



Greening the state? The framing of sustainability in Dutch infrastructure governance



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how the notion of 'sustainability' is strategically framed in the context of Dutch infrastructure governance in the Netherlands. By conducting a frame analysis (based on policy documents, websites and semi-structured interviews), the paper discerns six sustainability frames. These frames concern substantive (e.g., more focus on ecology), process (activating new networks) and organizational (e.g., new practices of work) aspects. The paper also illustrates how these sustainability frames relate to the changing institutional context of infrastructure policy and governance more broadly. The paper discusses some of the productive and challenging implications of the dynamics of sustainability in today's complex and multi-dimensional world of governance.

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1. Introduction

Sustainability has entered policy discourse since the 1987 Brundtland Report (Brundtland, 1987) and has raised the attention of both policy researchers and practitioners. In the Brundtland report *Our Common Future* (Brundtland, 1987) sustainable development came to be defined as a redirection of the social development in ways that combine prosperity, social cohesion and environmental protection. The concept of sustainable development has steered debates between development proponents and environmentalists proposing either a divorce between development and environment (the main thesis of Tim Jackson's work of prosperity without growth) or a promising wedding with proponents of a new green deal (Dryzek, 2005; 146–147; UNEP, 2012; Victor and Jackson, 2012). Sustainability as a process and aspiration, has been debated and researched in different fields such as energy (Raven, 2006; Kemp and Rotmans, 2009), agriculture (Grin, 2012), water management (Pahl-Wostl, 2007; van der Brugge & Rotmans, 2007), housing (Vergragt and Brown, 2008) and mobility (Kohler et al., 2009; Ieromonachou et al., 2004) as well as in different disciplines: policy, planning, management, business

(e.g., corporate environmental responsibility), and technology (e.g., Kemp et al., 2005; Frantzeskaki et al., 2012; Jaeger, 2009). Nowadays there seems to be a mutual acceptance among policy researchers and practitioners that sustainability is an important aspiration for different reasons in a various policy domains. The debates and insights from all those different research fields enter the policy domain in different ways such as via a policy advice narrative (e.g., Kemp and Rotmans, 2009; Meadowcroft, 2007; Smith and Kern, 2009), via the interaction of policy and science in adaptive policy cycles (Edelenbos et al., 2009) and/or via broader societal debates around sustainability and climate change (e.g. scholarship on environmental justice, Schlosberg, 2007). In public administration scholarship there is a view that sustainability and sustainable development are magic concepts (Politt and Huppe, 2011) with normative elements and political flavor (Jordan, 2008; p.18) that need to encapsulate interests and desires of the location and generation they refer to (Meadowcroft, 2000; Loeber, 2004). In an earlier work, we propose that "sustainable development is therefore a normative orientation that provides a frame of reference to discuss and direct differences in perception, ambition and understanding between actors in light of desired changes in society" (Loorbach et al., 2011, p.76).

As has been often argued that sustainability always operates in a specific context in the way it is interpreted and acted upon. Even though the multiple semantics of sustainability have been studied in accountability (Dillard, 2011), supply chain management (Varsei

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et al., 2014), transportation (Banister, 2014), and research projects (Wuelser, 2014), the symbolic meaning and strategic uses of sustainability in policy contexts are rarely discussed (Backstrand and Kronsell, 2015). Notwithstanding vast literature on sustainability programs and projects in governmental spheres, it often remains unclear how the discursive marker of 'sustainability' is actually employed in a context in which it is relatively new. This raises questions to what extent sustainability actually stabilizes existing forms of organization, triggers new structures, or is used strategically and instrumentally. In this paper we investigate the Dutch national infrastructure policy context where the newly introduced concept of sustainability has received different values, translations and has been employed in different ways.

The particular contribution of our article lies at the intersection of sustainability science and studies of policy, politics and governance. On the one hand studies on sustainability seem to address the policy dynamics of sustainability somewhat sketchy (Kates et al., 2005; Backstrand and Kronsell, 2015) due to either the focus on the clarity of meanings and definitions in isolation from policy and context dynamics (Christen and Schmidt, 2011) or to the focus on the equal attention to ecological, economic and social values within the definitions and meanings (Harlow et al., 2011; Redclift, 2005; McShane, 2007). On the other hand, in many governance, policy and planning studies, a comprehensive investigation of the substantive, process and organizational aspects of sustainability seems to be limited. The few research studies addressing the organizational aspects of sustainability policy either address the topic in a static way missing the process and learning components (e.g., Atkinson and Klausen, 2011; Fiorino, 2010) or address it at an international level such as the European Union level (e.g., Baker, 2007) or critically investigate its usefulness in policy (Seghezzo, 2009; Rozema et al., 2012). In planning studies there is a focus on operationalizing the concept of sustainability with an aversion to its contested nature (Davidson, 2010; Gunder and Hillier, 2009). As thus, it remains somewhat open how policy makers at a national level deal with sustainability in a dynamic context. We highlight how sustainability is operationalized in a context that is not quite familiar with it, namely national policy on infrastructure and in this way, we aim to contribute to the understanding of the contemporary greening of the state.

1.1. Research objective and methodology

We chose to focus on Dutch infrastructure governance to identify and understand the different definitions and uses of sustainability because the significance of sustainability for infrastructure relatively new in the Dutch context.¹ Given that the Netherlands has a multi-level governance system (horizontally and vertically), it is expected to come across different definitions and uses of sustainability. These employments are related to substantive, process and organizational aspects of policy and politics. The overarching research question that we will investigate is the following: *How is the sustainability framed in the Dutch national policy domain in the Netherlands, particularly in the field of infrastructure governance?*

This study is grounded in an interpretive epistemology and uses a qualitative method. Social reality is heterogeneous and rendered meaningful in local contexts and through meaning-making subjects. This starting point was crucial to allow for inductive mapping of sustainability frames. Since the strategic framing of

sustainability in a policy field often over looked (Wuelser, 2014), this empirics-driven approach was very instructive.

We started with an eight-month long scoping phase in which we participated in sixteen governmental meetings, one large-scale policy workshop with all the Ministry officers of infrastructure governance about the 'Sneller and Better' program and twenty-five smaller in time interviews with people who participated in the large-scale policy workshop (May to November 2010). During the scoping phase we identified the 'gatekeepers' from a large number of interviewees, meaning those actors that have three distinct qualities critical for introducing new concepts in the policy arena: (a) First, they are responsible for strategic planning for sustainability infrastructures, (b) they connect different policy networks in the state, and (b) have the experience and authority to frame policy issues and influence policy agendas. The respondents were mainly actors from the Ministry of Infrastructures and Environment holding positions at the level of strategic planning, project or program management, organizational leaders, responsible for policy implementation, policy enforcement and endorsement, planning advisors, as well as public-private partnerships advisors. We also used snowball-sampling as a means to gain new insights and voices. Data was derived from Dutch policy documents, websites and in-person semi-structured interviews with policy actors – the gatekeepers – (fifteen in total, see annex). The interviews period lasted for five months (January to May 2011). To validate our frames we participated and presented our findings in three policy workshops (November 2012 internal policy workshop in the Ministry of Infrastructures, May 2013 sustainability workshop organized by the municipality of Rotterdam including policy officers from the Ministry of Infrastructures and September 2014 green growth policy workshop with the Ministry of Internal Affairs as part of the agenda on green economy). The inputs from these workshops have been incorporated in the final frames as we present them in this paper. The reason for taking a long-term research scope is to identify the *dominant frames over time* on sustainability and the state's infrastructure governance.

We analyzed the documents, website and interviews through frame analysis. Frame analysis was particularly relevant to grasp how 'sustainability' was injected with symbolic meaning and rendered useful. Framing can be understood as a process through which complex realities are reduced and simplified in such a way that action becomes possible. As Entman puts it:

"Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." (Entman, 1993)

Frame analysis in social sciences is traditionally used to better understand social movements, media dynamics and social psychology (cf. Goffman, 1974; Snow and Benford, 1988; Klandermans, 1997). In the last decades, it has been also undertaken in many other disciplines. For our study, we used frame analysis to better understand how sustainability was observed and appropriated strategically in the context of policy-making and policy change (Roe, 1994; Stone, 2001; McBeth et al., 2007). Based on the empirical materials, we mapped and analyzed specific *sustainability frames* within the policy domain on infrastructure. More specifically, we identified sustainability frames that, within the policy context, refer to specific sustainability-related *values* (e.g., economic, environmental, mobility, clean air) and their relation to specific *problems, solutions, goals* or policy-related *means*. We reconstructed the frames narratives by highlighting the marker 'sustainability' in these data sources and situating its semantic position in broader discourses and narratives. Importantly,

¹ See e.g.,: http://www.changemagazine.nl/artikelen/duurzame_infrastructuur, http://www.rijkswaterstaat.nl/kenniscentrum/duurzaam/duurzame_gebiedsontwikkeling/

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