Implementation of the forest expansion policy in the Netherlands in the period 1986–2007: Decline in success?

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A B S T R A C T

The current study explains why Dutch forest expansion policy is at risk of failure. To study the forest expansion implementation process we have chosen to further operationalize Matland's policy type implementation model to an extended and comprehensive typology of relevant implementation characteristics. In addition, a case study methodology with mixed-method design was used to collect and analyze the data. The Dutch forest expansion policy is currently an example of symbolic implementation. The symbolic implementation is a consequence of the absence of central guidance, the legislative complexity, the low policy stability, the lack of supporting conditions for policy innovation, the lack of regulatory responsiveness and the latent policy at state level and in many provinces. Nevertheless, the transferable development rights method of the province of Limburg is a promising innovation and forest expansion still happens, which is mainly the result of a good internal and external communication, an effective actor network of forest expansion advocates and the willingness to realize negotiated project aims that lead to a win–win situation for all actors involved. Nonetheless, it is expected that the forest expansion targets will be not reached, unless most of the above shortcomings are solved.

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Introduction

Forest expansion is not new in the Netherlands. The increase in forest area started as early as the year 1800. At that time, the forest area had decreased to an estimated historic minimum of only 100,000 ha (Vernhout, 1988) (Fig. 1). Forest expansion in the 19th century was mainly done by private and municipal owners, who were motivated by the possibility to increase the profitability of their rural estate (private owners) or to reduce the unemployment of their citizens (municipal owners) (Van Laar, 1994). The increase in forest area after the Second World War was inspired by the aim to increase the self-sufficiency in timber production. Later, forest expansion was also wanted within the framework of other ecosystem services such as recreation, the production of clean drinking water, the improvement of living conditions, biodiversity conservation and the reduction of air pollution including the removal of fine dust and carbon sequestration.

The forest expansion aim is also recognized in many recent policy plans (the Long-term Forestry Plan of 1986, the Forest Policy Plan of 1993 and *Nature for people – People for nature* of 2000). All plans confirm the policy goal to increase the forest area to 400,000 ha in 2020 or a forest expansion of 66,000 ha between 1983 and 2020 or a yearly forest expansion of 1800 ha. The goal attainment of the forest expansion target is 80% in the period 1983–2001. However, the policy success during this period can partly be explained by the selective choice of policy-makers to focus first on the cases with highest legitimacy. For example, around 30% of the realized forest expansion in the period 1983–2001 was done on governmental land that was designated as forest expansion area, the Flevopolders. It is important to mention that no such cases as Flevopolders are left. Therefore, forest expansion experts expect that the yearly forest expansion rate will significantly decrease (oral. commun.), while a 50% increase is needed to reach the policy targets. Even more, there is almost a consensus between all Dutch forest expansion experts that there is almost no forest expansion for the period 2001–2007 (oral comm.). This stagnation is also confirmed in many studies on the realization of the Randstad green structure (LNV, 2001; Farjon et al., 2004; Van der Wielen and Bezemer, 2004). Therefore, there is the expectation that the successful Dutch forest expansion from the past will end.

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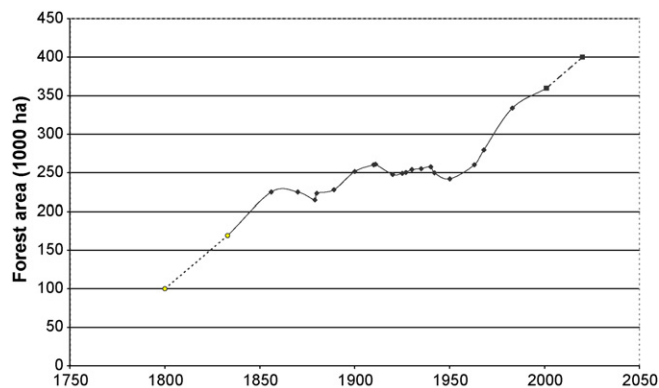
Fig. 1. The increase in forest area in the Netherlands between 1800–2001 and the desired forest area in 2020 [adapted from Vernhout (1988)]. The dotted line indicates estimations since the forest area in 1800 is not exactly known; the dashed line indicates the policy target.

Table 1
The ambiguity–conflict matrix of Matland (1995) indicating the implementation type and the preferred model type (top-down, new top-down, bottom-up, or a combination).

Conflict	
Low	High
Ambiguity	
Low	
Administrative implementation: outcomes are determined by resources; analyzed with traditional top-down models	Political implementation: outcomes are driven by power; analyzed with newer top-down models that include political factors
High	
Experimental implementation: contextual conditions dominate the process; analyzed with bottom-up models	Symbolic implementation: outcomes are determined by local level coalitional strength; analyzed with bottom-up and top-down models

A possible explanation for the failure of the forest expansion policy is its inadequate implementation (Mendes, 2006). It is also important to emphasize that recently two important policy changes took place, which can have an impact on the policy implementation. First, since 2000, the forest policy has been almost entirely integrated into the nature policy (Veenman et al., 2009). For example, the policy document *Nature for people – People for nature* focuses on the conservation, development, restoration and sustainable use of nature (forests included) and landscapes for a sustainable society (LNV, 2000). Second, an ongoing decentralization of the nature and forest policy can be observed. In the Netherlands, the policy responsibilities are distributed between national (state), regional (provinces) and local (municipalities) governments. As result of the decentralization policy, the central role of the state has shifted to the regional level, i.e. the 12 Dutch provinces. These provincial authorities play an increasingly important role in rural planning as well as in forest and nature policy. Particularly through their authority to develop regional visionary plans, provinces play an important role in regulating the public and private development possibilities. Furthermore, the municipalities also have the right to decide on these development possibilities, and they own 14% of the forest area (LNV, 2007), which makes them an important actor in forest policy.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyze the implementation process of the Dutch forest expansion policy over the period 1986–2007. We will focus on the failure and success factors of the forest expansion policy implementation.

Theoretical framework

In spite of the many definitions of policy implementation, there is a consensus on the general meaning of the term (Berman, 1978): policy implementation is the process in which decisions or actions are directed towards putting policies into effect (Goggin et al., 1990; Winter, 1990; Hasenfeld and Brock, 1991). The single most important fault line in the implementation literature is the division between a top-down view (e.g. Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975; Linder and Peters, 1987; Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1989) and a bottom-up view (e.g. Berman, 1978; Hanf, 1978; Elmore, 1979; Lipsky, 1978; Hjern and Porter, 1981). The top-down approach begins with an authoritative policy decision at the central (top) level of the government and proceeds downwards through the hierarchical administrative structure in order to examine the extent to which the policy's legally mandated objectives are achieved and procedures are followed (Sabatier, 1986; Najam,

1995). The bottom-up approach focuses on the street-level bureaucrats, the real policy implementers (Lipsky, 1980), and starts with analyzing all the actors that interact at the operational (local) level, working backwards to map the outcomes and impacts of the policy in terms of strategies adopted by the relevant actors in response to particular policy choices (Najam, 1995). A limited number of attempts tried to combine these two perspectives on policy implementation (Matland, 1995), e.g. Elmore's concept of forward and backward mapping (Elmore, 1985) and the communication model of intergovernmental policy implementation (Goggin et al., 1990). The concept of Elmore is not a theoretical model in the traditional sense, but gives useful suggestions for policy designers (Matland, 1995): a policy designer should first consider the policy instruments and resources available for policy change (forward mapping) and then identify the incentive structure for implementers and target groups (backward mapping) (Pülzl and Treib, 2007). Goggin's communication model is based on the idea that implementers are political actors in their own right, and that successful implementation thus requires complicated negotiation processes between the implementers and the central authorities (Pülzl and Treib, 2007).

Parsons (1995) pointed out that some of the differences between the top-down and the bottom-up approaches are as fundamental that seeking a comprehensive synthesis of both approaches is like trying to combine incommensurate paradigms. In reaction, Matland (1995) developed a policy type model that explains which approach is most appropriate (Table 1). Matland's approach was based on the policy problem classification of Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) and distinguishes four policy types based on high or low levels of conflict and ambiguity. Policy conflict exists when more than one organization considers a policy as directly relevant to its interests and when these organizations have incongruous views. Ambiguity might arise from ambiguity in goals, often a prerequisite to get new policies past the legitimating stage, or from ambiguity in means, e.g. the uncertainty on the role of organizations in the implementation process (Matland, 1995). For each policy type, a certain implementation type will be most likely (Pülzl and Treib, 2007), and each implementation type has its own set of requirements dependent on the selected approach (see Table 2). Table 2 is a modified version of Matland's descriptions for the different implementation types, in which the different requirements are organized in one clear overview, based on the implementation literature. At the highest level, three dimensions (resources, network and rules) are distinguished. Each dimension is subdivided into several factors, e.g. knowledge, implementation structure and discretion. The overview reveals some important similarities in