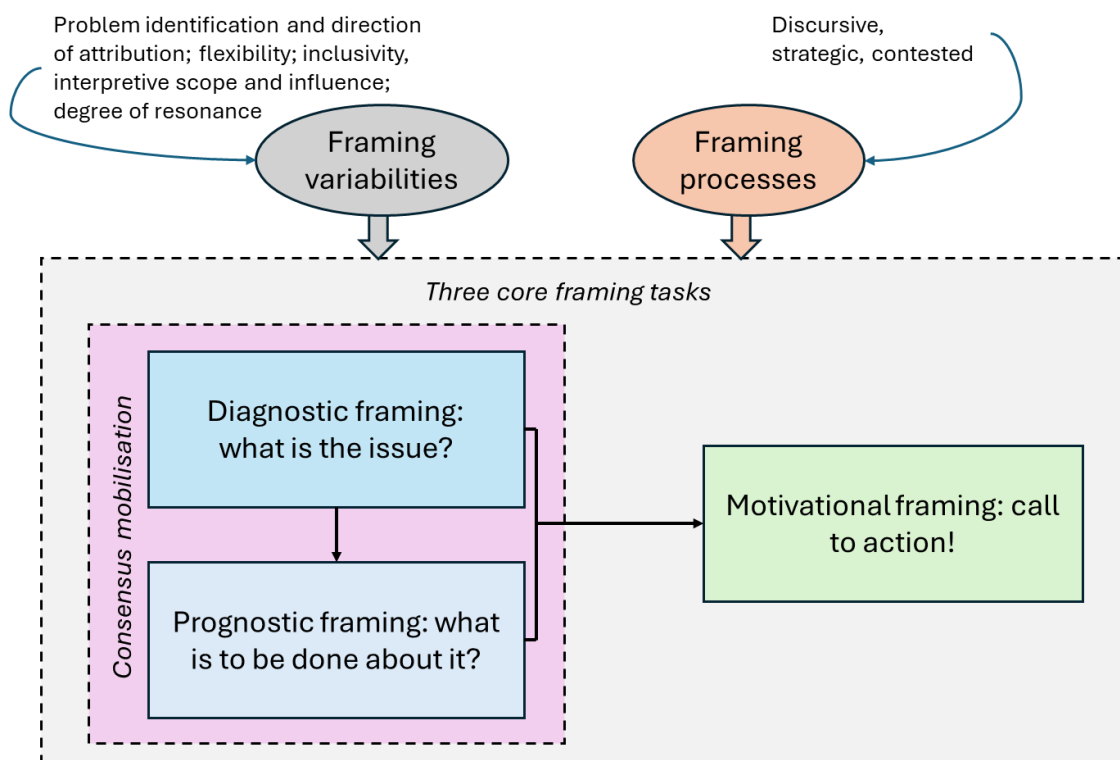


Figure 4: A simplified overview of theory of framing processes for social movements and collective action (own figure)

5.2 DOMINANT DIAGNOSTIC FRAMES

This sub-chapter describes the four main issue identifications that were present throughout all gathered data (interviews and online articles) on the Dutch farmers' movement and its relationship with the Nature Restoration Law. These dominant topics are the main diagnostic frames proffered by the Dutch farmers' movement.

Not all actors utilised or discussed the same diagnostic frames in their interviews or online articles. Table 3 below shows which actors (interviewees and Farmers Defence Force) described which diagnostic frames in the most detail, meaning: *who leaned to which diagnostic movement frame?* The table also shows the frequency of these diagnostic frames. It shows that frame 1 was the most discussed, frame 2 and 4 came up somewhat often and frame 3 was discussed the least.

Figure 5 shows the 24 codes within the 'broad frame' category that informed the four main diagnostic frames. The codes in grey are those that did not specifically belong to a diagnostic frame, but can be seen as overarching themes.

Table 3: diagnostic frames and which actor focused on them most

<i>Diagnostic frame</i>	<i>Actors who discussed this frame in most detail</i>	<i>Frequency (total quotes within 'broad frames' category)</i>
Frame 1: Trapped in the judicial system	2A, 3A, 6A, 7A, 1B, 2B, 3B	329
Frame 2: Trapped in a capitalist system	2A, 4A, 5A	123
Frame 3: Competition with outsiders	Farmers Defence Force, 1B	82
Frame 4: What is the Netherlands?	1A, 3A, 5A	114

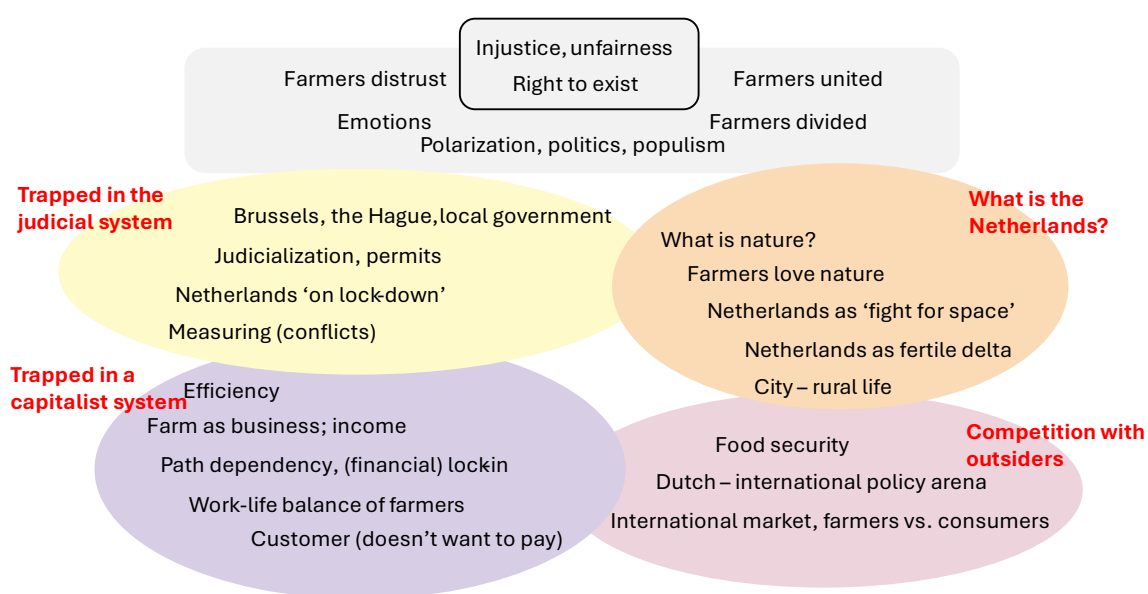


Figure 5: the 'broad frames' codes visualized as a spectrum of topics divided into four diagnostic frames

Dominant diagnostic frame 1

5.3.1 TRAPPED IN THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM: THE NITROGEN CRISIS

“The fear, and definitely in the Netherlands, definitely in the official organisations and also with the cabinet, is judicialisation. Because they are completely bogged down in that at the moment. And don’t have a way out. [...] And no one wants to make the problem bigger” (6A).

Farmers and non-farmers alike point towards the same starting point of the farmers protests between 2019 and 2024: the Dutch nitrogen issue. When the Dutch Council of State effectively nullified pre-emptively given permits for agricultural businesses via the Dutch Nitrogen Approach Program PAS (Raad van State, 2019) it sent shockwaves through the agricultural as well as construction sector. Livestock farmers that were participating in the Program immediately lost their permit for activities that emit nitrogen close to Natura 2000 areas, and permits for other land use plans concerning for example new roads or industrial terrain came to a halt as well. The so-called “nitrogen crisis” and its resulting juridical issues for agriculture is described by interviewees as the diagnostic frame for the first outbursts of the Dutch farmers’ movement in 2019.

However, interviewees’ identification regarding the exact focal point of the issue is slightly split. A majority of interviewees point directly towards the ‘fall of PAS’ (in which the issue is identified as being of judicial nature) whereas three others are most concerned with an infamous expression by a Dutch politician looking to solve the nitrogen issue: a proposed reduction of the Dutch livestock herd by 50 percent. This reduction was proposed by politician de Groot (political party Democrats 66) as a possible solution to the nitrogen issue, and was met with fierce criticism by the agricultural world: *“There was the goal then... The start was to halve the livestock population, that was expressed, and on that basis the protests were started” (3A).* The solution to reduce the number of livestock in the Netherlands was felt by many farmers on a personal level (contributing to the frame’s resonance), which can be why the expression was quoted even among interviewees who saw the fall as PAS as the original issue: *“look, it doesn’t help when someone like [de Groot] says: we want to halve the livestock population. This is not what [de Groot] literally says, but then farmers hear with ‘halve the livestock population’: halve the amount of farmers. In that they hear: it has to be less, and we are unwanted” (6A).*

This frame encompasses the broader issue of what is called ‘juridising’ in Dutch: the judicialisation (or “juridification”) of policy measures. This refers to the idea that policy goals are now being forced through the judicial system by way of lawsuits, rather than other methods. In this diagnostic frame, judicialisation is framed to tighten and constrict the rules for agriculture: *“And so companies still have hardly any opportunities to innovate, hardly any opportunities to develop and that’s why you see that not much is actually happening. And in a sector where little is happening, everything is going backwards. [...] While there are young people who really want to get started, also have very good ideas, but often get stuck in bureaucratic processes” (2A).* Judicialisation is identified by both interviewee groups as a common occurrence in conflicts surrounding regulations for land and water use. Though the diagnostic frame of judicialisation often is described as a threat towards agriculture, one member of an agricultural lobby organisation described that his organisation uses lawsuits as well: *“If measures are taken that we consider to be unjust, we will discuss this and if necessary we will go all the way to the Council of State. [...] then we ultimately ask the judge for advice. And that is also happening the other way around more and more” (3A).* Judicialisation is thus a strategy that is not only utilised by e.g., environmental NGOs in the farmers’ debate, but also agricultural organisations themselves, be it for opposite results.

The expressions in online articles about the NRL and the Green Deal by Farmers Defence Force show little appreciation in general for regulations on agricultural activities. Because these articles were selected in order to assess their opinion on the NRL, the Dutch regulations surrounding nitrogen are less discussed here. However, Brussels is a large source of blame, as they feel farmers are subject to a “hodgepodge” of bureaucracy from Brussels, who are blamed to be meddling with their businesses too much: *“we disagree with the attempts to get control over our agricultural soils, our beaches and the sea we live from. We demand sovereignty for the EU member states!”* (Farmers Defence Force, 29 may 2024).

JUDICIALISATION AND THE NATURE RESTORATION LAW

Many interviewees made clear that Dutch farmers, politicians and policymakers are all afraid of the judicial problem that was made visible through the nitrogen crisis. Farmers feel that judicialisation affects all within the Dutch farming system, not just those farmers whose operations are more conventional: *“‘organic’ needs a permit too. And ‘organic’ also suffers from Natura 2000 legislation. And if Nature Restoration Law legislation gets added to that, they will suffer from that too”* (3A). Added regulations to the Dutch agricultural (or industrial) landscape are said to ‘lock down’ the Netherlands even further. Because the NRL has legally binding targets, interviewees describe that their fear is that ‘another nitrogen issue’ will be created with the NRL, *“another legislative monster”* (3A). Interviewees from group A (opponents of the NRL) thus often link current or previous experiences with nature legislation to possible future experiences with it as a reason for contention against the NRL. For example, one interviewee specifically mentioned that this type of framing strategy comes into play for him as soon as an issue is viewed to be ‘in the future’:

“[...] Then no one really knows what it will look like, but then you have to [...] think about how it will look like. And of course you do that from your point of view, in our case from a dairy farming point of view. [...] First then you say to those policy officers, or to the minister, like: if you are going to implement this, then it will be like this and like that, then those are the consequences for the dairy farming industry. Look, whether that is exaggeration or framing... But it can also be a reality, can become reality” (5A).

MEASUREMENT ISSUES

One important aspect of farmers’ issues with new regulations is regarding measurements. The ‘A’ group was especially vocal about these issues. How the effectivity of the implementation of a new regulation will be measured, which standards it will have and what data a judge will use in a court ruling are all issues that many think will be a problem for agriculture in the future – because these are also issues that farmers currently see as a problem, regarding for example how nitrogen deposition is measured: *“[...] field tests show that the deposition of ammonia, that is actually this way for all cases, is within 500 meters of the emission point. [...] So I don’t think [my ammonia emissions] reaches the Natura 2000 area at all”* (1A). The fear of measurements and monitoring of how the NRL also plays for interviewee 1B, who is involved with policy for agri-environmental schemes: *“if you look at the figures from the past few years, it is already difficult not to achieve a [decline in farmland birds] at all, let alone that we add 10%... So I do worry, that worries me”* (1B). A lobbyist involved in consulting with NRL policymakers described that this fear of the ‘how’ of measuring is thus very present in worries about how the NRL will be implemented in the future:

“So we think that Nature Restoration Law, certainly also outside the Natura 2000 areas, right? That... It will also apply to the surrounding areas, and also newly designated nature. Yes, in order to be able to offer these sufficient protection, this will also lead to further restrictions on the possibilities that farmers have” (4A).

Dominant diagnostic frame 2

5.3.2 TRAPPED IN THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM: THE NETHERLANDS, INC.

“Farmers are no longer farmers these days, but entrepreneurs. Well, that was actually... the beginning of the end, I always say” (5A).

A farmer is an entrepreneur with a business that needs to be given room to grow and innovate, is something that speaks to the worldview of most interviewees. Combining this worldview with regulations for the (proposed) betterment of the natural environment creates conflict: entrepreneurs start to feel constricted. The implementation of such regulations are framed to result in a tighter web of rules, subsidies, investments and responsibilities which all put a damper on the economic output of the farmer. After all, Dutch farmers operate within a capitalist system in which there must be opportunity to make a farm profitable, otherwise they are doomed to disappear.

This diagnostic frame has to do with the system Dutch farmers are part of. The conventional Dutch agricultural system has since the end of the Second World War focused on scaling up farming operations by way of farmland expansion and long-term heavy investments to ensure maximum efficiency of farms (de Haas, 2013), which has made Dutch farmers deeply engaged with the State as well as heavily reliant on agricultural financing by banks. It also puts them at odds with proposed Dutch government policies that seem to not address the system that farmers operate within at all. New regulations are translated into new long-term investments, of which entrepreneurs are unsure if they will earn back. This system of investments and resulting indebtedness is what interviewees often use to illustrate farmers’ grievances: *“I think you are talking about that farmers need the support of a government and society to get further. And to, yeah, to dare to invest. And the government showed itself as a very untrustworthy partner when it’s about how a farm can develop itself towards the future. As if a farmer can do new investments within a year – of course it’s about long-term investments” (4A).* How new regulations will play out in relation to their economic situation is said to be a central issue: *“For us that always plays a number one role. Is there still a future to get an income from your company?” (5A)* Online articles by Farmers Defence Force are similarly concerned about how EU policies will affect farms on an economic level, though their arguments differ slightly. For this group, their issue is mainly directed at the Green Deal itself, and arguments against it detail that it is a threat that will lead to less agricultural production and is “fatal to our companies” (FDF, 2024b).

THE ROLE OF THE CONSUMER: “YOU CAN ONLY SPEND A EURO ONCE”

The consumer also plays a role in the economic argument. The Dutch agricultural system is set up so that the extra costs made in producing products while complying to environmentally friendly measures are passed on to the consumer. In this frame, the regular consumer does not want to pay extra for these products, often due to the tightness of their wallets: *“You see a trend towards the private [basic, low cost] label and such, just because people want to keep it affordable. You can only spend a euro once” (2A).* While most interviewees acknowledge this consumer barrier, its exact causes were often left vague and whether or not this issue is one produced by consumers or by the system was left in the middle. One interviewee, when reflecting on her core issues with the Dutch farming system, argued that the consumer can be hypocritical: *“[...] so that inequality like, on the one hand there are also plenty of people, citizens, who are indeed shouting that farmers need to do better. But indeed, when they’re at Albert Heijn or do I know what kind of store, they are not willing to pay 10 cents more. [...] There is really something fundamentally wrong there and actually a kind of hypocrisy that I cannot stand, so...” (1B).* Other interviewed individuals understand the consumer very well:

"[How] do you get that compensation from the market again, right? People all want sustainable, all organic, and they all want this. But when they drive through the supermarket with their shopping trolley, those [laughs] ambitions are sometimes pushed aside, because then it has to be... They also want to go on holiday in a new car, and then the cheapest food is dumped in that trolley. And that is logical, right? You do that yourself too. At some point, when you go shopping, you don't go... At least, if you have a tight budget, you can't get the most expensive one, it's that simple. But that's the problem. Then again, if new rules come in, how do we get, how do we ensure that that doesn't result in more costs instead of revenues? That's the point" (5A).

Sympathies from farmers towards non-farmers when it concerns how they spend their money – and shifting the focus away from the economic argument but towards a different form of blame – could be seen as an attempt by internal movement adherents to include external movement adherents into this economic frame argument. However, interview questions did not go in depth on this specific topic.

WHO'S SAYING WHAT?

Not just the conventional agricultural 'A'-side utilised this frame, but the 'B' interviewees as well. Interviewee 1B, involved with agri-environmental schemes, detailed that farmers who participate in those schemes will feel the effects of regulations such as the NRL on their farm as well, because of the economic system they have to partake in: *"You can't be 'green' if you are in the red. Yes, that is simply a true fact. And we see that too. Farmers really want to, but they have to be able to do so and they are not sufficiently able to do so because of the system they are in with a world market with food prices that are too low, incredibly high investments and land prices that are really the highest in the whole of Europe" (1B).* Interviewee 3B predicts that the implementation of the NRL could disadvantage the operations of especially 'biological' farmers as well: *"It is so that, especially because [Dutch] policy is aligned to the intensive way of farming, that especially biological farmers and other more 'broadened' sustainable farmers, they fall under the same regime. And then that works out badly for them, even though they are not the ones causing the problem" (3B).* Out of the 'B' group, 1B and 2B mention this issue resonates with them personally. Interviewee 2B described research he did that involved having "emotional conversations" about this topic with farmers, which spoke to him personally about the salience of the issue: *"[conversations] where people say yes, I do want to change, but I'm just stuck, so: how? Then tell me how. Well, those kinds of things have made an impression on me too" (2B).* Interviewee 1B detailed that to her, the fact that farmers have to bear the economic burden of regulations without being commended for their societal services is a main point of discontent when it comes to new regulations such as the NRL.

Dominant diagnostic frame 3

5.3.3 COMPETITION WITH OUTSIDERS: “CHEAP TRASH FROM THIRD COUNTRIES”

“What’s not produced in the EU, cannot be consumed in the EU!” (FDF, 2024a; 2024b)

The third issue frame is the frame that is prominent in the later stage of the Dutch farmers’ movement, around the time the Green Deal and the Nature Restoration Law came into view. This frame problematizes the Dutch position in relation to the international market, which differentiates between the European market and the market between the EU and countries outside of it. The effects of EU regulations such as the NRL are described to be highly problematic for agricultural import and export. Because of its focus on economics, this diagnostic frame is closely linked to the *‘The Netherlands, inc.’*-frame (diagnostic frame 2) but differs from it, because it came up more prominently in interviews regarding the development of arguments against the NRL in later stages of the movement. This diagnostic frame mainly came up as something that farmers themselves have to deal with and thus belongs as a diagnostic frame to ‘internal’ movement adherents – external adherents do not have to deal with regulations that affect international trade. However one interviewee described that the Dutch position in international trade was raised as an issue towards potential Dutch adherents of the farmers’ movement, by highlighting home-grown products to be more healthy and safe in comparison to imported products from for example Argentina or Brazil: *“we also don’t know exactly how it is treated and how it was bred and whether other products were used that are not allowed here. Normally not, because then it won’t be allowed in. But you never know it for sure”* (3A).

FDF concerns itself primarily with the way the Green Deal has been worked out, in which the NRL plays a lesser role. In its online articles regarding the Green Deal and the NRL, FDF directs all issues towards EU policy and EU figureheads. All policy measures imposed by the EU are seen as threatening and unfair, and in need of change. To FDF, the people who are most responsible for the issues with the Green Deal are Von der Leyen and “socialist” Timmermans (e.g., FDF, 2024c). These Brussels figures are said to try to get rid of European agriculture, while boosting import from non-EU regions with different standards:

“At the same time, the European Commission under the lead of Von der Leyen and Timmermans

Set the backdoor wide open to trash from regions that DO NOT have to comply to the EU sustainability requirements and EU quality requirements: grains that have been sprayed with substances that are forbidden in the EU, eggs from caged chickens, meat and dairy produced with hormones... Cheap trash to keep the European citizen at their side.” (FDF, 2024c).

Simple phrases or slogans are used to punctuate FDF’s issues with the Green Deal and the NRL within that, such as *“We demand sovereignty for the EU member states!”* (FDF, 2024a), *“What’s not produced in the EU, cannot be consumed in the EU!”* (FDF, 2024a, 2024b) and *“Home-grown food. Self-determination.”* (FDF, 2024c). Regarding the issue of imported food, the group repeatedly uses words to denote products imported from outside the European Union, such as “cheap trash”, “inferior products”, “unfair competition” and suggests that imported products may have a negative effect on the health of EU citizens (FDF, 2024b). The latter statement, about the health effects of imported food, could be seen as an effort by FDF to bridge its issues to external movement adherents, which aligns with how interviewee 3A communicates the issue of international trade to external movement adherents. All analysed articles specifically address the EU as responsible for issues that farmers face, together with the Dutch government. Both are framed to be untrustworthy and looking to destroy Dutch farming practices.

(INTERNATIONAL) FOOD SECURITY

A notable part of the issues described within the ‘competition with outsiders’ diagnostic frame are linked to food security. Farmers Defence Force is not the only section of the Dutch farmers’ movement that is concerned with the effects of the NRL on food production. Interviewees’ worries regarding international trade are similar to that of FDF, e.g., that international trade agreements have different standards for product from non-European regions, which makes the competition unfair.

Moreover, this frame encompasses the food security issue. ‘Food security’ came into focus around the same time the war between Ukraine and Russia started, which put pressure on the grain supply in Europe and made EU food security a pressing issue:

“But anyway, you see [the discussion] totally turn around in that last year. [...] There is an additional element to that [...]. That is, namely, the war in Ukraine. Then suddenly the story became: yes, but the food supply, it's under pressure and then we can't have the Nature Restoration Law... right? [The NRL] poses a danger.” (3B)

These international developments and their effects on food security in Europe are linked to the farmers movement as arguments against developing the NRL. It is thus linked to the diagnostic frame of judicialisation: the NRL means more judicialisation, which means more ways to hinder Dutch as well as European food production and food security, which is also unwise in a time of international crisis.

Dominant diagnostic frame 4

5.3.4 WHAT IS THE NETHERLANDS? A COUNTRY THE SIZE OF A POSTAGE STAMP

“Like nitrogen, that’s a big problem in the Netherlands, in Belgium it’s a bit less of a problem, in Germany it’s not a problem and the rest of Europe doesn’t talk about it” (2A).

What is the Netherlands? What values and activities do we place on its land and water use? This is a question that played a central role to many interviewees. These questions played a big role in the beginning of the farmer movement, and still do as of late 2024. To elaborate their grievances with regulations for agricultural practices, interviewees often utilised a frame of the ‘tiny’ Netherlands: the small size of the country, the high ratio of land devoted to agriculture in comparison to small natural areas (11% of the Netherlands is considered a natural area, the second lowest in Europe) mean that nature regulations play a disproportionately large role, to adherents of this frame. Moreover, frame adherents characterise the Netherlands for its very fertile agricultural soils that should be used to its full extent, without being subjected to ‘unfair’ regulations regarding the natural environment.

WHAT IS ‘NATURE’ IN THE NETHERLANDS?

When defining the effects of nature policy on agricultural areas, some interviewees first challenged the definition of nature itself in a highly urbanized country like the Netherlands. This issue topic is most often utilised by interviewees from the ‘A’ group who were more involved in local levels of agriculture organisations, and was much less prominent in other interviewees. It often contains discursive elements that paint nature as something small and nature conservation as a futile endeavour:

“In the Netherlands we have decided that we need to have a lot of Natura 2000 points. All those little postage stamps, so to speak” (1A); “[...] that has little to do with nature, that has more to do with a bit of desired nature [transl.: wensnatuur]” (1A). “And what is deteriorating nature, what is improving nature? And who tells me that climate change does not deteriorate nature?” (2A); “In the Netherlands there is no nature like in Germany or Poland or Spain. There are very large areas there” (3A); “of course, the public space has changed enormously. Except often for the farmers, there is still the green meadow. Yes, there may be one flower less than before, but [...]” (5A); “We don’t really have any nature in the Netherlands anymore. It’s all just landscaped parks... [...] so yes, what is nature then?” (5A).

Aside from calling into question what ‘nature’ itself is in the Netherlands, many interviewees also expressed worries about the definition of nature that the NRL uses and will utilise in future implementation. The definition of nature in the NRL will be problematic, according to interviewees, because it will affect all natural areas outside of the built-up area: *“We think that Nature Restoration Law, certainly outside the Natura 2000 areas, right... It will also apply to surrounding areas, and new nature will be designated too” (4A).* The issue is defined outside of current time and space and into an uncertain future. Moreover, the uncertainty of how nature will be defined in the NRL links to the ‘measurement issue’ that has been defined in the first diagnostic frame (see ‘nitrogen crisis’), because there is a similar worry about how the new regulation will be measured and which criteria will be used.

Many interviewees have specific grievances towards the Natura 2000 areas in the Netherlands. Dutch Natura 2000 areas tend to be small, but farmers still have to take them into account, which is seen as an issue: *“Look at Natura 2000, they registered all those little areas that we are now having problems with, so to speak. Which actually have very little value for nature and yet have been registered. And those farms that are located around there, they are having a huge problem with that” (5A).* The grievances with the definition

of nature for Natura 2000 areas in the past and present are thus translated into future grievances with the Nature Restoration Law: *“We are afraid that with the Nature Restoration Law, that impact [of nature policy] will become much greater. Due to the fragmentation [of natural areas] almost the entire Netherlands will be designated as a nature reserve”* (3A); *“Yes, in order to provide [these natural areas] with sufficient protection, it will also start to further limit opportunities that farmers have”* (4A).

A FIGHT FOR SPACE

Most interviewees mentioned that because the Netherlands is small, many issues have to do with a ‘fight for space’. The diagnosis of these issues is put at the spatial planning level of the Netherlands. The Netherlands is said to be ‘full’ and planned to the last centimetre. This lends itself to discussion on how this small and densely populated country should be ideally divided in terms of space utilised for certain activities. In this frame, often nature development and agricultural activities are in conflict with each other. For interviewee 5A, this is the core of the issues in the Netherlands: *“In the past, the Netherlands simply had much more surface area, much more agricultural land. That agricultural land is now all used for housing, for railways, roads, industrial estates, block boxes, you name it. Yes and that little bit of agricultural land that is left now, so to speak, those farmers need that. And yes, all kinds of restrictions are imposed there because that nature has to be restored there. But on that hard surface [...] no more nature can be developed there”* (5A). Farmers also claim they are simply unlucky because they tend to lose this fight for space. This issue frame is linked to the nitrogen issue, because there is only a limited amount of nitrogen allowed to be emitted, so choices need to be made: *“We have to halve the livestock so that, popularly speaking, Schiphol can grow”* (1A). The nitrogen issue in the Netherlands started in 2019, one interviewee stated that the nitrogen issue resulted in an “extra pressure on agricultural land” which was not present before 2019 (4A). Interviewee 6A thinks it’s not too unusual for this discussion to occur:

“And if everyone wants to claim [the available space] very much for themselves, that space... Yes. And if Natuurmonumenten says: that land belongs to us, so we do not want anyone on it. Yes, that is bothering. And that’s the same as agriculture saying: it’s our land, so no one is allowed to have an opinion on what we do on that. Yeah, and then people say: I do have an opinion about that.” (6A)

“THE MOST FERTILE DELTA OF EUROPE”

Another way to characterise the Netherlands in this fourth diagnostic frame ‘*what is the Netherlands?*’ is by describing it as a large river delta with fertile soils. Not too much restrictions should be placed on these fertile soils, argue frame adherents, but rather they should be utilised for the European food security issue and should thus be exempt to EU rules regarding e.g., nitrogen. This diagnostic frame was identified by many interviewees, though it was not the most prominent frame interviewees utilised. It was also present in the online articles posted by FDF, who posed it is unfair for ‘healthy soils’ to be taken out of the hands of farmers in order to give it a different destination, for example (FDF, 2024b).

The issue of how the Netherlands should be characterised also links to the perceived unfairness of EU regulations between the Netherlands and other member states. It is unfair not only because the Netherlands is said to be able to play a big role in the European food system and should thus be given an exception to the rule, as described in the third diagnostic frame (‘*competition with outsiders*’) but unfairness is also identified in the fact that other countries such as Germany or Italy do not have the same issues with EU regulations, because regulations there are interpreted differently. By some, it is also identified as an issue that has to do with the small size of the Netherlands’ natural areas that are used to calculate to what standards its agricultural areas have to comply to: *“But yeah, the Po delta and Bretagne have less to deal with these problems, because they are part of a big country and where they also have some mountains close-by that they can include in those calculations, so to say. But I think that many*

businesses in those areas are relatively more intensive than we are here in the Netherlands, but here every square meter is utilised” (3A). Two interviewees (1A, 3A) mentioned the difference in implementation between the Netherlands and Germany:

“The example is always given of the Dinkel, which flows [from Germany] into Twente. In Germany, it is green on the map. In the Netherlands, it is red on the map because it does not comply here and then it flows from the Netherlands to Germany and it is green on the map again. It depends a bit on the standards of different countries, like: how do we deal with it? But it’s also to do with intensity. Germany has fewer cows per hectare. [...] A lot of farms are on one livestock unit or one dairy cow per hectare, so there you have much more space and in the Netherlands it’s much more intensive right away” (3A).

5.3 PROGNOSTIC FRAMING, PART 1: THE DIFFICULTY OF A SHARED CONSENSUS FRAME

“There’s not one organisation to the outside world, right? So that, I think that’s also the great weakness of agriculture” (1A).

There is little agreement in the Dutch farmers’ movement regarding its exact issue identification. All farmers differ in business operations and are widely spread across a spectrum between highly conventional farming, participants in agri-environmental schemes (also called organic farmers in this research) or those whose income does not rely solely on their agricultural output, but have a diverse income through for example agritourism. The Dutch farmers’ movement is thus not a single unit, is something that most interviewees underscored. Moreover, farmers are described to be not just divided in business operations, but also in political orientation and how they relate to the policy-making process.

This results in differences in prognostic frames for the movement: there are distinct differences in the proposed solutions and preferred course of action, which are linked to the personal identities of the movement adherents. The most discernible division in the farmers movement that came forward through interviews is the one between the ‘lobbyists’ and the ‘protesters’. The differentiation between these two categories was made by interviewees themselves – interview participants had a strong tendency to classify themselves as belonging to a either prognostic frame category – and this distinction was found to be relevant upon in-depth analysis of results through theory and supporting literature. The box below summarises their differences which were first found through interview results and then backed up by the literature.

5.3.1 LOBBYISTS

All interviewees in group A have or have been involved in lobbying for agricultural issues. Of the three interviewees in the group B, two were involved in lobby only on a few occasions and one is involved full-time for nature conservation. While some interviewees mentioned having participated in the first few farmers’ protests, all stated they prefer to take action for their cause through lobbying, or dialogue. These lobby organisations are institutionalised movement actors, because of their centralized organisational structure and a division between “labour and authority” (Pruijt & Roggeband, 2014). They could further be described as institutionalised because they are part of the agricultural policy community, as these organisations are often immediately consulted in the policy-making process for policies that touch on agricultural issues. Moreover, Dutch political party BBB (*Farmer-Citizen Movement*) was created directly following the first protest outings in 2019 and is part of the Dutch government coalition as of late 2024. The lobbyist group finds it especially important to rely on their networks and their representation in all levels of governance to enact change: *“We [LTO Noord] believe that we should be everywhere, so we have a meeting with the municipalities, we have a meeting with the province – and in addition LTO Noord, together with LTO Nederland, is always present in The Hague [...]” (3A).*

The solutions of the lobbyist group regarding the issues first identified by the Dutch farmers’ movement in 2019 – mainly those related to the ‘nitrogen crisis’ – were only described in vague statements. Some

LOBBYIST OR PROTESTER?

Lobbyists

- Action through dialogue
- Moderate political opinions
- Movement is institutionalised

Protesters

- Action through disruptive statements out on the streets
- Tendency towards right-wing and/or populist political opinions
- Movement is more or less autonomous

interviewees recounted those first protests had as a goal mainly to “make a statement” (1A) in favour of farmers and were a “cry for attention” and to ask for “realistic policy” (2A), or to “continue farming in a certain way” (3A). Many individuals felt that farmers were blamed for an issue which was calculated with the wrong measurements (regarding e.g., nitrogen) and the proffered solution by the ‘A’ group became to redefine the measurements used in calculating things like nitrogen deposition, whereas one individual from the ‘B’ group would have liked tweaking of for example international trade agreements (by things like ‘true cost accounting’) to account for issues present within the agricultural economic system (1B). Redefinitions of measurements within regulations also played a role for the NRL in the later stage of the movement frame, because lobbyists felt that the words used in the Nature Restoration Law were too unclear and left too much room for interpretation, while they could have a large effect on agriculture: *“with every human activity that you can do, just in extreme form, you could say: this is a deterioration [of nature]”* (6A). Lobbyists from organisations such as LTO mentioned that the first solution for the NRL was to scrap it entirely, but when that was not on the table, they were very focused on suggesting amendments to the Law in order to ease policy measures that could affect agricultural operations.

POLARISATION: “IT’S VERY MUCH NATURE VERSUS AGRICULTURE”

The interviewees from both sides are hesitant to use politically charged language and oppose the perceived polarisation of the farmers’ debate. Conversations about being ‘for’ or ‘against’ an issue are seen as limiting this debate. This polarisation is often regarding conversations about nature policy issues, in which farmers feel that they are unrightfully being painted to have polarising opinions with nature conservation policymakers:

“And you see more polarisation in the past five years, like: yeah, farmers are actually environmental terrorists...” (4A); *“It’s very much nature versus agriculture”* (6A).

Two interviewees from the ‘B’ side described that these poles hide the ‘silent middle’ of the argument, meaning individuals in or outside the movement whose opinions are not so dissenting: *“And there is a very large part that simply had sensible things to say. But there is also a very large part that does not make itself heard. And they are just as important and that is a shame, I think, that they don’t get the attention”* (1B). Polarisation is also often described to occur within the farmers movement itself, though in this case it often refers to the political opinions of movement adherents and how that relates to how quick they are to participate in actions that disturb public order.

However, polarisation did not only happen during the first Dutch protests, but during the NRL policy-making process as well. Interviewee 3B recalls how quickly the debate surrounding the NRL became polarised. He mentions that the chaotic discursive space of the NRL around the time of the EU elections meant that some actors could make unfounded claims without repercussions: *“the moment you shout something during election times, it is too late anyway when it gets refuted. If the rebuttal even gets to the first recipients of that message at all”* (3B). It seems that polarisation could thus also be utilised as a strategy by lobbyists to get favourable results.

5.3.2 PROTESTERS

The other group are the protesters: those whose preferred movement action is done through confrontational, disruptive protests on the streets, of which notable Dutch protest organisations skew towards right-wing and/or populist political opinions and whose movements can be seen as less institutionalised and more autonomous. This group was often painted by the ‘lobbyist’ group as being more radical and quick to protest rather than wait a situation out: *“Right, they jump immediately on the barricades and get on the tractor”* (1A). This group was not interviewed, so their individual political opinions cannot be assumed, but the politically charged language is readily apparent in online articles by Dutch

farmers' protest group Farmers Defence Force (FDF), utilised in this research. Articles draw upon the rhetoric of (far) right-wing politics, e.g., by using terms such as 'family values', 'third countries' (countries outside the EU), 'restoring democracy' as well as describing journalists as 'lying rats' (Farmers Defence Force 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

Even though the two well-known Dutch farmers' movement protest groups, Agractie and FDF, can be seen as institutionalised because both have centralized organisational structures with division between "labour and authority" (Pruijt & Roggeband, 2014), they are less institutionalised when it comes to their policy networks. The protester group is often described by the lobby group as being less involved with – as well as less knowledgeable about – the policy process: *"it's very complicated subject matter and you have to have knowledge of that. And you see, especially with action groups, they are simply less well organized and have less knowledge. So I think they really have a different role"* (6A). Because the protest groups are more autonomous than the lobbyists, they have more freedom to be disruptive without risking damage to network relationships, for example (Pruijt & Roggeband, 2014). In a sense, their 'role' is to facilitate these disruptions and create space for new kinds of conversation.

When it comes to the protester group, their solutions to the initial issues of the movement did not come up in discussions, but it could be assumed their solutions were similarly vague to those described by the lobbyist group for the protests around 2019. Some interviewees suggested that the first outings of protests happened as a truly collective statement, meaning that the farmers' movement was described to be not as divided yet in 2019 as it is as of late 2024. Interviewee 5A states that all layers of the agricultural population wanted to make a statement. This could thus be the reason that interviewees did not mention that the protester group had very dissenting solutions to the movement's issues in 2019. However, FDF does offer very clear solutions to the problems they identify with the NRL in its online articles: they specifically demand the complete retraction of the Green Deal as it stands currently, a protection of the internal EU market, protection and support for the European livestock industry and the protection of private property rights, and demand that EU politicians be voted out of office (FDF, 2024a).

DIVIDES IN AGRICULTURAL PROFESSION

"As a farmer, you simply cannot base your decisions on government policy" (1B).

Dutch farmers are divided in opinion on solution, but their differences in farming operations were also said to create a divide. Those farms described to be 'organic' are said to possibly be less concerned with the NRL because they already implement measurements that have less effect on the surrounding natural environment. However, while the agricultural sector was described to be divided, statements like these were often followed with a 'but', in which interviewees described that *all* farmers do run into similar issues with environmental legislation. All agricultural operations across the spectrum are said to be subject to the whims of the Dutch government, which makes relying on Dutch agricultural policy difficult, even for those farms involved with agri-environmental schemes: *"And the policy is too erratic. Well, and that is a really valid point. As a farmer, you simply cannot base your decisions on government policy"* (1B).

Moreover, some interviewees stated the NRL is not a part of the Dutch farmers' movement yet, as of late 2024. The individuals who do not think that the NRL is a part of the movement were often not immediately involved with the policymaking process of the NRL. They oftentimes posed that the Law will become a problem in the future, following national implementation. Meaning, the solutions of the movement to previously identified issues could be the same in the future for the NRL – for all farmers.

5.3.3 ONE SHARED CONSENSUS FRAME: AN UNTRUSTWORTHY GOVERNMENT

In a frame for a social movement, discontent results in seeking for blame or responsibility on who or what caused it. Often-blamed actors by the Dutch farmers' movement are the Dutch or EU governmental bodies and specific politicians within either of those (e.g., the Dutch politician who advocated for halving the Dutch livestock herd, or EU figureheads such as Von der Leyen or Timmermans). Protest group FDF directs most of the blame regarding their issues with the NRL onto Brussels and its politicians as the perpetrator and the Dutch government as an accomplice. Actors outside of the government are sometimes mentioned by interviewees, such as the Dutch group Mobilisation for the Environment (MOB) whose lawsuit led to the nitrogen crisis of 2019. A fear identified with individuals from the 'A' group is that groups such as MOB could use judicialisation in their favour again with the NRL. While MOB could be seen as a culpable agent for the start of the movement by the Dutch farmers, the group was not necessarily seen as the one *responsible* for the identified issues – they only came up incidentally in interviews. Interviewees felt it is hard to convince movement adherents of the importance of Brussels as a cause of blame, because of a low awareness of the way the EU's official processes work but also because it is hard for people to understand how legislative processes work in general (7A) and because EU processes take place on a relatively long timescale so it takes a while to experience its effects (2A). One interviewee also mentioned that there was not really a participation process for the NRL in which her organisation was asked to participate, which also resulted in a low awareness of the role of Brussels (1B). This means that in the end, actors within the Dutch government were more often held responsible:

“Eventually, [the politician who called for a 50% reduction of the national herd] did say like: we have let Brussels pass us by for too long. We never complied to anything, and that's why we now need to lose 50% of our national herd. He was blamed for that and that was framed too: that's what they think in The Hague, and that's what we need to prevent. [...] To me, it's more a political discussion between the Netherlands and Brussels” (3A).

For issues identified both at the beginning and during the evolution of the movement, interviewed individuals from both sides mainly focused on the role of the Dutch government, which is portrayed to be an untrustworthy actor whose plans need to be stopped. The salience of governmental bodies as a cause of blame is reflected in a disproportionate amount of times they were mentioned in interviews compared to other directions of blame. At the hands of these governmental bodies, farmers face issues that are said to be unfair. This points towards the idea of a shared consensus frame of an untrustworthy government.

CITIZEN SUPPORT

“What we are seeing at the moment is that there is enormous distrust of the government, among other things, in the agricultural sector, but that is now starting to happen across society” (2A).

The frame of an untrustworthy government was described to be salient to (potential) external movement constituents as well. When asked why non-farmers would join Dutch farmers in protest, interviewees referred to issues that Dutch citizens have dealt with regarding the government. Proposed issues of citizens with Dutch government are wide-ranging, from a government scandal that put a large amount of families in debt ('toeslagenaffaire') (2B); policy switch-ups regarding sustainable investments that are not seen as affordable at all to regular citizens (2A); the tensions in the Dutch housing market (2B); earthquakes due to gas drilling in the province of Groningen and high prices in the supermarket (FDF, 2024d), to name a few.

Interviewed individuals underscore the importance of relating issues back to what citizens themselves can experience, and that it can be hard to make others understand the importance of certain issues: *“if you're*

not in that, weren't raised on a farm yourself, or you don't work on a farm, yes, then you can sometimes find that difficult to understand" (5A). The disappearance of farms is also said to resonate with potential external movement adherents, because it may influence the dynamics of villages because farmers cannot e.g., volunteer or make their land available anymore for village activities (5A). One interviewee described that in order to get support from non-farmers, he offers non-farmers a long list of government regulations that farmers have to comply with (3A), as well as giving emotional appeals: *"then you're also talking about your family life, about an income. You talk about the little support you get and about the landscape [...] Then you're talking about how many people have jobs thanks to the agricultural sector? Looking at transport, looking at things like that, that it comes back to their living environment instead of becoming a technical discussion"* (3A). An interviewee from the 'B' side mentioned that government policy has a tendency to come across as quite technocratic, which does not resonate with anybody: *"[it] is far removed not only from farmers, but also from other people. [...] People have little affinity with that way of thinking and talking about nature"* (2B).

Interviewees were not questioned in-depth about whether or not they experience a divide between urban and rural citizens in terms of support for the farmers' movement, so results regarding this topic are only anecdotal. Even so, when it comes to a potential rural-urban divide in movement adherents, one interviewed individual suggested that it is important to invite people living in cities to farms so they understand how a farm works (3A). Another suggested that that divide is definitely present because people living in cities simply lack experience what the countryside is like, and only see the countryside as a place for recreation (5A). How the Dutch farmers' movement as a whole experiences the support from 'external' actors cannot be said with certainty, also because these external movement adherents were not interviewed or otherwise analysed.

Overall, people living in the countryside or cities alike were described to be convinced by the Dutch farmers' movement because they could relate to the 'untrustworthy government' frame. To one interviewee, drawing the farmers' issue to broader societal issues was a strategic action by the movement:

"It's about responding to... Social issues. [...] When you say, farmers are disadvantaged, and you couple that with: but that applies to the whole countryside anyway, just look at Groningen, just look that there won't be a [specific train line]. Well, you name it. Then you can link a lot of things to it [...]"* (6A).

**Lelylijn*

Thus, while the Dutch farmers' movement has difficulties creating a shared consensus frame (i.e., shared diagnostic and prognostic frame), the frame of an 'untrustworthy government' and the way it is linked to an injustice frame is an overarching all-encompassing 'master frame' that is utilised within the Dutch farmers' movement, by both internal and external movement adherents.

5.4 PROGNOSTIC FRAMING, PART 2: COUNTER-FRAMING AND CONTESTED FRAMING PROCESSES

“They try to pick someone who still has shit on their clogs, and if possible someone from Twente or something, someone who can’t be understood” (1A).

Here, the second part of ‘prognostic framing’ for the Dutch farmers’ movement will be shown in a separate sub-chapter due to the large amount of data gathered on this topic. It presents the three contested framing processes that fall under prognostic framing identified by Benford & Snow (2000): frame dialectics, disputes and counter-framing (for a theoretical overview consult figure 4, p.21). Many contrasting opinions regarding the Dutch farmers’ protests were identified through interviews. All interviewed individuals put emphasis on protest dialectics, intra-movement framing disputes and identified counter-frames by outside actors. This highlights the dividedness of the movement.

5.4.1 FRAME DIALECTICS

Many interview participants discussed frame dialectics. Frame dialectics were often linked to the temporal variation of social movements, i.e., that the idea of an ‘effective’ protest develops over time, according to the response it gets from society. These frame dialectics were often related to the prognostic framing question of which forms of protest are deemed most acceptable by a movement. Many interviewees mentioned that the effectiveness of the movement dies down when the same ‘aggressive’ protesting methods are utilised too often. Some interviewees felt strongly that initial ways of framing for the farmers movement helped the first protest actions of the movement, but that these actions could also alter how the movement was seen and how discourse around it became structured. This then influenced future protest actions. The initial ways of protests – by way of e.g., bringing tractors to the Hague – were said by many to not be overused. While these methods were viewed as effective and powerful in the beginning of the movement, one interviewee described that to him, the repeated use of tractors became a negative force over time, which made the movement lose its credibility and its power:

“But then those tractors were used for everything, right? [They thought] if something happens, we’ll get back on the tractor, we’ll go to the Hague again. I don’t think that should have happened. Because then you’ve lost the power, you’ve lost it, in my opinion” (1A).

Other forms of tension between the movement’s actions and the discourse around it were described occasionally by interviewees, for example when protest actions negatively affected the (perceived) status of the movement. Many interviewees find it personally important that protests are not taken too far or be too disruptive – though this could also be due to the fact that only those from the ‘lobbyist’ faction were interviewed. One interviewee briefly mentioned that when his organisation organized a protest in front of the province hall of Groningen in 2019, the protest eventually got out of hand and a group of protesters forcibly took down the door to the town hall with a tractor: *“that [door] was not our initiative, but anyways, that can emerge sometimes if protests are organized” (6A)*. It made the national news, and many Dutch politicians reacted negatively to the use of violence (NU.nl, 2019). Dutch media, in general, was mentioned occasionally as an entity with a tendency to portray the movement negatively. One interviewee denounced the way he felt Dutch media portrayed participating farmers: *“they try to pick someone who still has shit on their clogs, and if possible someone from Twente or something, someone who can’t be understood” (1A)*. Protester group FDF mentioned Dutch media explicitly as influencing the general public with “lies and accusations” and “sowing hatred” against Dutch farmers (FDF, 2024e). While many interviewees brought up the fact that the media portrayed the movement negatively, no interview discussions went in-depth on what this meant for future protests.

5.4.2 POTENTIAL FRAME DISPUTES

There is considerable discussion within the Dutch farmers' movement about the way certain issues or solutions are framed by movement actors. This has been previously described in the diagnostic frame task of creating a shared or overarching diagnostic frame, which was a difficult task for the Dutch farmers' movement. When these internal arguments about diagnostic or prognostic framing do not get resolved, there is a risk for framing disputes. The different actors within the movement do not always agree on for example problem identification and direction of attribution. Specific issues for potential framing disputes were mentioned only sporadically. For example, two interviewees (3A, 1B) mention an occurrence of Dutch political party BBB stating that many issues can be fixed by going to Brussels and making a hard statement there. Interviewee 3A feels that it is not right for those movement actors – in this case Dutch politicians – to say that the movement's issues are solely due to Brussels, because to him, other bodies of government are also at fault. Two other interviewees addresses those farmers within the movement whose offered solutions to the identified issues is to simply not change anything within Dutch agriculture at all. “[*They say, I do not want to change anything in the first place. Well, that's impossible*]” (4A). One interviewee noted that the radical FDF leader has shifted from opposing any change to livestock farming to now saying it's normal for things to change, which he found strange.

Though these issues were mentioned within interviews, there was not much clarity as to whether or not they culminated in real framing disputes. All of these mentioned issues could be categorized as simply being differing opinions on diagnostic and prognostic framing, which is a recurring attribute of the Dutch farmers' movement.

5.4.3 MOVEMENT COUNTER-FRAMING

Most interviewees address solutions or other types of framings brought forward by 'outsiders', those who are not movement adherents. These outsiders are often identified to be politicians who are not 'with farmers', members of environmental NGOs, or animal rights activists, for example. Moreover, 'outsiders' of the movement who were interviewed (the B group) were also heavily involved with counter-framing.

The first actions by the Dutch farmers' movement could be seen as a way to counteract 'outsider framing'. After all, the issue of halving the livestock population was brought forward by a Dutch politician (De Groot) in an attempt to offer a solution to the nitrogen permitting issues following the fall of PAS. This solution was promptly refuted by the farmers' movement, and the first protests happened. In 2022, a different Dutch politician (Van der Wal, minister of Nature and Nitrogen in 2022) proposed another solution by posting a map of the Netherlands online with zoned areas where reduction of nitrogen outputs had to take place. The wave of protest of that year was claimed to be in direct response to the solution offered by this politician: “*Yes, those farmers in 2022 suddenly were confronted with basically stupid plans by Van der Wal [...] It had many sharp edges and actually not a single farmer felt safe with it*” (4A). Moreover, the solutions offered by government officials for the nitrogen issue that Dutch farmers deal with are also refuted by arguing about the facts and measurements that these solutions utilise. The issue of measurements is described in more detail in the diagnostic frame one on the nitrogen crisis.

When it comes to countering the arguments proposed by government officials to help Dutch nature and farmers alike, many interviewees from the 'A' group state that farmers do love nature, but within reason. They explain that while Dutch farmers are very concerned with nature, many do not want nature to be a 'main task': “*That's not what most farmers became farmers for, because then they would have become forest rangers, I always say*” (5A). Proffered measures to resolve the issues that Dutch nature deals with regarding nitrogen dispositions are dismissed on technical grounds. Movement adherents argue that they agree that something must be done about the deterioration of nature, but the solutions of outsiders are not right because of the facts and goals those 'other' solutions utilise:

“I think most farmers indicate like, one, when it comes to biodiversity for example, we embrace the concepts of managing biodiversity. But when it comes to, yeah, which efforts are needed to improve that? Yes, that should not be at the expense of nitrogen, and farmers, but that should be about a shared problem analysis. And that shared problem analysis has never been there since 2020” (4A).

Counter-framing efforts from the ‘A’ group against the NRL are similar to the above statements that farmers do want to participate in the betterment of natural environments, but that they disagree with the methods proposed by others.

The farmers’ movement is not only involved in refuting proffered solutions by the Dutch government, but solutions offered by other actors as well. Some interviewees for example mentioned that many outsiders of the movement see agricultural extensification as a solution. Solutions like ‘the extensification of agriculture’ are viewed by the ‘A’ group to come from people who are on the left side of the political spectrum: *“but you do see a very large polarization between the left spectrum, who are actually pursuing a bit of Ot en Sien [transl.: childlike, of times gone by] agriculture and who hardly have any sense of reality...”* (2A). This interviewee also mentions that ‘extensive agriculture’ is in conflict with the view of Dutch agricultural as efficient, i.e., having a high output. Another interviewee mentions that he is often present in for example provincial debates in which some leftist politicians state that they ideally do not want cows present in meadows at all (3A). This interviewee also feels personally affected by statements from activist groups such as animal rights activists from the organisation Wakker Dier. Interviewee 3A mentions frames from organisations like these bother him the most, and identifies slogans used by animal rights activists such as Wakker Dier: ‘sloopmelk’, which literally translates to ‘destructive milk’, or ‘kistkalf’, which translates to ‘coffin-calf’. While bringing up the issue, interviewee 3B immediately mentioned the importance of refuting these types of frames by stating for example that all farmers are very concerned with the well-being of their animals.

FRAMING PROCESSES FROM OUTSIDE THE MOVEMENT

The three individuals from the ‘B’ group vary in profession and to what extent they relate personally to the movement, but all have been involved with the Dutch farmers’ movement in either policy processes or through research. They were asked about their opinions and views of the movement as ‘outsiders’, and as such, a lot of data from their interviews could be classified as counter-framing.

The main finding of interest concerning this group, is that the ‘B’ group was very often explicitly involved with trying to restructure the debate surrounding the Dutch farmers’ movements issues. They are concerned with transforming the frame, and attempt to create completely different types of discussions happening in the discursive space of the movement. Interviewee 1B for example focused on offering alternative solutions to the solutions that the farmers movement offers for agricultural issues (by e.g., addressing trade inequalities), as well as correcting the facts used by movement actors in debates on social media platform X (formerly Twitter) about the NRL about the way European regulations work: *“I say: well, European regulations are directly binding in the member states, so that you can just do nothing with them is really nonsense...”* (1B).

Another interviewed individual (3B) often addressed the issues and solutions utilised within the Dutch farmers’ movement, and countered those issues. For example, one argument that he described that the Dutch lobby created was that with the NRL, the Dutch peatland landscape with the “cows in the meadow” could no longer exist: *“I thought that was a very interesting one [...] the very act of draining those polders to farm intensively with cows on there... Yes, that’s the destruction of the very beautiful landscape system we have there [...]”* (3B). Another argument he identified was that the NRL is said by opponents to be created in order to “go back in time, which is a utopia in times of climate change” (3B), which was also quickly

refuted: *“that is exactly the pro-argument to create the Nature Restoration Law. It is said, we need a weapon in times of climate change and so... That is literally in the preamble of the Nature Restoration Law”* (3B).

Interviewee 2B described that he was invited to Brussels to speak to Frans Timmermans and his team, who at the time were very concerned with the negative direction that the NRL was taking. As a representative from the academic field, he was asked to come up with scientific arguments to substantiate why the NRL and nature restoration is important: *“So actually their question was, well, contribute to the voice to emphasize the importance of nature”* (2B). In this substantiation, issues such as the importance of nature for the functioning of society were brought forward, and less so the importance of nature restoration itself. It was important for this interviewee to reframe the issues that were discussed regarding the farmers’ movement as well as the NRL. He described that for the academic field, there is a general feeling that scientific reports appear not to be read or heard, which leads those within the field to try different methods to get their issues across, by for example posting articles on online websites or small items in newspapers:

“There were attempts to at least pull the discussion out of those trenches and say, okay. We somewhat understand the protest or the resistance, but let’s talk about the right issues and not let it be a sort of pro- or against-nature discussion, right? Just like it should not become a pro- or against-farmer discussion. Let’s just talk about the, yeah, the question of what kind of society you want to live in together and what role you play in it” (2B).

When these interview participants were asked whether or not they felt their attempts at re-framing the farmers’ movement from the outside were successful, they disagreed. This is further detailed under the section ‘results of protest’.

5.5 MOTIVATIONAL FRAMING: THE MOVEMENT IN ACTION

“We have to take action now, otherwise it’s the end of the story for us” (5A).

The diagnostic frames utilised by the Dutch farmers’ movement vary, and little consensus of prognostic frame has been described by interviewees – although they did agree on a potential overarching movement frame of an untrustworthy government. The final step for a social movement organisation is to organise and actualise protest, whether it be behind closed doors in the form of lobbying, or on the street. Relatively few analysis results pertained motivational framing for the first couple interviews, so latter interviews were slightly more focused on this topic. Overall, ‘motivational framing’ was the least mentioned coding category of the ‘core framing tasks’ with only 48 out of all 622 ‘core framing task’-code uses. Within motivational framing, vocabularies of motive are important. Movement adherents are inspired to take action through the vocabularies of severity, urgency, efficacy and propriety (Benford, 1993). This chapter describes motivational framing as the movement evolved from mid-2019 to late 2024.

5.5.1 THE FIRST OUTBURST

The first moments of protest by the movement in 2019 were described to be quite sudden and explosive by interviewees. While some interviewees felt that there were already issues brewing in the Dutch agricultural world as well as Dutch society before 2019, the fall of PAS in 2019 as well as the following response to the ‘nitrogen issue’ by politicians and policymakers led to a strong need to protest. Individuals as well as lobbyist organisations were described to feel that acting upon the identified issues suddenly became very urgent. Individual movement adherents were described as “panicked” and “put against the wall” (6A), and experiencing a “sense of hopelessness” (5A). These strong negative emotions were described as removing a barrier towards action: *“they just think: we have to take action now, otherwise it’s the end of the story for us”* (5A). Action group FDF describes these feelings similarly in their online articles – farmers are said to feel trapped by governmental bodies, are “in despair” which results in having no choice but to fight (FDF, 2024e).

Lobbyists described that their organisations responded to those emotions. They also described that that their job is simply to keep an eye on policy developments regarding agriculture. They take worries brought up by members into account – e.g., regarding the fall of PAS – as well as communicate new, potentially negative policy developments to their members. If enough members of their organisation feel negatively about these new developments, one interviewee describes that an “idea of urgency” can arise (4A). If this sense of urgency is especially pertinent, steps are made to create a movement against the proposed policy developments: *“And at a certain point you of course continue towards The Hague and also Brussels, trying to influence people who are close to the fire in that diplomatic way. [...] and also trying to convey en masse your opinion of your association, so to speak, so that more people pick it up. That not only your association, but also more people in general get behind it”* (5A).

Some interviewees reason that external movement adherents felt spurred on by the anti-government frame, and experienced connectedness and a sense of community regarding the farmers’ movement through this shared frame: *“you see a very strong frame being created: ‘they want us gone’. For that, you can really get people into the streets, of course”* (6A). One lobbyist, while not necessarily personally affected by issues that conventional Dutch farmers have brought up, described that he personally joined the farmers’ movement and participates in lobbying because through his activities for his organisation, he has a feeling that he can really make himself heard: *“I can really make my ideas about sustainability true here, instead of it only staying with nice words...”* (4A). In other words, for some movement adherents like interviewee 4B, their reason to participate in the lobbying process was due to a feeling of efficacy.

The success of the first outburst of protest is often credited as a reason as to why the movement became so big. I.e., because the action was perceived to go well, more people were likely to join in: *“of course, one reinforces the other”* (5A). Some interviewees posed that persons became incentivized to join the protest simply because many others already joined. This was also credited as one of the reasons why external movement adherents joined the protest by some individuals. One interviewee suggests that this could be attributed to the earlier successes of the movement:

“In various places you noticed that people who made themselves heard loudly were listened to, also in the Netherlands [...] so I think there was just a tenor of: hey, it works, if we raise our voices” (2B).

Interviewees as well as analysed articles by action group FDF suggest that the perceived successes of the Dutch farmers’ movement are what led to a broader European-wide movement against the NRL. In the following subchapter, I describe how the Dutch farmers’ movement created attention for the NRL.

5.5.2 FROM THE NETHERLANDS TO THE EU: THE CANARY IN THE COALMINE

BRUSSELS LOBBY

This section describes the actions that were taken by Dutch farmers’ movement actors by way of interest group mobilisation. It is shown that attempts were made by lobbyists to water down the NRL from a conservational perspective, and what initial framing strategies were used in order to convince outsider actors in Brussels of the Dutch farmers’ movement frame. In this way it relates to motivational framing: movement adherents attempted to inspire outsider actors, in this case Brussels policy-makers, to take action against the NRL (for example scrapping certain sections or voting against it).

Interviewees involved with Brussels’ lobbying processes suggested that the earlier stages of the Nature Restoration Law policy-making process were relatively mild in terms of the tone of discourse. It must be noted that the NRL was already being developed in 2020 – in the middle of the first Dutch farmers’ protests. At this point, the farmers movement did not have the NRL in their sights, although lobbyists involved with EU developments were aware of it from its inception, such as those lobbyists with connections to COPA-COGECA as well as the lobbyist involved with Natuurmonumenten. Lobbyists with agricultural organisation LTO mentioned that their organisation advocated that the NRL be scrapped entirely from its first stages, and tried to at the very least downgrade the Law so that it would have less impact on those involved with agricultural ecosystems.

The diagnostic frame ‘trapped in the capitalist system’ (diagnostic frame 2) was only mentioned by one interviewee when asked what arguments were given in the lobby against the NRL: *“agricultural use with a good earning model must be considered as a primary interest. Negative effects of nature restoration for agriculture and horticulture must be counteracted as much as possible. If necessary, the compensation of lost income”* (4A). Interviewee 4A described that the most important argument against the NRL from the Dutch lobby was regarding its regulations for peat meadows and stream valleys, because the consequences of those measurements were felt to be the most disastrous for Dutch farmers, especially their incomes. However, those arguments seemed to fall on deaf ears in the end: *“eventually, that has not been accounted for at all economically. And we think that is still totally incomprehensible [...] because you are talking about, what is it, about a quarter of the farmers who has to deal with this”* (4A).

The characterisation of the Netherlands as a fertile delta (diagnostic frame 4: *what is the Netherlands?*) was also utilised in the EU lobby: *“Well, the Netherlands... Is characterised by a river delta with high-*

quality agricultural soils. These agricultural soils are really unique and valuable within Europe and should definitely be priority within the European food strategy” (4A). Another identified the frame as an outsider: “the argument is also very often like guys, look at the Netherlands and the position that the Netherlands has and especially the characteristics that the Netherlands has that differ significantly from other countries in Europe, right? So our role in the food system. If you look at that, shouldn’t it be the case that the Netherlands should be given a bit more room to, yeah, pollute, you could say exaggeratedly, right?” (1B).

The two lobbyists closely involved with the NRL lobby (interviewee 4A and 3B) have mentioned specific articles of the NRL that were argued against. Interviewee 4A mentions that at first, it seemed like articles 4 and 9 (*restoration of terrestrial, coastal and freshwater ecosystems* and *restoration of the natural connectivity of rivers and natural functions of the related floodplains*, respectively) were going to be completely scrapped from the Law on the advice of the EU agricultural council, which the EU Parliament eventually voted differently on, to his organisation’s dismay. An interviewee from the ‘B’ side argued that the NRL could actually work in favour of farming, and this is what his organisation also lobbied for. For example regarding articles such as 10 and 11 (*restoration of pollinator populations* and *restoration of agricultural ecosystems*, respectively), these were described to be not only beneficial to ‘organic’ farmers but conventional farmers, too. Those farmers already involved with measurements to protect nature were said to not have an issue with those articles at all. Interviewee 3B argued that Dutch agricultural lobbyists for conventional farming should not have a problem with it, either. A link was drawn to a previous identified claim made by Dutch farmers’ organisations that farmers do love nature and want to help nature (be it on their own terms – see *movement counter-framing*):

“And I actually also think that this is not at all at odds with the ambition that all farmers’ organisations have expressed like, ‘yeah, we are also for nature, and we are also for sustainable production’. Well, what [argument] is there against pollinators on your land, against butterflies on your land, against birds on your land, right? Against carbon in the soil. Carbon in the soil, that is also good for your production eventually, but it’s also a long term thing” (3B)

As will be shown, the Dutch lobbyists’ substantive arguments against the NRL were not very resonant with EU policy-makers. However, due to the electoral successes of the Dutch farmers’ movement in the Netherlands, the Netherlands was soon to be seen as a ‘canary in the coalmine’, not only to European farmers but to the European Parliament, too.

5.5.3 A DIFFERENT DISCURSIVE SPACE: LEADING THE LOBBY AGAINST THE NATURE RESTORATION LAW

In the lead up to the European Parliament Elections of 2024, the discursive tone as well as the movement actors involved with the NRL changed. While the first stages of the policymaking process were felt to be substantive by those involved in the Brussels’ lobby, interviewees felt that the discourse surrounding the NRL suddenly changed during this time. They describe it became quite personal, and not to do with substantive arguments anymore, to their surprise. Interviewee 4A as well as 3B found the politicisation of the NRL in the lead-up to the European Elections a negative force. Interviewee 3B describes the online debate between EU political figures: “[...] *EPP tweeted like, with a photo of Timmermans: mister Timmermans, retract this dramatic law! And the other side said like: mister Weber, please stop this ridiculous resistance – or something in that regard, right? It really became a personal issue*” (3B).

When asked why the broader Dutch farmers’ movement seemed to have a delayed response to the developments of the NRL, many interviewees described that they rely on the work of lobbyists to get as many issues out of the way – and when that is deemed to be unsuccessful, only then they will rally against

a certain policy proposal. For example, interviewee 5A describes that his group is mostly focused on Dutch developments and feels the urgency of EU issues later: *“You also have to wait and see how it develops, right? You cannot immediately go out on the streets against every incipient law here like, oh! That is not how it works”* (5A). Moreover, the EU policy process takes place on a longer time scale, so interviewees describe that it takes a while for agricultural organisations to realize its potential urgency. The emergence of a ‘moment of urgency’ regarding the first outbursts of the Dutch farmers’ movement thus likely applies to the outburst (in lobby or protest) against the Nature Restoration Law, too.

During interviews, it was not asked for precisely as to when this moment of urgency appeared. However, the interviewed individuals who were present in the Brussels’ lobby mention that the shift in ‘tone of voice’ occurred right after the Dutch farmers’ movement booked national political successes in March of 2023 when it won all provincial elections:

“What happened in Brussels, Brussels has seen very well how things turned out in the Netherlands with the resounding victory of the BBB, and at the provincial elections. [...] the EPP, the Christian Democrats, they saw that and they thought: uh-oh. That is a risk that we also have here, that we as a Christian Democratic party will lose out to all kinds of populist parties. And they opted for the way forward. Namely, there were there was dissatisfaction and where voters could run to the populists, they took the same position. And that was at a very important moment, namely the run-up to the European elections.” (3B)

Lobbyists mentioned that arguments against the NRL that were related to judicialisation and food (in)security found resonance within the Dutch government and could thus be what made the Netherlands shift position against the NRL (regarding its vote in the EU Council): *“It says somewhere literally: this will be the nitrogen crisis 2.0. And with that, as a result of that, the agriculture will be locked down, right? The fear of judicialisation. But in any case, at least the link to nitrogen we experienced, also when we went to knock on the government’s door to talk about this law, this [nitrogen] frame really found resonance with the national government”* (3B). The food security frame (part of diagnostic frame 3, ‘competition with outsiders’) was described to have an effect on the observed shift of position by EU politicians and member states regarding the NRL: *“And if you see how the distribution of votes changed in the spring of 2024, then you see that a bunch of countries suddenly... That suddenly it became clear [to them] like hey, wait a minute, this is going to mean a lot for our own food production”* (4A).

The shift of the EPP in the EU Parliament created momentum and a window of opportunity for the Dutch farmers’ movement to affect the contents of the NRL in the lead-up to the 2024 European Parliament Elections. The Dutch agricultural lobby was described to be ‘leading’ the lobby movement against the Nature Restoration Law. Arguments against the NRL as proclaimed by involved lobbyists are closely related to the arguments against previous issues the Dutch farmers’ movement has dealt with. In that sense, lobbyists utilised a similar frame of an ‘unjust government’, and the framing for the farmers movement was scaled up to a higher political level.

CALL TO PROTEST: TAKE BACK CONTROL!

Dutch farmers posited themselves as ‘canaries in the coalmine’ regarding what can happen to farmers Europe-wide regarding the EU’s environmental policy. The successes of farmers’ protests in the Netherlands were by some described to be a catalyst for protests elsewhere: *“[...] people [in the Netherlands] are rebelling – and it works too, to a certain extent. So that, it has been kind of a contagious effect I think, back and forth”* (2B). Similar sentiment can be identified in online articles posted by FDF regarding calls for protests in early 2024 against the Green Deal and the NRL. They stated that the European colleagues of Dutch farmers are impressed by what the movement accomplished in Dutch government: *“a*

complete landslide in the senate, followed by a tsunami in the parliament” (FDF, 2024b). In the run-up to the European elections and the turning point in the debate on the NRL, protest groups such as FDF who previously did not have the NRL in their sights, likely felt spurred on to act against the NRL because of their national successes – and even more so by the fact that there was openly expressed doubt on the Law by large political factions like EPP.

While Dutch farmers’ lobbyists were less involved with creating motivational frames for movement adherents to inspire collective action, FDF was very involved in this process to create action against the Green Deal and the NRL in 2024. In analysed articles, FDF focuses mainly on the Green Deal in its entirety rather than the NRL alone. FDF’s arguments draw comparisons to the frames of the earlier Dutch protests, in which the overarching frame of the ‘untrustworthy [Dutch] government’ is drawn to an ‘unjust Brussels’, and a failing of government everywhere in Europe. Brussels is for example described to be “treacherous” and a “wrecker of prosperity” (FDF, 2024c). Moreover, one article even claims that the Dutch farmers’ issues as they emerged in 2019 were due to the Green Deal, and that the goal has been to get rid of European agriculture (FDF, 2024c). The leaders of the EU and those responsible for farmers’ issues are portrayed to be biased and undemocratically chosen. The FDF thus argues that it is necessary for the ‘people of Europe’ to restore democracy by voting those leaders out of office in the European Elections of 2024, just like other Dutch leaders were voted out of office after Dutch protests:

“Let’s clean up European politics like we did in the Netherlands in March and November of 2023” (FDF, 2024c).

The vocabularies of motive are very present in the FDF articles. Arguments focus on the severity of the situation, for example by stating that if nothing would change in the political make-up of the EU Parliament, nothing would improve either – meaning farmers would still be doomed to disappear. The mobilisation of movement adherents for the issues of the Green Deal and the NRL was described to be “very necessary” and the movement was told to seriously “step up” and work hard in order to achieve their goal of righting the wrongs that Brussels has saddled them with (FDF, 2024b), which relate to vocabularies of severity and propriety. Arguments by FDF focus on the strength of farmers and citizens alike to make a difference, and that protests are a way to take back control over their lives and their values, without “woke nagging” (FDF, 2024c) – related to efficacy. No interviewees participated in the protests in Brussels. This could be because those protests were initiated by action groups FDF and Agractie, whose politics and understanding of the issue did not align with theirs.

5.5.4 RESULTS OF PROTEST

Most interviewees describe that the effect of the farmers’ movement is mainly seen in the attitude of governmental bodies towards the agricultural sector. The fact that political party BBB became part of the parliamentary coalition is described to be important by some, and resulted in the feeling of the agricultural sector taken more seriously: *“that has changed in the meantime, that the agricultural lobbyists have been taken much more seriously again, I just notice that in everything” (2A).* Interviewees underscore that it is mainly lobbyists who feel they are taken seriously as a result of protest – the ‘radical protester’ faction of the movement is said to be waved off much more quickly by government officials. However, some interviewees from the ‘A’ group note that the fact of being taken more seriously does not automatically result in outcomes on policy that they see as positive. To them, political party BBB is not powerful within the government, which results in little changes for farmers: *“So well, in the beginning it feels very nice. Until you see it does not lead to solutions. And that nothing changes” (6A).* They describe that they do not think that the movement’s goals of changing the regulations and legislation that are seen to negatively affect their farming operations have been changed: *“if you look factually at the questions that were posed or demanded by protesting farmers, and the eventual policy changes, I see quite little change” (7A).* Still,

arguments in favour of the NRL were described by interviewees as being relatively unsuccessful compared to the arguments offered by the agricultural lobby. Interviewee 3B describes that the farmers' frames were more immediate and fear-based, whereas theirs were more constructive and long-term, which did not resonate with policymakers. Even so, the first goal of the Dutch farmers' movement regarding the Nature Restoration Law was for it to be completely rejected. This has not been achieved.

Whether or not the Dutch frame regarding nitrogen and judicialisation found resonance in Brussels debates about the Nature Restoration Law seems to be contested, “[other countries] saw that danger way less than we did”, according to interviewee 6A. One interviewee who was present in the Brussels NRL lobbying said this could be because other EU countries are not experiencing similar issues with regulations at the moment: “[The arguments about nitrogen were not convincing] because there are many countries that are going to have the same problems... Are going to run into the same problems in the future, but are not experiencing that at the moment. They were more willing to vote for this law than we all expected from a Dutch perspective” (7A). While this research does not focus on the reasons for the European-wide farmers' protests of 2024, interviewees mention that there were various, widely differing reasons for these movement adherents to protest: “those protests in Germany, they were – very simply said – about the VAT increase. And the abolishment of red diesel, they had nothing to do with the Nature Restoration Law” (6A). Interviewee 7A states that the protests in France were partly about unfair trading practices, and those in Wallonia and Flanders were directed at manure policy. When it comes to concerns shared EU-wide by the agricultural sector, the Green Deal seemed to unify the European farmers' protests of 2024 more: “The Green Deal is another issue, it's been going on for longer of course, and there... There you see that there are more concerns about in countries, because of all sorts of tasks that were set there. The Green Deal was, so to say, perceived as more threatening than the Nature Restoration Law for a whole number of countries. So that was sharper in focus” (6A); “In the end there was one underlying factor, what I think was the common denominator for all those protests. Namely the Green Deal as a whole, and the logic behind the goals that came out of the Green Deal” (7A). Involved interviewees state that Dutch agricultural lobbyists' arguments were not always very resonant, but that they did – at the very least – increase the political attention to the NRL:

“We definitely did put the political attention for the Nature Restoration Law on the map, as the Netherlands. I do not want to say with that that we had a huge influence on the voting behaviour of other countries with that” (7A)

5.5.5 THE PROTEST MOVEMENT AS OF LATE 2024: WHAT'S NEXT?

Whereas actions by way of protest were by and large seen as important and effective at the beginning in 2019 as well as 2022, interviewees mentioned that as of late 2024, the movement's appetite for protest has largely died down. While interviews did not focus on the possible reasons for this, it is possible that for example the farmers' issues were framed as being so severe that it actually hindered mobilisation – i.e., that its framed severity led to a feeling of hopelessness and a low motivation for the cause. Some interviewees elude to the idea that the Dutch farmers' movement as of 2024 has entered a different phase, the ‘quitters phase’. Farmers who previously would have protested against governmental regulations that constricted their businesses, are now said to be more comfortable with quitting. The Dutch government has offered a ‘quitters scheme’, also described as a buy-out scheme, to farmers in which it buys out those who want to quit their agricultural operations entirely. This scheme was first being seen as shameful to participate in, but is now being used more:

“In the beginning you saw the ‘quitters scheme’, people actually did not dare say that they were participating in the quitters regulation, because that was a kind of shame or like... Am I betraying everything if I participate, right? Am I the one who is making agriculture shrink in this country. And you see now that it has been accepted. And then you see also quite often that if one person quits, quite a few others quit too. Because it’s apparently a barrier. So yes, that’s, if you’re talking about changes, you see just a change in acceptance” (6A)

This shift in attitude has been observed by one lobbyist interviewee – who requested anonymity for this particular observation – regarding the FDF faction, too. This interviewee noted that a previously defining characteristic of the Dutch farmers’ movement used to be a firm stance of FDF against livestock farmers who choose to exit the sector. This interviewee referenced a podcast in which the FDF leader stated that he now views the departure of some farmers as beneficial, arguing that it may ultimately improve conditions for those who continue farming. Moreover, an outsider of the movement said that it’s possible that a number of farmers feel “worn out” and like their movement has not been effective for them, because their issues are still the same as they were before (2B). Another interviewee describes that he keeps his eye on protest WhatsApp-groups and if there are new calls for protest. Whereas previously those calls would be answered, *“right now, it stays completely quiet” (6A).*

5.6 RESULTS OVERVIEW GRAPH: CORE FRAMING TASKS

The overview graph presented in figure 6 below summarises the three core framing tasks of the Dutch farmers' movement (diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing) and how the (political) scaling up of the movement affected these core framing tasks. It must be noted that the information presented in the graph is highly condensed and leaves out all framing processes and framing variabilities that are involved in these three framing tasks on both political scales.

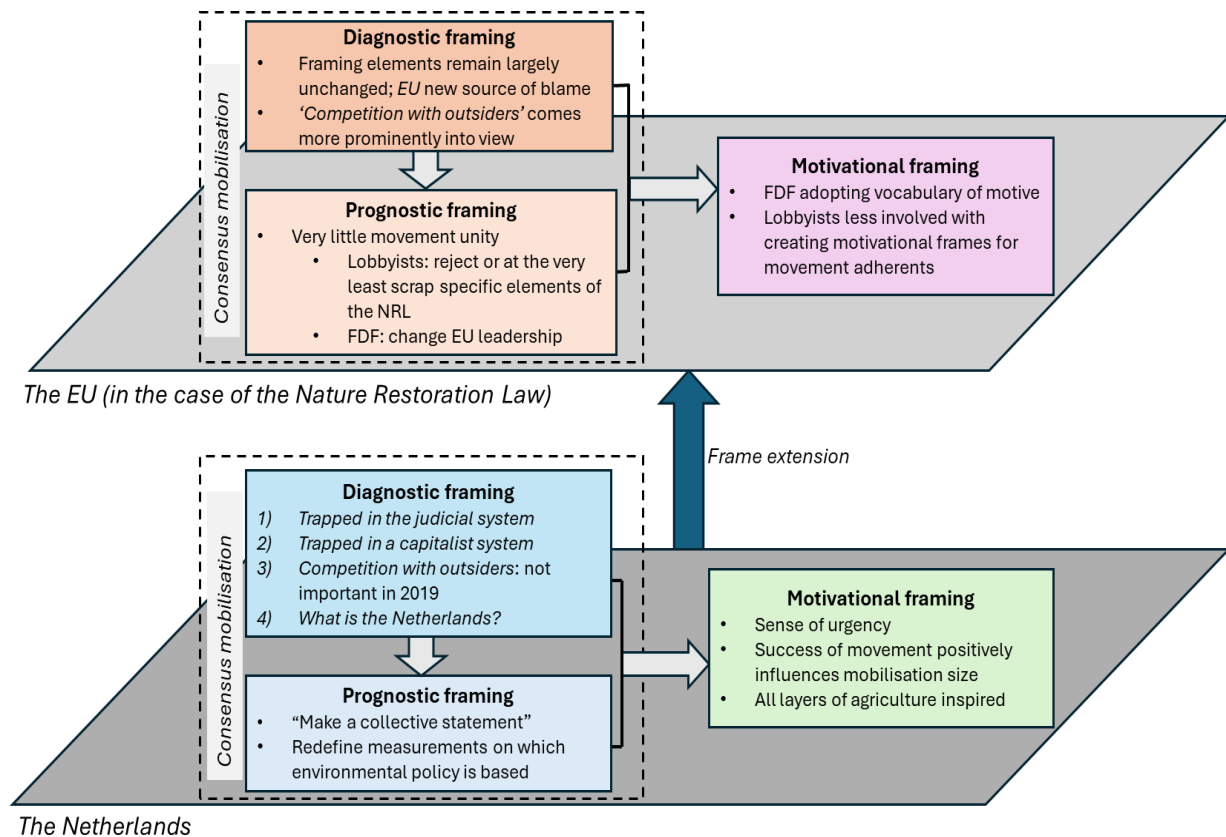


Figure 6: Overview of the three core framing tasks of the Dutch farmers' movement in the Netherlands and scaled up to the EU in the case of the NRL

6. DISCUSSION

This research aimed to examine how the Dutch farmers' movement evolved to challenge nature conservation policy in the case of mobilisation against the Nature Restoration Law. I hypothesised that adherents of the Dutch farmers' movement utilise framing to problematise the effects of nature conservation policy on agriculture, which leads to collective action. I further hypothesised that the movement's framing has evolved over time, incorporating new issues such as the NRL, which may have influenced the concessions that were made in the Law on agricultural ecosystems.

A brief overview of the three core framing tasks can be found in figure 6. In short, results indicate that there were four main diagnostic frames for the Dutch farmers' movement that were identified by both adherents and outsiders. The movement problematises all new policy measures, not solely nature conservation policy: farmers are portrayed as being up to their neck in policy measures and regulations that bog them down, and internal and external movement adherents united under a master frame of an 'untrustworthy government'. The fall of PAS in 2019 resulted in a sense of urgency that caused the first outburst of the movement. Then, the Dutch farmers' movement frame was extended to a higher political level by applying the same type of frames to the EU level rather than just the national level. Moreover, the Dutch farmers' movement's protests and political impact shifted the discursive space around the NRL, though interviewees suggest that their arguments were not resonant in EU Parliament. Finally, results indicate that the Dutch farmers' movement has entered a different phase as of late 2024, which growing acceptance of exit schemes and declining enthusiasm for protest.

This discussion is structured around the three sub-research questions, followed by an examination of the study's limitations and implications for future research.

6.1 DOMINANT CONSENSUS AND MOTIVATIONAL FRAMES OF THE DUTCH FARMERS' MOVEMENT AT ITS CONCEPTION IN 2019

1. What were dominant consensus and motivational frames of the Dutch farmers' movement at the start of the movement in 2019?

- Did framing for (potential) internal and external movement constituents differ, and how?*
- Which framing elements are perceived as most resonant for adherents to participate in the protest waves in the Netherlands?*

6.1.1 DOMINANT CONSENSUS FRAMES IN 2019

Diagnostic framing for a social movement organisation pertains to issue identification: what is the problem, exactly? The results found four dominant diagnostic framings for the Dutch farmers' movement: 'trapped in the judicial system' (1), 'trapped in the capitalist system' (2), 'competition with outsiders' (3) and 'what is the Netherlands?' (4).

All interviewees pointed towards the fall of PAS and the following attempts by politicians to address and solve the 'nitrogen issue' as the starting point of the Dutch farmers' movement. Some interviewees directly referred to PAS as the root cause of the social movement, whereas others were more focused with the '50% less livestock' expression by a politician as a proposed result to the Dutch nitrogen issue. It was a surprising finding that this issue identification was split between a technical (judicial) versus a more personal source of blame. Overall, this finding corresponds to insight by van der Ploeg (2020), who criticises the Dutch farmers' movement for being unfocused in its problem statement as well as demands.

Diagnostic frame 1, ‘trapped in the judicial system’, is the diagnostic frame that corresponds with this first outburst of the social movement. The diagnostic frames 2 ‘trapped in the capitalist system’ and 4 ‘what is the Netherlands?’ were also important to the movement’s adherents at the start of the movement in 2019, but can be interpreted as a way to flesh out a broader argument against the core issue of *any* policy measures targeting the agricultural sector being identified as affecting farmers negatively. Results suggest that diagnostic frame 3 ‘competition with outsiders’ was not as relevant at the start of the movement, which is likely because in 2019 the movement had not (strategically) expanded its movement framing beyond national borders yet and so ‘outsiders’ were not yet being taken into account. Diagnostic frame 3 is more present when the movement addresses the EU, as in the case of the Nature Restoration Law.

It can be assumed that these three diagnostic frames were present at the start of the movement in 2019. However, because the start of the movement happened after the fall of the Dutch Nitrogen Approach Program (PAS), the first diagnostic frame that details ‘the nitrogen issue’, which predominantly problematises judicialisation, can be seen as the most important diagnostic frame at the movement’s conception. This idea is supported by the very high frequency of diagnostic frame 1 in comparison to the other three diagnostic frames.

MAIN DIAGNOSTIC FRAME: JUDICIALISATION

‘Judicialisation’ is a commonly used term by interview participants and is used by both the in- and out-group of the movement. In academic literature, ‘judicialisation’ is often researched in its function of being a safeguard in the case of policy failure (see e.g., Pellegrini et al., 2020). In the context of the Netherlands, it is less about marginalised groups fighting an oppressor (as is often the case in environmental justice) but rather refers to the usage of the justice system as a tool to challenge or reinforce any (government) policy that does not comply with its set objectives. In this case, actors pursuing the judicialisation strategy are not (necessarily) marginalised, but are often well-established and institutionalised organisations such as (environmental) NGOs or businesses, which aligns with other descriptions of judicialisation as a policy change strategy described by Winkel (2014). One interviewee from a large Dutch agricultural organisation explained that his organisation makes use of the Dutch judicial system, too, if regulations or policy is developed that they feel to be unfair. Research on judicialisation in the Netherlands shows that political decisions score lower on legitimacy than judicial or participatory decisions regarding land use (Herkes & Zouridis 2023). Forcing a policy goal through the judicial system can be explained as a way to boost the public legitimacy of a policy.

The conceptualisation of judicialisation as expressed by the Dutch farmers’ movement focuses mainly on its negative effects: it is linked to negative emotions of distress and the denial of freedom. Judicialisation, they argue, results in a web of regulations imposed by the government, in which every new regulation is one too many. This finding underscores that a core part of the diagnostic framing used in the Dutch farmers’ movement is based on the notion of personal freedom to operate their business as they please. By linking a judicial event such as the fall of PAS to a value like personal freedom, this aspect of the diagnostic framing appeals to *centrality* (meaning: if and how movement frames are seen as essential to the perceived daily lives of constituents in terms of beliefs, values or ideas), which strengthens the resonance of the movement’s frame. Every new regulation or policy measure can be linked to diagnostic frame 1 ‘trapped in the judicial system’ and in that way become seen as an issue by the Dutch farmers’ movement that should be solved. Diagnostic frame 1 is very closely linked to the master frame ‘an untrustworthy government’, because it points towards the Dutch justice system, the people who operate within that, and policymakers as directions of blame.

LINKS AND CHARACTERISTICS IN AND BETWEEN THE OTHER DIAGNOSTIC FRAMES: FRAME COHERENCE

Overall, the four diagnostic frames of the Dutch farmers' movement are coherent and build on each other, no substantive evidence for intra-movement frame disputes for diagnostic framing was found. Diagnostic frame 2 'trapped in the capitalist system' is closely linked to diagnostic frame 1 'trapped in the judicial system', as it problematises the effects of regulations on the economic and financial system farmers operate within. Specifically, this diagnostic frame further defines the effects of judicialisation on the farming business, and the blame is put on the government for the negative situation Dutch farmers find themselves in following the fall of PAS. Results indicate that outsiders of the movement, in this case lobbyists and other individuals who are closely involved with the movement, were most sympathetic to diagnostic frame 2. This could be because this diagnostic frame focuses on the tangible results of government policy on farmers – its effects on economic output and how that affects their personal lives. Moreover, diagnostic frame 2 states that the reason for the harmful impacts of (Dutch) agriculture today lies within institutional, systemic issues. In this respect, it criticises the existing institutional system farmers operate in more than the judicialisation frame does (which takes this system as a given, and uses regulatory measures as a way to mitigate obstacles rather than the system as a whole). This could be why individuals who are more critical of societal and institutional structures adhere to diagnostic frame 2 more. However, how individuals relate to these societal and institutional structures was not researched in-depth here and so I recommend future researchers to pick up this topic. Also, frame 2 does not focus on permits and measurements of nitrogen emissions like diagnostic frame 1, which are topics that could be seen as more abstract to the 'average' person who does not operate a farming business. The resonance of frame 2 with outsiders aligns with research done by Ketelaars (2016) who describes that frames that focus on personal experiences resonate more than abstract frames.

These identified issue frames align with earlier reports on the European farmers' protests by Matthews (2024) who identifies the commonly shared issues of low farm incomes, environmental regulation and trade competition for European farmers. Considering the shared European farmers' grievances represented in the first three diagnostic frames, diagnostic frame 4 is specific to the Netherlands, and has been present in the Dutch farmers' movement since its inception. The other three diagnostic frames focus on the effects of policy on the farming business, with a focus on having 'nowhere to go'. In contrast to that, diagnostic frame 4 focuses on the reasoning behind the policy – the policy is nonsense, Dutch nature is not worth *that* much protection considering the following frame aspects: (1) the importance of defining the right land-use priorities in a small country and (2) it is a fertile delta, ideal for farming. This diagnostic frame says that the policies that they protest against are for a goal that does not align with their views on nature conservation at all.

6.1.2 PROGNOSTIC FRAMES AT THE START OF THE MOVEMENT

Surprisingly, many interviewees underscored that Dutch farmers are fundamentally divided and that there is no 'one' farmers movement. This leads to the second finding regarding sub-research question one, which is that even at the beginning of the movement, the movement had a hard time answering the prognostic framing question of 'what is to be done about the issues identified within the movement?'

Results suggest that the main issue in reaching consensus within the Dutch farmers' movement is its interplay between institutionalised movement with radical, confrontational and high-risk movement counterparts who attempt to politicise any issue related to the Dutch agricultural system. The 'lobbyist' group can be described to be depoliticised as they are seen as policy experts for the Dutch government, and are often called in to solve political issues from the outside. *Depoliticisation* in this regard refers to its definition by Lijphart (1968) which refers to handling political issues as technical issues, in this way attempting to defuse them. The lobbyist group also frequently expressed their discontent with the

polarisation occurring in the political domain regarding overlapping environmental and agricultural issues. This manner of depoliticisation through policy experts occurs in various Dutch political dossiers: Otjes & Louwerse (2024) show that the proposal to raise the Dutch retirement age came from policy experts, not politicians, for example. However, calling in experts does not render an issue apolitical in nature; in the case of the Dutch farmers' movement, it relates to how lobbyists are typically seen as rational actors, whereas protesters are seen as emotional actors. In this way, it relates to the debate on rationality in policy-making, which will be further discussed in chapter 6.2.3 and 6.3 (*'emotional or evidence-based policy-making?'*).

The difficulty of defining a shared consensus frame – which the Dutch farmers' movement oftentimes lacked – could moreover be due to the large size of the movement, in which various organisations with many kinds of backgrounds and political opinions are represented. This finding is supported by literature, as Giugni & Nai (2013) found that an important factor that predicts consensual decision making of a social movement organisation is a small organisational size.

Overall, the above findings lead to a highly split prognostic framing, which also fits within the literature: Benford & Snow (2000) show that for a movement, it is often the prognostic dimension that is the most common way in which the various organisations within a movement differ from each other. Even though interview participants described the Dutch farmers' movement to be fundamentally divided, some did state that the first stages of protest in 2019 were unanimous, in which all layers of the agricultural population wanted to make a statement (5A). While results suggest a shared issue identification at the beginning of the movement, the solution that the prognostic framing offered seemed to be mainly that the adherents of the Dutch farmers' movement should "make a statement" and speak up for themselves or in support of the Dutch agricultural sector. This finding aligns with van der Ploeg (2020)'s description of the movement as being vague in defining solutions to the issues at hand.

It is thus a remarkable finding that even without a strong, shared prognostic frame, still a large group of movement adherents can be mobilised in support of a certain cause, as was the case for two large protest waves of the Dutch farmers' movement in 2019 and 2022. It is likely that this large mobilisation was due in part to a strong initial motivational frame.

6.1.2 MOTIVATIONAL FRAMES AT THE START OF THE MOVEMENT

Interviewees frequently struggled to articulate precisely *how* the Dutch farmers' movement mobilised its supporters. The most compelling evidence of the movement's motivational framing at its conception can be found in accounts detailing the collapse of the Dutch Nitrogen Approach Program (PAS), which created a heightened sense of urgency. Results found an intense emotional reaction, which respondents believed removed the barriers to collective action. The abrupt onset of the protests, coupled with widespread societal support, was perceived to strengthen the momentum of the movement. The perceived relationship between the large size of the movement and citizen support reinforced a collective sense of efficacy which in turn was cited as a motivational factor for even more external movement adherents to participate in demonstrations. This finding aligns with scholarly work on SMOs, which suggest that movement supporters engage in collective action because they believe in its potential efficacy, and that movement adherents utilise framing techniques to foster this sense of efficacy (Benford, 1993; Klandermans, 1984). This research adds to this theoretical hypothesis by suggesting an additional reciprocal relationship between (perceived) movement efficacy and mobilisation size.

Benford (1993) also suggests that the motivational framing vocabularies of severity, urgency, efficacy and propriety should be constructed in a manner that shows that mobilisation is the correct option, and that movement adherents are instead not so overwhelmed that the cause feels doomed. It seems the Dutch

farmers' movement motivational framing struck the right balance between a vocabulary of urgency and efficacy at the movements inception, which mobilised a large amount of people.

In addition concerning motivational framing, it must be noted that there was limited attention given to discursive elements, despite the apparent centrality of these elements for the movement given its focus on signage and slogans. This underrepresentation may be attributed to the several years between initial mobilisation and interviews, as several participants mentioned it was hard to recall these types of discursive elements. It is also likely that interview questions were not appropriately fit to find the discursive elements present in the Dutch farmers' movement. However, considering the discursive elements of framing, the uptake of the Dutch farmers protest slogan "no farmers, no food" in the European-wide farmers protests of 2023-2024 (Finger et al., 2024; Mazzocchi et al., 2024), shows a strong resonance of the core message of the Dutch farmers' movement framing with farmers throughout Europe.

6.2 CONSTRUCTING CONSENSUS AND MOTIVATIONAL FRAMES TO GENERATE ACTION AGAINST THE NATURE RESTORATION LAW

2. How were consensus and motivational frames constructed by key movement actors of the Dutch farmers' movement to generate collective action against the Nature Restoration Law?

- *Did framing for (potential) internal and external movement constituents differ, and how?*
- *Which framing elements are perceived as most resonant for adherents to mobilise against the Nature Restoration Law?*

Results show that the Dutch farmers' movement extended its frame to a higher political level in order to generate collective action against the NRL. Framing elements remained largely unchanged from 2019 to 2024. Similar diagnostic and prognostic frames were utilised, though 'competition with outsiders' became a new argument as the movement adapted to an international policy environment. Moreover, the movement refined its prognostic framing, but in doing so created tension between institutionalised lobbyists with radical protesters, in this way reinforcing internal division. Actual mobilisation was limited. Frames targeted internal constituents (with a focus on social and emotive appeals) and external actors and policy makers (with a focus on technical rationale) differently. A lack of resonance with the movement adherent pool may explain the absence of a larger Dutch farmers' mobilisation in the 2024 protests against the NRL.

6.2.1 A NEW DIAGNOSTIC FRAME: COMPETITION WITH OUTSIDERS

Results show that the diagnostic frame 'competition with outsiders' had not been widely used yet in appeals to a national audience, but gained prominence in a European context. Radical movement faction Farmers Defence Force used this frame most prominently. FDF positions itself as nationalist and focuses on protecting Dutch agricultural interests, and utilised the 'competition with outsiders' frame to divide actors into legitimate and illegitimate actors on multiple levels, mimicking a 'divide and conquer' strategy similarly described by Leipold & Winkel (2016). It defines the EU as legitimate, and non-EU as illegitimate trading partners. Notably, this strategy is marked by internal inconsistencies: EU trading partners are described as legitimate, while EU governance is illegitimate. EU countries are legitimate in instances where FDF seeks the support of EU actors – Dutch farmers can be assumed to always be 'most' legitimate. Interestingly, this frame was also echoed, albeit in different language, by an interviewee from the opposing side (i.e., pro-NRL). This interviewee used discursive elements focused on fairness and equity, whereas FDF focused on self-determination and property rights. This suggests that concerns about fair trade standards transcends ideological divides and is not inherently tied to right-wing nationalist discourse, but

rather shows that how a diagnostic and prognostic frame aims to connect to potential sentiment pools depends on emotional tone and language used. This relates to the strategic process of frame amplification, because through tone and language, an alignment to existing values and beliefs is created (Benford & Snow, 2000). Regarding the ‘competition with outsiders’ diagnostic frame, FDF’s values align with broader literature on rural politics: populist strategies for rural issues often focus on reinforcing property rights and deciding who controls the land, and for what environmental purposes it can be used (Alarcón Ferrari, 2020).

The ‘international trade’ issue frame was linked to food security in the light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which affected European food supply chains. The Dutch farmers’ movement utilised this political development through a framing strategy known as *frame extension*, aligning their cause with broader anxieties about European food production chains. However, the causal direction of this framing strategy remains unclear: it’s likely that various European actors (independent of the Dutch movement) were already responsive to the ‘food security’ argument, indicating that Dutch movement actors may not have needed to make strategic efforts to convince potential movement adherents of this frame. Instead, it is plausible that the existing concern for food security was retroactively associated with the Dutch movement’s messaging. Due to limited empirical data, definite conclusions on this potential strategic framing process cannot be drawn. Additional research is thus recommended to better assess the causal direction in framing processes between European actors concerned with food security and actors from the Dutch farmers’ movement.

NATURE RESTORATION LAW OR GREEN DEAL?

Many Dutch movement actors, particularly those less familiar with EU-level policy, did not clearly distinguish between the NRL and the Green Deal. Groups like FDF frequently conflated the two, and at one time misattributed earlier protests such as the first protest wave in 2019 to the Green Deal rather than the Habitats Directive, which was the reason for the rejection of the Dutch Nitrogen Approach Program (PAS). It was FDF specifically that connected the NRL to EU Commission executive vice-president Timmermans (between 2019-2023), key figure in the creation of the Green Deal. By connecting a specific figurehead such as nationally known left-wing political figure Timmermans to the issues proffered by the movement with the NRL (and the Green Deal), FDF sought to strengthen their frame against the NRL. They did so by appealing to *narrative fidelity*, i.e., resonating with adherents’ cultures or inherent ideologies, because the right-wing character of FDF is posed to be at odds with the left-wing political ideology of Timmermans. Lobbyist interview participants on the other hand did not mention Timmermans as a source of blame, likely because they had to maintain formal relationships with policy-makers such as Timmermans. However, additional research is recommended to assess the differences in the Dutch farmers’ movement factions in how they frame the roles of political figureheads. The interplay between the radical and moderate movement actors is discussed in chapter 6.2.3 and 6.2.4.

Moreover, the broader focus of movement actors on EU agricultural and environmental policy, rather than just the policy goals mentioned in the NRL, aligns with articles about the European farmers protests of 2023-2024 which detail that European-wide farmer protests had a broad focus on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the agricultural elements in the Green Deal and the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation (Finger et al., 2024; Matthews, 2024). As a member of a local-level agricultural organisation explained, ‘local’ movement constituents tend to not keep their finger on the pulse of EU politics as much as higher level agricultural organisations do, and instead rely on the work of EU-lobbyists to get as much issues out of the way as possible. This is the most logical reason why EU-level policy like the Green Deal, the Nature Restoration Law and the Habitats Directive (see e.g., concerns about Natura 2000) are often taken together rather than singled out by movement constituents who are not regularly involved in debates about these policies. The emergence of the resistance against the NRL can also be viewed through a political opportunity lens: the time voting and shaping of the NRL took place coincided with a politically volatile pre-

election period in the EU in which politicians sought to appeal to displeased voters. As part of the Green Deal, the NRL became a focal point of political heat.

6.2.2 A NEW POLITICAL LEVEL

Overall, results show strong evidence for frame extension as the main strategy used in scaling up the Dutch farmers' movement to the EU. The movement reused the frames that already had been used against Dutch policy, but with a changed direction of attribution: the European Union. For example, the judicialisation issue frame was scaled up spatially, resulting in similar arguments being made against nitrogen reduction policy as to the NRL; restrictions farmers experience within a capitalist system were scaled up from the Dutch policy level to the EU level regarding the NRL; negative experiences with definitions and measurements regarding nature were extended from past Dutch experiences to possible future experiences with the NRL. The latter argument shows evidence that the Dutch farmers' movement frame did not only spatially expand, it also expanded itself through the temporal dimension, by framing into an 'uncertain future'. In this way, it created an opportunity to tap into debates on (incomplete) knowledge, risk, and evidence-based policy-making, in which lobbyists used the language of uncertainty to try to convince policymakers that the NRL should be adapted. The effects of this are described in sub-chapter 6.3. The final evidence of framing strategies utilised for the Dutch farmers' movement comes from outsider actors (i.e., opponents), who attempted frame transformation by having 'different kinds of conversations' altogether, by reframing the issues the farmers movement identified with the Nature Restoration Law with inclusionary values (e.g., "what kind of society you want to live in together and what role you play in it" (2B), and by applying the arguments that the farmers movement posed *against* the NRL in *favour* of the NRL instead, thus constructing totally new argumentative angles in this discursive space.

A REFINED PROGNOSTIC FRAME

The prognostic frame (i.e., the solution) offered by the movement in the EU evolved to be more defined than it was previously on a national level. On the national level, the solutions the movement offered were hard to identify and often ended up in the debate about measurements used in calculating e.g., nitrogen depositions. However when the movement scaled up to this new political level, it sought to explicitly scrap specific policy measures that it deemed unfit with the demands of the Dutch farmers' movement. In this case it sought to reject the NRL entirely – when that was not possible, lobbyists made efforts to target and scrap or downgrade (from an environmental point of view) specific articles of the NRL. FDF's main solution was to change EU leadership entirely by voting them out of office and 'clean up European politics', similarly to how the movement changed political results in the provincial elections of 2023 (FDF, 2024c).

6.2.3 UP-SCALING THE MOVEMENT AND RESONANCE

As the Dutch farmers' movement evolved, it came at a cost for its unity. Lobbyists defined themselves as rational actors that should be part of seeking a solution, in contrast to that the radical members of the movement (such as those belonging to FDF) were defined as obstructing solution-seeking. It stands to reason that FDF's radical solutions conflicts with the solutions that lobbyists offer. Lobbyists have to find compromise with the same politicians that FDF rejects. This finding corresponds very well to literature about who or what is considered 'radical' in a social movement organisation: lobbyists are part of, and operate within, the hegemonic discourse in an attempt to resonate with policymakers. In attempting resonance, they downgrade the movement's arguments and drop the arguments that are too unrealistic in the given discursive setting. The hegemonic discourse lobbyists partake in is based on the dominant power structure, thus it is marginalised 'radical' voices who seek to undermine existing discourses and "challenge institutionalised ways of thinking" (Ferree, 2003). Thus, FDF fulfils the role of 'radical' movement actor, especially since its voice got marginalised as the movement extended to this higher political arena and FDF was left out of substantive meetings about the NRL.

While the radical and moderate movement factions are described to be at odds with each other, it is also suggested that there is a potential interplay between them. It could be seen as a deliberate strategy by separate factions of the same movement to employ different kinds of framing strategies, in this way affecting more potential movement adherents (Fernandes-Jesus & Gomes, 2020). Additionally, it is shown that FDF was more involved than the moderate movement faction in creating and contributing to the discursive space of the NRL policy-making process, even if they did so from a marginalised position. It is likely that these efforts broadened the discursive space of the NRL and stretched the limits of what were considered to be acceptable policy solutions. However, results cannot give concrete insight into this relationship. Further research on this potential framing strategy is warranted to give insight into how this interplay functions, and whether or not this is a coordinated movement effort.

6.2.4 MOTIVATIONAL FRAMING AGAINST THE NRL

The previously identified issue of lobbyist versus ‘radical’ when it comes to the Dutch farmers’ movement is clearly visible in its motivational framing as well as actual mobilisation against the NRL. Regarding motivational framing, FDF gave the most clear examples in their online articles by adopting a clear vocabulary of motive emphasizing severity, urgency, efficacy and propriety.

The results indicate that despite the call to mobilisation happening mainly from FDF’s side of the movement, it was lobbyists who took the movement’s arguments to Brussels. These lobbyists describe that FDF was not invited to the EU negotiation table at all. Moreover, determining whether the lobbyist faction of the Dutch farmers’ movement has been involved in generating *collective* action against the NRL has proved challenging. Findings indicate that while lobbyists were influenced by the broader movement’s framing, their actions were less oriented towards *mobilising*, and rather aimed to *convince* outsiders of their organisation’s specific issue frame. This relates to the movement’s central issue: multiple identities converged and it was hard to identify a shared plan of action. The former statement is said with caution however, because interview questions did not always go in depth on intra-movement coordination. However, the observed lack of common collective identity may hinder the movement in e.g., fostering resonance for the movement’s frame.

At the same time, this perceived lack of ‘shared vision’ or shared prognostic frame can expand the range of possible actions, which has been suggested to be an effective strategy to demonstrate a movement’s urgency, extensiveness and significance (Fernandes-Jesus & Gomes, 2020). Results demonstrate that different sub-sections of the Dutch farmers’ movement rely on each other, with each actor or organisation occupying a different niche: interview participants describe that national actors waited until lobbyists could not solve in the EU what they wanted to see solved.

6.2.5 INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL MOVEMENT ADHERENTS

As the Dutch farmers’ movement scaled up and refined its issues and solutions, little evidence shows that it framed issues to appeal to a non-agricultural audience. These ‘regular’ citizens often align to a broad ‘untrustworthy government’ frame which is connected to other social issues (e.g., household debt due to government mistakes, earthquakes due to gas drilling; see chapter 5.4.3). It is likely that there was a lack of resonance of the movement’s frame to external movement adherents, as there was no evidence that the previously identified broad social issues got linked to the EU as a new source of blame. This could explain the absence of the non-agricultural movement actors in the mobilisation against the NRL. This is however speculative and warrants future research.

Moreover, different arguments against the NRL were given to constituents as well as policy-makers. The alignment of movement constituents to the frame is through appealing to personal experiences and values, such as the practice of farming and the role of the farmer in society, i.e., social issues. For policy-makers,

agricultural lobbyists demonstrated that they packaged their issues into technical concepts relating to food security and the financial rate of return. This aligns strongly to research by Ketelaars (2016) who shows that appealing to every day experiences has a higher likelihood of frame resonance than an abstract or technical frame.

It is likely that a large-scale protest wave against the NRL never occurred in the Netherlands in 2024 because EU-level issues are seen as more abstract and thus resonate less with (potential) movement adherents. However, it makes sense for lobbyists to utilise a technical frame for EU policy-makers, as the EU has often been characterised as being sensitive to a scientific robustness of evidence underpinning policy options and has been described by some to be technocratic in nature (Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019). What this means for the effects of mobilisation on policy-makers is described in the following sub-chapter.

6.3 RESONANCE OF FRAMING ELEMENTS ON POLICY-MAKERS OF THE NATURE RESTORATION LAW

3. When it comes to policy effects, which of the above framing elements is perceived by Dutch farmer movement key actors as most resonant in challenging policy-makers of the Nature Restoration Law?

In this sub-research question, ‘framing elements’ refer to specific aspects of a social movement organisation’s (SMO) frame, while ‘key actors’ are those individuals who were in any way involved with Brussels lobby. Interviews reveal mixed perceptions of how the Dutch farmers’ movement frames affected policy-makers of the NRL. Three key observations emerge.

First, it is described that Dutch agricultural lobbyists were able to put the Nature Restoration Law ‘on the map’, i.e., increase its presence in the discursive space of the EU. This likely occurred through frame articulation: experiences and events are linked to create a new “angle of vision” (Benford & Snow, 2000). This new angle was described to be strengthened by the movement’s electoral success: the ‘political earthquake’ resulting in Farmer-Citizen Movement party (BBB) establishing itself in Dutch parliament and winning the most seats in all provincial elections. An interviewee from the opposing side noted that this event signalled to EU policy-makers that there are potential political consequences to displeasing agricultural constituencies.

Second, creating political attention towards the NRL and leading this discursive space did not necessarily translate into perceived persuasive power. Lobbyists did not see themselves as effective when it came to convincing EU policy-makers of the Dutch arguments against the NRL. For example, one interviewee noted that while the Dutch nitrogen crisis was a key argument for the Dutch parliament to shift opinion on the NRL, other member states had not yet encountered similar issues and therefore did not feel it to be an issue worth responding to. It is likely that arguments that were de facto ‘scaled up’ versions from Dutch farmers’ movement arguments were not resonant at the EU level, where different political priorities dominate.

EMOTIONAL OR EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY?

The third and final observation pertains to the distinction between emotional or evidence-based reasoning. One lobbyist from the oppositional side expressed that arguments against the NRL seemed to resonate more than those in favour. This interviewee detailed that the farmers’ frame was more immediate and fear-based, whereas the frame in favour of the NRL was long-term and constructive. This contrast suggests that resonance of the movement’s frames resulted not through a thorough understanding of EU policy-makers of Dutch issues, but rather on the ability of the movement to appeal to the EU’s broader anxieties about food security and uncertainty. The discursive space around the NRL became characterised by themes of

doubt, knowledge or the absence thereof. Subsequently, this discursive space lent itself to influence from (European) lobbying groups from primary sectors who spread misunderstandings on the contents of the Proposal of the NRL, as has previously been described by Cliquet et al., (2024). The lasting impact of creating a language of (empirical) doubt on certain policy elements was also touched upon by the interview participant who lobbied in favour of the NRL: *“the moment you shout something during election times, it is too late anyway when it gets refuted”* (3B).

It follows that policy-making is not an objective nor neutral process – evidence that will be taken into account in policy depends on the narrative on the policy’s role and the function of evidence within that narrative (Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019). Moreover, policy options are inherently context-dependent and value-laden and there were evidences from various sources available, such as e.g., evidence from conservational or agronomical perspectives, but also personal accounts of rural livelihoods. Both opponents and proponents of the NRL framed their arguments as being in favour of evidence-based and fact-driven policy, which highlights that interview participants had a tendency to describe themselves as rational actors that aim to make decisions utilising the ‘right’ frame of evidence in comparison with other actors (whether those other actors belong to the farmers’ movement, or not). Thus, what remains is the political context in which these discussions took place, which was at the time in favour of the Dutch farmers’ movement. Ultimately, the technocratic characterisation of the European decision-making process (see e.g., Sánchez-Cuenca, 2025) enabled movement actors from the agricultural sector to exploit uncertainty, demanding unattainable levels of evidence and thereby finding political room to reject policies which could otherwise have been a step towards restoring Europe’s natural areas, on the basis of doubt.

While these insights underscore the important role of what is considered ‘evidence’ in policy-making, it is important to note that in this research, only one research participant contributed to the evidence-discussion at length (others merely hinted at it). Interviewing a broader array of interview participants involved with the NRL lobby, as well as refining the interview questions to touch upon this topic more clearly, may result in a more thorough analysis of this issue. Future research is encouraged to take this into account.

6.4 NEXT STEPS FOR THE MOVEMENT?

An interesting finding is that Dutch farmers’ movement adherents, as of late 2024, feel that the movement has died down and has on many occasions been unsuccessful, despite their apparent electoral as well as policy successes. The movement is represented in the Dutch government (both Parliament and Senate) through political party BBB, many concessions to the NRL were made when it comes to agricultural ecosystems, and several other agricultural related policies in the EU failed too, for example the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Regulation proposal (European Commission, n.d.). While this research did not go in detail on the reason why interview participants expressed these fatalistic views on the movement’s effects as well as how it stands as of late 2024, there are a few explanations possible.

First, it is possible that movement adherents do not feel that additional movement mobilisation – with the same mobilisation strategies – will have added effects on policy change, i.e., that the movement has achieved what it could achieve, given their resources and given their political space. This idea touches on the theory of ‘resource mobilisation’, which describes that movement adherents internally weigh the costs and benefits of participating in action, and are only likely to participate if there are anticipated benefits (Klandermans, 1984).

Furthermore, interview participants indicate that the limited political effects of political party BBB (*Farmer-Citizen Movement*) creates a dispirited feeling among movement adherents, which may hinder further

mobilisation. Respondents note that the party is not very powerful within Dutch government, which is in part due to the relatively small amount of seats BBB holds in Parliament. It is likely that the party is also constrained both by the judicial system (some policy measures cannot be scrapped nationally because they stem from EU regulations) and the political discourse, in which the farmers' movement does not necessarily have a majority voice. It is noteworthy that BBB is a politically right-wing, populist party whose electoral base is presumed to adhere to an 'untrustworthy government' master frame. This dynamic produces a paradox: if no political parties are considered trustworthy at the outset, the inability of BBB to fulfil their political promises leads to it being quickly put away as untrustworthy, too. Existing research indicates that populist political parties, upon entering power, give up their 'radicalism', and their policies will follow opportunity rather than ideology (Caiani & Lubarda, 2024). This, combined with judicial constraints, can be a reason why the electoral win of BBB has not resulted in perceived favourable policy outcomes by movement adherents.

Finally, this finding relates to windows for political opportunity. Nationally, this window seems to have closed most prominently very recently, after the collapse of the Dutch government on the 3rd of June 2025 – the outgoing cabinet will not focus on creating new policies until a new government will be elected. As the Dutch farmers' movement finds its core reason for mobilisation in national issues – after all, the movement's principal issues are scaled politically *up* rather than *down* – it is likely that the current state of Dutch government is not inspiring further farmers' protests in the EU, either. This is moreover confirmed by the low resonance of EU-specific frames on the broader Dutch farmers' movement. However, when relating the suggestion of a 'closed window of opportunity' to the theory on framing, it has been often described that 'opportunity' is something that can be constructed within a movement's frame. Meaning: if the movement's actors are convinced that there is a political opportunity rather than constraint, they may eventually create opportunities for political change (Benford & Snow, 2000). In this sense, it is likely that movement actors expressing that the Dutch farmers' movement is (politically) constrained, or ineffective, leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy resulting in a lack of collective action and consequently the absence of further policy change at the hand of the Dutch farmers' movement. However, more in-depth research is necessary to confirm or deny the above suggestions.

6.5 FRAMING FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: REFLECTIONS

The theory of framing for social movements as primarily described by Benford & Snow (2000) is a valuable tool to understand how social movements construct and communicate meaning for (potential) movement adherents and how mobilisation is generated. In this research, it was successful in explaining how a movement attracts adherents, why it may (or not) be successful in doing so, how shared meaning can be constructed and negotiated across different movement participants, as well as how a movement's frame can influence public discourse.

This theoretical framework did however pose some analytical challenges. First, use of this theory may conflate movement influence with movement membership when it comes to analysing a movement's effects on (assumed to be) non-movement actors. For example, Dutch policy-makers can be influenced by the Dutch farmers' movement and adjust their stance on certain policy issues, but this does not imply they identify as being part of the movement. This conceptual diffuseness made it difficult to measure the movement's influence and the causal link between movement framing and (perceived) movement outcomes. There are other ways in which the theoretical concepts are diffuse. For example, the theory oftentimes overlaps with theories such as discourse analysis, due to the discursive nature of framing processes for social movements. This resulted in occasional unclear boundaries between what constituted a frame for a social movement and what constituted a discursive storyline. This relates to slight

challenges in the methodologies utilised in this research, as the operationalisation of theory to interview codes was oftentimes subjective.

Finally, I found that the theory does not pay significant attention to the role of power, power imbalances and institutional constraints in social movements. There are structural barriers for movement actors to participate in a given discursive space (such as funding or institutionalisation), which the theoretical framework did not explicitly address. Moreover, some actors within a movement may have more (framing) power than others, and certain actors may get marginalised in this process. While I reflected on the marginalisation of 'radical voices' in the Dutch farmers movement in chapter 6.2.3, this reflection was backed up by literature on discursive analysis rather than rooted in the theory on framing for social movements, even though social movements are inherently based on a power structures. Thus, it may be fruitful for future research to analyse the role of power structures in social movement organisations in order to explore this theoretical gap.

6.6 LIMITATIONS

This research is limited in its interpretative scope due to the relatively small sample size of both interview participants and online positional statements. While my analysis provided a rich qualitative insight into the Dutch farmers' movement, it does not capture the full diversity of the movement's various actors. Mainly, a small sample size of the 'B' group, an absence of 'radical' interview participants and a lack of observations on 'external movement actors' (i.e., movement adherents who are not involved in the agricultural sector) means that the insights on these actors are limited. Additionally, due to the qualitative and interpretative method chosen to analyse movement frames, this analysis is filtered through the interpretation of both participants and the researcher which creates a degree of subjectivity in my approach. This is to be expected however, as this research leans towards being inductive and places itself within the interpretative social research paradigm; interviews and analysis were conducted under the assumption that an individual or group's reality is subjective, constructed and embedded in its social context.

Moreover, not all interview questions proved effective in creating a response to the research question at hand. The semi-structured interview format allowed for questions to be modified during the interview to create more pertinent information. However, formulating the 'right' questions to answer the research question to its full potential would have required preliminary knowledge into the Dutch farmers' movement, which was not available at the time of data collection. This study therefore highlights the importance of such insight and may contribute to a more refined methodological approach in future research.

The research aimed to capture the framing of the Dutch farmers' movement at the time mobilisation occurred. In order to properly assess the shifting strategies utilised by a movement as it evolves, a longitudinal study would have been preferred. Unfortunately, this was impossible due to (personal) temporal limitations of this study, as well as the fact that mobilisations of this movement had already ceased by the time of data collection. Interview participants were asked to reflect on events that occurred up to five years prior, which could have created memory gaps in interviewees' recollection of past events. Moreover, participants' recollection of past events may be clouded by current public or personal opinion on the movement, which could result in participants having elected not to talk about certain past actions, feelings or opinions, which further affects the objectivity of the data sample. This is however a risk with all social research (quantitative or qualitative).

Finally, this study operationalises ‘effectiveness’ as ‘perceived resonance’, which is filtered through individuals’ perceptions rather than based on analysis of policy outcomes. It cannot establish causal links between a social movement’s framing process and policy change.

6.7 RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has, as posed in the objectives in chapter 2, contributed to current research in various ways. First, it shows how the Netherlands (and specifically its agricultural sector) relates to nature conservation policy measures of the European Union, as well as the social processes that contributed to the policy-making process of the Nature Restoration Law. Moreover, it adds to the theoretical knowledge on process and temporal dimensions of framing for social movements by analysing how a movement evolves through time and what effects this may have on policy processes. While the methodology utilised here cannot confirm causal links between framing processes and policy change, this case study can help creating a path into future research into the effect of social movements on policy change.

While suggestions for additional research are mentioned in-text in the discussion chapter on topics where further analysis is warranted, there are some general suggestions for future research that were uncovered in the discussion of the results at hand. First, this research functioned as an exploration into the Dutch farmers’ movement from 2019 to 2024 in its relation to nature conservation policy, as no academic literature had covered this specific topic. This means that future research can use the relevant frames and framing concepts uncovered here and build on them through a more refined methodology, including a broader variety of involved actors and e.g., sampling data over time to more accurately capture the evolution of the movement. New methodological designs may be built off this research. For example, it may prove to be fruitful to assess how individuals align to various movement frames by letting research participants rank established movement topics (from the three core framing tasks) in order of personal importance to analyse the resonance of the movement in-depth.

Lastly, this research offers a first insight into the strategies utilised by the Dutch farmers’ movement to convince policy-makers and ‘regular citizens’ alike of the movement’s frame, which have (partly) been adopted into political discourses about the role of agriculture and nature conservation in the Netherlands. A worthwhile research opportunity may be found in adding to the knowledge on how a movement’s frame affects policy proposals over time. It would be interesting to get a deeper understanding of how and why certain frame elements of the Dutch farmers’ movement will affect and be reflected in future policy proposals in the domain of nature conservation.

7. CONCLUSION

The research performed in this thesis describes how the framing of the Dutch farmers' movement has evolved to challenge nature conservation policy in the case of mobilisation against the Nature Restoration Law (NRL) in early 2024.

I show that at the first outburst of the movement in 2019, the movement's main issue frame focused on the effects of the fall of the Dutch Nitrogen Approach Program (PAS), with concerns of how judicialisation affects the Dutch agricultural sector. These arguments were strengthened by issues such as farmers' financial independence and by calling into question the definitions and measurements of 'nature' used in policy. Moreover, at the first outburst, the movement did not have strongly defined solutions to the issues at hand, but rather seemed to want to 'make a statement'. The shared consensus frame of the movement has been that the Dutch government is untrustworthy. Movement actors were able to create a large-scale mobilisation in 2019 by conveying a strong sense of urgency, in which the size and perceived effectiveness of the movement were shown to work in a reciprocal way.

Moreover, I show that the Dutch farmers' movement extended its frame to a higher political level, as well as expanded itself through the temporal dimension in its attempt to generate collective action against the NRL. Framing elements remained largely unchanged from 2019 to 2024, but were simply attributed to a new source of blame: the EU. Similar diagnostic and prognostic frames were utilised, though 'competition with outsiders' became a new argument as the movement adapted to an international policy environment. Moreover, the movement refined its prognostic framing, at the cost of creating tension between institutionalised lobbyists with radical protesters and reinforcing internal division. Actual mobilisation was thus limited. The movement's frames seemed to only target external actors and policy makers with a focus on technical rationale. A lack of resonance of abstract frames offered by the movement to its internal constituents, paired with the deep division between the lobbyist and the protester movement faction, likely explains the absence of a larger Dutch farmers' mobilisation in the 2024 protests against the NRL.

As to the effectiveness of framing elements of the movement in challenging NRL policy-makers, research participants are divided. Agricultural lobbyists describe that they opened a discursive space for criticism on the NRL, but that this did not translate into persuasive power as other EU member states have not encountered issues similar to Dutch farmers' issues yet. However, arguments against the NRL seemed to resonate more than those in favour of it, which is likely due to the farmer movement's ability to appeal to the EU's broader anxieties about food security and uncertainty. In the lead up to the European Elections of 2024, the discursive space around the NRL became characterised by doubt and discussions on what constitutes evidence when it concerns policy-making. Ultimately, it is likely that the Dutch farmers' movement influenced EU policy-makers primarily by instilling a sense of doubt, which created political room to block or weaken policies aimed at restoring Europe's natural areas.

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ANNEX 1: STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

Statement of Informed Consent

Thesis Title: The Dutch farmers' movement: framing processes and mobilisation against the Nature Restoration Law

Researcher Name: Ilja Bouwknegt

Supervisors Name: Georg Winkel, Jasmijn Keuning

Study Background

You are being asked to take part in a study. This is a study about mobilisation efforts of Dutch farmers and its effect on the EU Nature Restoration Law.

You are being asked to participate because of your knowledge of Dutch farming practices, movement participation and perspectives on the EU Nature Restoration Law.

This study does not have ties to funding institutions.

Given that this research is part of a MSc thesis project it has not been reviewed by the WUR-Research Ethics Committee, but ethical issues have been discussed with the supervisor.

Before signing, please read this form and ask any questions.

What is being asked of you as a participant?

You will be asked to participate in an interview. It will take about 45 minutes to one hour to complete.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any part of the study or stop taking part at any time without any negative consequences to you.

Are there any benefits for participating?

There are no direct benefits to you from taking part in the study. Your input will be important to research and specifically this thesis project by improving knowledge of how certain movements relate to European nature conservation policy. Your input is important to these discussions. The information from this project will be shared with the participants upon request via email.

Are there any risks in participating?

This study poses little risk to you. You may stop participating and answering the questions at any time.

How will your information be handled?

During this study we will collect the following information from you: a description of your connection to the research topic (e.g., through your job title), an audio recording of our interview and a full transcription of this audio.

The research data will be used as part of a Master thesis and potentially within a connected scientific publication. When using your insights or quotes from this interview in this research, your name will not be mentioned but you will get a letter and number identifying you, a pseudonym, such as 'A1' or 'A2'; as well as how you relate to this research topic (through e.g., your job title). The research data will be stored in a OneDrive folder of WageningenUR. Audio files of interviews will be deleted after completion of the final research product. Transcriptions of interviews will be stored in the case of use for further research. No personal identifiers will be used in transcriptions, only a pseudonym and connection of the individual to the research topic.

This means that in the thesis and potential publication, measures have been taken to ensure your confidentiality. It cannot be fully guaranteed that you stay anonymous if someone close to you were to read the final publication.

What if I have questions about the study, or change my mind?

If you have any questions, concerns please contact Ilja Bouwknegt (ilja.bouwknegt@wur.nl). If you have additional questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Committee of Wageningen University - Email address: rec@wur.nl
You are entitled to have the abovementioned information destroyed at your request, both during the research and while in storage, in line with the GDPR's right to erasure provision.

I consent to having quotes from my interview used in the final report of this research.

_____ Yes, I consent

_____ No, I do not consent

I consent in participating in this research and to the use of my personal data as described.

_____ Yes, I would like to take part in the research.

_____ No, I would not like to participate in the research.

Please print your name:

Date:

Signature:

ANNEX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDELINE (DUTCH)

Introductie

- Over mij
 - o Ilja, 25, Nijeveen, dorp in zuidwest Drenthe in de buurt van Meppel.
 - o Boerenachtergrond; oom heeft melkveebedrijf.
 - o Krijg veel mee van wat boeren in Nederland vinden.
 - o Vind wat de agrarische sector van bijvoorbeeld hun natuurlijke omgeving vinden ontzettend interessant
- Over dit onderzoek

Dit onderzoek gaat over de link van de Nederlandse boerenbeweging met de Natuurherstelwet van de Europese Unie. Die Natuurherstelwet, of Natuurherstelverordening, is afgelopen zomer door de EU goedgekeurd, maar er was ontzettend veel debat over, en een tijd lang leek het alsof het niet doorging. In februari dit jaar geloof ik zijn er ook protesten tegen geweest in Brussel, onder andere van Nederlandse boeren.

Ik onderzoek nu hoe die debatten en processen rondom de Natuurherstelwet gingen. Ik denk dat de Nederlandse boerenprotesten best veel impact hebben gehad in processen rondom Nederlands natuurbeleid, en in het verlengde ook de Europese Unie. De Natuurherstelwet is daarin voor mij een case study, en er is eigenlijk nog geen onderzoek naar gedaan.

Dit interview is een deel van mijn datacollectie in dit onderzoek, ik kijk hiernaast ook naar bijvoorbeeld persberichten van belangenorganisaties en dergelijke. Ik interview mensen van zowel de agrarische sector en mensen die daar tegenover staan in het maken van natuurbeleid. Het interview duurt ongeveer een uur.

- Privacy en dataopslag

Na dit interview zal alles opgeschreven worden en verzameld worden in een gesloten file op een harde schijf die privé wordt opgeslagen. Wanneer ik quotes of inzichten uit dit interview gebruik zal u niet bij naam genoemd worden. Uiteindelijk wanneer het af is, zal de scriptie online worden gezet in de database van Wageningen University & Research. Het zou kunnen dat de kennis van deze scriptie bij gaat dragen aan een academisch artikel. Als u het wilt kan ik de scriptie naar u toe sturen.

Ook de transcriptie van dit interview zal ik na ons interview naar u toesturen om te kijken of alles klopt, en of ik dingen heb gemist.

- Informed consent

Heeft u het formulier dat ik heb meegestuurd met de mail ingevuld? Zo niet, zou u dat nu misschien kunnen doen. Dit is zodat de ethiekcommissie van Wageningen Universiteit weet dat u mij toestemming hebt gegeven voor dit interview.

Dit interview bestaat uit drie delen: eerst een algemeen onderdeel over jouw profiel, daarna jouw meningen over bepaalde onderwerpen die te maken hebben met boeren en natuur, en daarna wil ik samen meer specifiek de diepte in.

Deel I: introductie van betrokken persoon in de beweging

(0.) Zou je jezelf kunnen introduceren? (Leeftijd, geslacht, occupatie,...)

1. Ben je betrokken geweest met de Nederlandse boerenprotesten tussen 2019 en 2022 en zo ja, hoe?
 - *(Note: onder 'betrokken' valt protesteren op straat, maar ook door betrokkenheid laten zien door middel van vlaggen ophangen of zakdoeken, of je hebt wel eens andere mensen van de beweging proberen te overtuigen...)*
2. Kort: ben je betrokken geweest bij de Natuurherstelwet, en zo ja, hoe? Daar kunnen we later verder op in gaan.
 - *Zelfde betekenis van 'betrokkenheid' als bovenstaande*

Deel II: Perceptie van Nederlandse boerenbeweging, natuurbeleid en Nature Restoration Law (20 min)

3. Hoe zou jij de boerenbeweging (van Nederland) tussen 2019 en nu chronologisch omschrijven? Zijn er bijvoorbeeld doelen, oorzaken of oplossingen geweest die door de tijd heen veranderen?
 - *(Note: kernpunten als: doelen, oorzaak van het probleem, wie moet het probleem oplossen, klachten of ergernissen jegens wie, beleid of beleidsmakers)*
 - a. Is dit wat 'de beweging' ook denkt? Zijn er kernstandpunten waar elke persoon die zich bij de boerenbeweging vindt horen hetzelfde over denkt?
4. Hoe karakteriseer jij de relatie tussen Nederlands natuurbeleid en de agrarische sector?
5. Hoe zou jij de Natuurherstelwet beschrijven?
 - *(Note: niet alleen waar het over gaat, maar ook hoe interviewee erover voelt. Denk aan doelen, mogelijke problemen, ergernissen, beleid)*
 - a. Zou jij zeggen dat de Natuurherstelwet een onderdeel is van de boerenbeweging?
 - a. > Zo niet: hoe zou je de protesten tegen de Natuurherstelwet dan omschrijven?
6. Is er een bepaald moment geweest waarbij plots duidelijk was voor bijvoorbeeld u, uw organisatie, of andere boeren, dat jullie actie wilden ondernemen tegen de Natuurherstelwet? En zou je dan kunnen beschrijven van waar dat idee komt, en waarom dat overtuigend was?

Beschrijf hier framing (rustig!)

In dit onderzoek gebruik ik theorie over framing voor sociale bewegingen. 'Framing' zelf ken je misschien al, maar de theorie die ik in het specifiek gebruik zegt ongeveer dat mensen niet zomaar actie ondernemen als ze bepaalde klachten over dingen hebben, maar dat ze zich aansluiten bij een bepaald frame. Dat frame kan worden gemaakt en bewerkt worden door mensen, waardoor bepaalde onderwerpen belangrijk of minder belangrijk worden gemaakt. Framing zelf ken je waarschijnlijk al, dat slaat eigenlijk op het feit dat mensen 'de realiteit' in kleine stukjes opdelen en daar een makkelijk te begrijpen pakketje van maken. Zo'n frame is handig voor een sociale beweging, want daarmee kan worden bepaald wat het probleem is, wie het probleem veroorzaakt, wat er gedaan moet worden, en hoe.

Bij zo'n sociale beweging wordt dan eerst een frame gemaakt voor de oorzaak van het probleem zodat iedereen het erover eens is, daarna wat er gedaan moet worden, en daarna wordt men aangespoord actie te ondernemen. Actie kan dan protest zijn of lobbyen of alles in die richting, zolang je anderen maar van 'jouw' standpunt probeert te overtuigen.

Waar ik geïnteresseerd in ben is hoe die framing ten eerste ontstaat voor een beweging, en daarna hoe die kan veranderen door de tijd heen. Dat er bijvoorbeeld nieuwe ideeën aan worden toegevoegd, en daarmee ook nieuwe doelgroepen of organisaties. Met deze blik kijk ik dus naar de boerenbeweging in Nederland en de Natuurherstelwet in de EU.

Als je hier later nog verduidelijking over nodig hebt, laat het me weten.

Deel III: dieper in framing voor de Natuurherstelwet (30 min - 2)

7. Als je dan zo aan framing voor sociale bewegingen denkt, zou je dan een frame kunnen bedenken waardoor de protesten in 2019 en later zo grootschalig waren? Waarom dat frame zo effectief was?
 - a. Wat was de reden om te gaan protesteren?
 - b. Hoe werd men aangemoedigd te gaan protesteren? Of om op andere manier actie te ondernemen?
 - c. Wat vind jij hiervan? Overtuigde dit jou? Dat je bijvoorbeeld iets hoorde over mensen die gingen protesteren en dacht, ja: dit voel ik persoonlijk ook zo
8. Hoe denk jij dat je framing gebruikt voor onderwerpen die belangrijk zijn voor bijvoorbeeld de overleggen die je hebt over de agrarische sector?
 - a. (Speelt dat dan ook wanneer je het hebt over milieu of natuur dingen?)
9. Zijn er bepaalde aspecten binnen die framing die volgens jou zijn veranderd door de tijd heen? Dus dat bijvoorbeeld in het begin iets of iemand anders werd aangewezen als hét probleem, versus nu; of, dat de oplossingen die mensen in het begin hadden verzonnen nu anders zijn.
10. Niet iedereen die betrokken is bij de (Nederlandse) boerenbeweging werkt zelf in de agrarische sector. Wat voor verschillende frames zijn er om verschillende doelgroepen te overtuigen zich aan te sluiten bij de boerenbeweging?
 - a. In welke aspecten verschillen deze frames?

De Natuurherstelwet vroeg om input van de samenleving en organisaties in December 2020. Toen had de Nederlandse boerenbeweging deze nog helemaal niet op hun radar, want in 2022 was er de tweede grote golf van boerenprotesten die gefocust waren op de stikstofplannen van minister Van der Wal. Sommige belangengroepen hadden de Natuurherstelwet wel al langer in hun vizier, maar pas later in 2024 begon de agrarische sector te protesteren tegen de Natuurherstelwet. (Dus als we denken aan framing, moet er ergens in deze tijdspanne iets zijn gebeurd om de Natuurherstelwet onderdeel te maken van de Nederlandse boerenbeweging.)

11. In jouw mening, (hoe) is de (Nederlandse) boerenbeweging verschoven om de Natuurherstelwet onderdeel te maken van hun frame?
 - a. Welke 'key' acties zijn er geweest in het algemeen vanuit de agrarische sector, om de Natuurherstelwet aan te vechten?
 - b. Is er dan een collectief standpunt tegen de Natuurherstelwet vanuit de Nederlandse agrarische sector?
 - i. Zo ja, door wie wordt die dan verkondigd? En is dat effectief?
12. Waarom gingen bijvoorbeeld Nederlandse boeren protesteren in Brussel? Waarom sprak dit mensen aan? Kan je dat linken aan een bepaald frame?

➤ (Note: denk aan: *nieuw probleem, hoe relateer je dat aan het oud probleem, nieuwe schaal, nieuwe betrokken personen*)
13. Maakt het feit dat de Natuurherstelwet een EU-beleidsproject is uit voor de boerenbeweging in Nederland? Maakt dat het bijvoorbeeld meer of minder belangrijk op de agenda, of in het frame, of is het bijvoorbeeld lastiger mensen te overtuigen van het belang hiervan?
 - o (Note: denk aan hoe dit impact heeft op Nederlandse boeren, hoe aanhangers denken over de Wet, etc.)

Als: aanhanger van boerenbeweging actie heeft ondernomen tegen de Natuurherstelwet

14. Je liet weten dat je stappen hebt genomen / betrokken bent geweest bij acties tegen de Natuurherstelwet. Kun je omschrijven hoe dit ging, en wat hier de resultaten van waren?
 - a. Wat voor argumenten waren het meest overtuigend in het uitdagen van beleidsmakers voor de Natuurherstelwet?

- b. Wat voor argumenten zijn het meest overtuigend om anderen binnen de boerenbeweging over te halen?
 - c. Zou je zeggen dat deze acties overeenkomen met jouw mening over de boerenbeweging?
- 15. Hoe voel je je over de resultaten van de Natuurherstelwet, vooral wanneer we het hebben over de regelingen voor agrarische ecosystemen?

Als: persoon buiten de boerenbeweging betrokken is geweest bij de Natuurherstelwet en weerstand heeft ervaren tegen de Wet

- 16. Je bent betrokken geweest bij de Natuurherstelwet door het te steunen. In dat proces, heb je weerstand ervaren van de Nederlandse agrarische sector? En dan vooral van mensen die zich bij de boerenbeweging aansluiten?
 - a. Zo ja, wanneer en hoe gebeurde dit?
- 17. Welke frames hebben de mensen uit die groep gebruikt om beleidsmakers over te halen om de Natuurherstelwet naar beneden af te stellen? Of de Natuurherstelwet helemaal te proberen te torpederen?
 - a. Welk van deze frames vind jij het meest effectief?
- 18. Tot slot, hoe voel je je over de resultaten van de Natuurherstelwet, vooral wanneer we het hebben over de regelingen voor agrarische ecosystemen?

Actie: sluit opname af

Wrap up

In mijn interviews probeer ik 'key actors', dus kernpersonen op te sporen die betrokken zijn geweest in zowel de Nederlandse boerenbeweging en bij de Natuurherstelwet. Ken jij namen van mensen met wie ik hierover contact kan opnemen voor dit onderzoek?

Komen er andere dingen bij je op waarvan je denkt dat die belangrijk kunnen zijn voor dit onderwerp?

ANNEX 3: AI STATEMENT AND AI PROMPTS

All text in this research has been written out in full by the researcher. This research has on occasion made use of AI tool ChatGPT for particularly dense or potentially confusing paragraphs written by the researcher, in order to give suggestions to enhance the academic tone as well as clarity of the text. Prompts given to ChatGPT can be found in Annex 3. However, this tool was *never* used to generate insights into the results at hand, and generated text suggestions were carefully reviewed and edited to align with the logical flow of the text.

This Annex describes the prompts given to Artificial Intelligence tool ChatGPT. The ways in which these prompts influenced the final research report are described in the AI statement in the Methodology section.

Prompt: Can you make this text sound more academic?: It is hard to tell whether the lobbyist faction of the Dutch farmers' movement has been involved in trying to generate collective action against the NRL: results suggest they were moved to action because of the frames the movement offers, but focused less on trying to get more members of the Dutch farmers' movement involved with acting against the NRL. Results suggest that lobbyists were active in generating collective action in the beginning of the movement, but started discounting their more 'radical' movement adherents when the NRL was up for discussion. These findings relate to the issue of institutionalisation when it comes to movements. It is likely there is interplay between institutionalised movement actors such as lobbyists, who have tight connections to policymakers but have to strive for mutual understanding and thus run a risk of settling for less, and radical movement counterparts, who experience more freedom to 'act out', which comes at a cost of being taken less seriously.

Prompt: Rephrase this using some different words: *Theoretical research on SMOs suggests that movement adherents participate in collective action because this action is believed to be effective, and that there are people within the movement who utilise framing techniques to create a sense of efficacy*

Prompt: Give a suggestion for how to rephrase this sentence in an academic manner: *The creation of a movement against the Nature Restoration Law could thus also be seen through a political opportunity lens: the voting and the shaping of the NRL happened to coincide with a tumultuous lead-up to the EU elections in which politicians were trying to please angry constituents. The NRL, as part of the Green Deal and at that point in time up for debate, had to endure this political heat.*

Link to ChatGPT conversation

<https://chatgpt.com/share/688e8144-1284-8013-b953-d473906019e5>