



# Partnering for nature conservation NGO-farmer collaboration for meadow bird protection in the Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

In order to reverse the trend of continuous decline in species diversity and abundance in agricultural landscapes, various governance arrangements have been implemented that promote, organise and finance nature conservation by farmers. The scientific literature predominantly focuses on agri-environment schemes (AES), i.e. publicly funded financial compensation schemes for farmers who implement prescribed conservation measures. Less attention has been paid to governance arrangements initiated by actors outside the public domain. This paper analyses a unique partnership between a nature conservation NGO – BirdLife Netherlands (BLN) – and a network of about 130 dairy and cattle farmers, aimed at meadow bird protection in the Netherlands. Meadow birds breed in large numbers in the Netherlands, mainly on farmland, but their numbers have been declining as a consequence of agricultural intensification, urbanisation and predation, amongst other things. Established in 2010, the partnership is gradually evolving from bilateral cooperation between BLN and individual farmers into a network. Based on desk research, interviews and five focus group sessions with almost 40 representatives of the partnership, we conclude that the main (perceived) achievements include: a large contribution to awareness of and recognition for the important role and efforts of farmers in meadow bird protection among citizens, politicians, policy-makers and companies in agri-food chains; a modest contribution to improving conservation efforts by participating farmers; and a modest contribution to their knowledge about conservation of meadow birds. The main success factors are the alignment of interests and complementarity of the partners and motivation derived from meeting peers. The partnership clearly complements AES in terms of its functions.

## 1. Introduction

In Europe, species abundance and diversity in agricultural landscapes have been declining as a consequence of agricultural intensification and scale enlargement next to factors such as urbanisation and fragmentation (Stoate et al., 2001; Sanderson et al., 2013; Ollerton et al., 2014; EEA 2015a,b). In response, agri-environment schemes (AES) have been implemented in order to motivate and enable farmers to implement conservation measures. In AES, farmers can voluntarily apply for financial compensation for implementing measures such as creating and maintaining flower-rich fields or field margins, temporary high water tables, the preservation of landscape elements, or other measures to protect specific species (Grüebler et al., 2012). Findings regarding the ecological performance of AES are mixed (Kleijn et al.,

2006; Whittingham, 2007; Batáry et al., 2010, 2015) and AES has not improved the conservation status of many species which breed in agricultural landscapes (EEA, 2015a). A recent study of AES, and other EU policies for protecting farmland birds, concludes that they “seem to generally attenuate the declines of farmland bird populations, but not to reverse them.” (Gamero et al., 2017: 1).

Far less attention has been paid to agri-environmental governance by non-state actors such as companies in agri-food chains or NGOs centred round nature conservation (Runhaar et al., 2017; but see Van Amstel et al., 2007 on voluntary standards for promoting agrobiodiversity or Taylor, 2010 or Polman et al., 2011 on agri-environmental cooperatives). How do these other governance arrangements<sup>1</sup> aim to motivate farmers to contribute to nature conservation, and what are their potential and limitations in terms of contributing to nature

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<sup>1</sup> We define a governance arrangement as a specific structure in which a group of actors interacts round a specific objective (cf. Polman, 2002 en Driessen et al., 2012). In the literature often distinction is made between top-down governance arrangements with governments in a leading position; interactive arrangements in which governments, companies, NGOs and other stakeholders interact on a more horizontal level; and bottom-up arrangements based on self-governance by companies and NGOs (Hysing, 2009).

conservation in farmland?

In this paper we focus on *partnerships* as a specific private governance arrangement for nature conservation by farmers. Partnerships distinguish themselves from other governance arrangements because of their ‘multi-sector’ and collaborative nature (Bryson et al., 2006). Partnerships in this paper are collaborative, institutionalised arrangements between actors from two or more sectors of society (market, state and civil society) aimed at the provision of collective goods (Glasbergen, 2007). Other distinct features of partnerships are their voluntary character; the non-hierarchical relationships between the partners; their logic of utilising the complementary resources and capacities of the actors involved in order to address problems that none of these actors can address alone; and the active role that companies play in contributing to collective goods such as biodiversity (Bitzer et al., 2013; Van Huijstee et al., 2007; Bitzer and Glasbergen, 2015).

We analyse a specific partnership in the Netherlands that exists since 2010: the partnership between BirdLife Netherlands (BLN) and a group of about 130 cattle and dairy farmers (representing less than 1% of the whole farmer population), aimed at the protection of meadow birds on their grasslands. The Netherlands are of particular importance for meadow birds. Yet over the last six decades meadow birds have dropped in numbers (see for instance Fig. 1). Black-tailed Godwits, a meadow bird species of which a substantial proportion breeds in the Netherlands (Wiggers et al., 2016), have even dropped by 70% since the 1970s (Kentie et al., 2015). These trends are not only consequences of urbanisation and fragmentation but also agricultural intensification. In order to maximise agricultural productivity, wet and herb-rich meadows have been replaced by well-drained grassland monocultures, that are mown earlier, more frequent, and by even larger and faster mowing machines, reducing the opportunities for meadow birds to forage, breed and hide. Especially chick survival forms a main problem for these relative long living bird species (Kentie et al., 2013, 2014, 2015; Wiggers et al., 2016). The amount of breeding habitat and the quality decreases. Predation has been recognised as a factor explaining farmland bird decline (Teunissen et al., 2008). Predation rates have increased because the transformed landscapes favour species such as foxes, martens and buzzards.

The partnership exists next to other governance arrangements for meadow bird protection of which the most important ones are AES and farmed nature reserve areas (Runhaar et al., 2017; Westerink et al., 2017). AES funding for meadow bird protection (which forms the main part of the whole AES budget) only applies to areas in the Netherlands where still large enough populations of meadow birds are present. Farmers located in these areas can apply for subsidies in return for voluntary taking conservation measures such as postponement of the mowing date in order not to disturb breeding birds or kill chicks. Next to AES farmed nature reserve areas have been assigned where agricultural land is bought from farmers by the state and decentral governments and usually transferred to so-called reserve area management

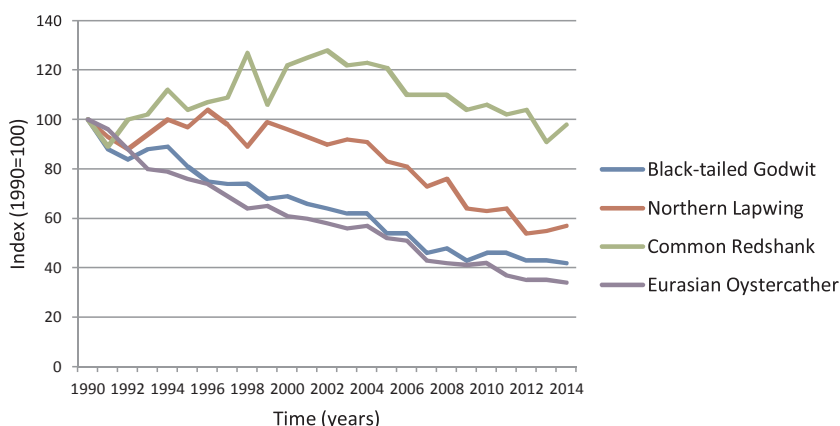


Fig. 1. Trends in numbers of meadow birds in the Netherlands. Source: CBS (2015), based on data from the Network Ecological Monitoring (CBS, SOVON and provinces).

organisations. In these nature reserve areas farming is allowed under strict conditions in order to provide favourable habitat for meadow birds (for more information about these and other governance arrangements for agrobiodiversity in the Netherlands, see Runhaar et al., 2017; Westerink et al., 2017).

The partnership is a relatively unique governance arrangement for agrobiodiversity because no public actors are involved (Runhaar et al., 2017), which has implications for its governance capacities (e.g. no direct influence on policies or legislation but on the other hand the partnership can influence other companies and the public in ways that public actors cannot; see Van Huijstee et al., 2011). The partnership also is relatively unique among other partnerships for sustainable development because the involvement of farmers, which is hardly reported in partnership literature. Lastly the partnership is relatively unique because of the involvement of a large number of farmer-partners (compare: Glasbergen, 2007).

This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. How can the partnership between BLN and farmers be characterised?
2. What are the main achievements of the partnership and what factors explain these achievements?

## 2. Theory

Literature on partnerships as a specific environmental governance arrangement is relatively new. The interest of environmental scholars in this particular governance arrangement emerged as a consequence of scholarly debates about the role of actors other than the government in solving environmental problems and the establishment of a growing number of partnerships for sustainable development after the Rio + 10 Summit on Sustainable Development (Glasbergen et al., 2007). Sustainability challenges addressed by partnerships include, but are not limited to, halting biodiversity loss (Bitzer and Glasbergen, 2015).

Below we discuss features that characterise partnerships (research question 1). Secondly, we distinguish the different types of achievements of partnerships as discussed in the literature and identify factors that explain these achievements (‘success factors’)(research question 2).

### 2.1. Characterising partnerships

Obvious features of partnerships are their objectives and their participants. The objectives of a partnership are usually negotiated between the partners and relate to partners’ own objectives and motivations to engage in a partnership (which may change over time). Companies’ motivations to engage in environmental partnerships include contributing to compliance with environmental legislation, risks reduction (e.g. reputational damage), intrinsic motivations, access to new resources or perceived business opportunities (Austin, 2007; Bitzer

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