



Changing land use in the countryside: Stakeholders' perception of the ongoing rural planning processes in Flanders

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ABSTRACT

Rural areas in densely populated regions face increasing competition for land. Consequently, land use planning processes must attempt to balance the goals of diverse stakeholders and the process of reaching consensus becomes more complicated. By investigating the perception of the actors involved in rural planning, this research contributes to the knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of such processes. We have focused on the case of rural planning processes in Flanders in which proponents of nature and agriculture are competing for land. Data are collected through open interviews with key actors such as farmers, representatives of nature preservation organisations, farmers' unions, and employees of the relevant governmental policy areas. Data analysis according to the grounded theory approach resulted in six categories and 26 concepts that represent the stakeholders' perception of difficulties in the Flemish rural planning approach. Three points where difficulties arise are (1) the link between envisioning, drawing up the plan and implementation, (2) the need for data, and (3) the role of sectors. We use three concepts from literature (procedural justice, distributive justice and value conflicts) to frame the difficulties observed. Based on this analysis, we discuss several ways to improve rural planning processes.

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Introduction

Rural areas in densely populated and urbanising regions are faced with an increasing demand for land. Urbanisation is encroaching upon the rural areas and threatening open space (Antrop, 2004; Schmied, 2005 and others). Moreover, societal expectations for the countryside are changing due to developments such as an increasing awareness of the need to protect vital ecosystems and natural processes, higher incomes, increasing leisure time and increased mobility (Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007; Jongeneel et al., 2008; Zasada, 2011). Agriculture, which has historically been the main user of rural land, now has to compete for land with other functions, such as housing, commercial activities, nature, woods and recreational areas (Oltmer, 2003; van den Brink et al., 2006; Jongeneel et al., 2008; Zasada, 2011). In some cases, these developments even result in a blurred appearance of rural and

urban, creating a 'rurban' zone that serves a multitude of functions (Sieverts, 2003; Vanempten, 2011). This growing pressure on rural land and the necessity of a multifunctional development of the rural area is acknowledged in the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) as well as in other literature (CEC, 1999; Brandt and Vejre, 2004; Gallent et al., 2006; Busck et al., 2009).

Various planning systems and instruments have been developed to deal with this pressure on rural land, aiming for example to manage urban growth, to control land use changes and to protect the remaining open space and farmland (Duke and Aull-Hyde, 2002; Koomen et al., 2008; Busck et al., 2008). Plans such as the Copenhagen Finger Plan, the London Green Belt or the Randstad and its Green Heart illustrate that the focus of many planning systems is on managing the conflict between urban development or sprawl versus conservation of open space (Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007; Busck et al., 2008; Koomen et al., 2008). However, the traditional distinction between urban and rural has lost most of its relevance for spatial planning in areas where the rural and urban appearance is blurred (van den Brink et al., 2006). Moreover, the contemporary countryside is characterised by a decreasing dependency on agriculture and a growing awareness of the need to protect vital ecosystems and natural processes. Likewise, countryside planning is moving from an agriculture-based

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to an environment-based approach (Bishop and Phillips, 2004; Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007). The dichotomous planning model of 'open space-versus-urban development' has thus developed to a triangular model of 'agriculture-versus-nature-versus-urban development' (Koomen et al., 2008), in which nature and agriculture often stand in opposition in the quest for land (van der Valk, 2002; van den Brink et al., 2006; Henle et al., 2008; Bomans et al., 2010).

Within this context, planners and decision-makers are not only confronted with increasing functional claims, but also with a growing number of stakeholders who often have conflicting interests (Albrechts, 2004). Consequently, rural land use planning seems to be caught between the need to protect and preserve areas for nature development and food production, intertwining the former agricultural functioning with other land uses, and at the same time meeting the goals and wishes of various stakeholders. The growing claims on the limited amount of space give rise to increasing social controversies. Land use policies relating to the question of 'agriculture vs. nature vs. urban development' often result in conflicting opinions among planners, developers, farmers and rural residents and ultimately result in resentment towards the planning processes (Spaling and Wood, 1998; Wolsink, 2003; Boonstra, 2006; Leinfelder, 2007; Gilg, 2009). It is unclear which direction of development should be preferred. Moreover, the problem-solving capacity of planning systems seems to have changed because reaching consensus appears to have become more difficult and the processes are often time-consuming (Wolsink, 2003; Boonstra, 2006). Simultaneously, an increasing need for community participation and stakeholder involvement has arisen (Healey, 1997; Albrechts, 2004).

Planning systems have been altered in response to these trends. Several studies describe the effectiveness of specific planning instruments for goals such as growth management, protection of open space or farmland preservation (Frenkel, 2004; Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007; Koomen et al., 2008). Many studies have been done on the weaknesses and strengths of the various planning approaches that have been developed over time. These discuss for example the introduction of participation in the planning process (e.g. Healey, 1997, 2007; Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1998; Sager, 2009; Jones and Stenseke, 2011) or the most appropriate level (local versus national) for planning (Tewdwr-Jones, 1998; Mell and Sturzaker, 2011). Several authors discussed the Dutch planning system, which is often considered to be an exemplary system of spatial planning (van der Valk, 2002; Wolsink, 2003; van den Brink et al., 2006; Koomen et al., 2008; Alpkokin, 2012). Busck et al. (2008) compared the Dutch planning system to the Danish and Swedish systems. The studies all assess whether the approaches applied succeeded in achieving their goals and they search for factors to explain this success or failure. In this way, they stimulate the continual adaptation and evolution of planning theory. Additionally, research has been performed assessing the perception of stakeholders concerning the object of rural transformations, e.g. development of nature reserves and afforestation (Trakolis, 2001; NíDhubháin et al., 2009), residential development patterns (Zabik and Prytherch, in press), greenhouse clusters (Rogge et al., 2011) or wind turbines (Gross, 2007; Wolsink, 2007; Warren and McFadyen, 2010).

The goal of our research is to contribute to the knowledge on spatial planning approaches and how they cope with the abovementioned rural transformations. Specifically, our aim is to shed light on this matter by assessing the rural planning processes from the stakeholders' point of view. This point of view is important because of the emphasis on stakeholder involvement in current planning approaches and the recorded conflict and resentment among the stakeholders involved in rural planning processes. To obtain insight into the stakeholders' perception of planning processes, we performed in-depth interviews with

diverse stakeholders. We focused on the case of rural planning processes in Flanders, particularly processes characterised by tension between agriculture and nature. The critical review of rural planning processes in this case is expected to contribute to the overall knowledge on rural planning processes and to provide guidance to policymakers and practitioners (Alpkokin, 2012).

This paper is divided into six sections. We start by describing the research methodology. The main aspects of the methodology are the choice of a case area, the performance of in-depth interviews and the application of grounded theory. In the next section, the results of the interviews are presented. In the discussion section, we compare our results with literature on spatial planning approaches and rural land use transformations. (The description of the research results precedes the theoretical framing based on literature because of our use of the grounded theory approach.) Starting from the overall analysis, we discuss in a separate section proposals for improvement of the rural planning approach in Flanders. The final section presents the conclusions of this research.

Methodology

Rural planning in Flanders as a case

Flanders, the northern region in the federal state of Belgium, is used as a case to investigate the stakeholders' perception of rural planning processes. This region is confronted with the above-described trends that lead to a high demand for rural land, conflicting interests and difficulties in spatial planning policy. In this section, we briefly explain the rural planning situation in Flanders.

In Flanders, rural planning is mainly embedded in spatial planning policy. Spatial planning policy is assigned to the regions in Belgium, thus Flanders is responsible for its own spatial planning. The Flemish spatial planning policy is mainly based on two types of plans: the spatial structure plan (SSP) and the spatial implementation plan (SIP) (RWO, 2011; Kerselaers et al., 2011). Both plans are made on three governmental levels: the regional (Flemish), provincial and municipal level. An important vision for the rural area, stipulated in the Flemish SSP in 1997, is that the total area of forest and nature reserves should increase at the expense of the agricultural land area (RSV, 1997). To implement this vision, a planning process has been started in 2003 that aims to demarcate the agricultural and natural structure in Flanders (AGNAS). This demarcation is being consolidated in regional spatial implementation plans.

Other examples of planning processes in Flanders that are characterised by a tension between the open space functions, are the demarcation of valuable heritage landscapes, the nature compensation in return for development of other functions, e.g. dockland expansion in valuable natural areas, and the implementation of the *Natura 2000* directive where goals are formulated to preserve specific habitats and birds. These planning processes appear to be encountering difficulties. For example, after 8 years the demarcation goals of the Flemish SSP have not yet been reached: only 30% of the intended increase of natural areas has been consolidated into a SIP (RWO, 2011). Moreover, the processes seem to cause a great deal of resentment among the actors involved (Leinfelder, 2007).

Grounded theory approach

In order to grasp the heterogeneity of the perceptions and the nuanced opinions of the involved stakeholders, in-depth open interviews were performed with the actors involved in rural planning processes. This qualitative approach is useful to offer insight and enhance understanding of the planning situation. Following the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), the

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