

Regional Workshop on Rural-Urban Poverty Linkages (2-4 September)
Hangzhou city

A note on rural-urban linkages: The Netherlands

Peter Nientied, July 2014

In this note on urban-rural linkages in the Netherlands, I want to share a few short stories. During the workshop, I can tell more about the European context, the Dutch governance system, what territorial cohesion in Europe means, etc. In this contribution, a few stories by way of a starter.

1 Where are the rural areas in Holland?

The Netherlands is a bit special in terms of urbanization and urban – rural relationships. Holland is small, has almost 17 million inhabitants and has a population density of 397 per km² (or 487 per km² if only the land area, of 33,883 km² is counted).

Map 1 will give you an idea of the settlement pattern in the Netherlands: many intermediate – large cities (the municipality of Amsterdam with its 813.000 people is the largest municipality), well connected with each other. In the Western part of the Netherlands, the municipalities of Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Hague and Rotterdam, and municipalities in between, form ‘Randstad’ (rim city). This is in fact a large urban area with about 7 million people. No metropolis, but a chain of intermediate cities, as you can see on Map 2.

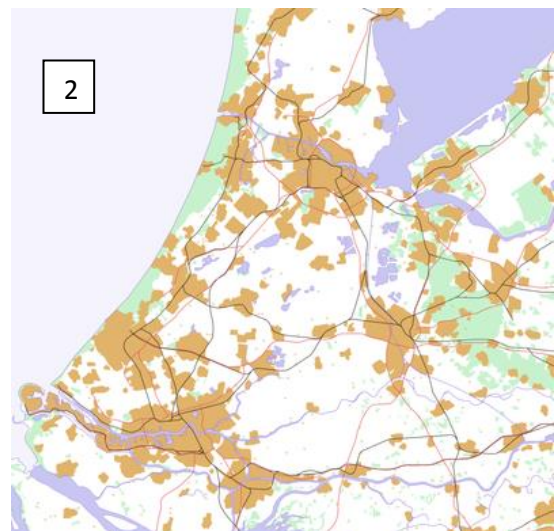
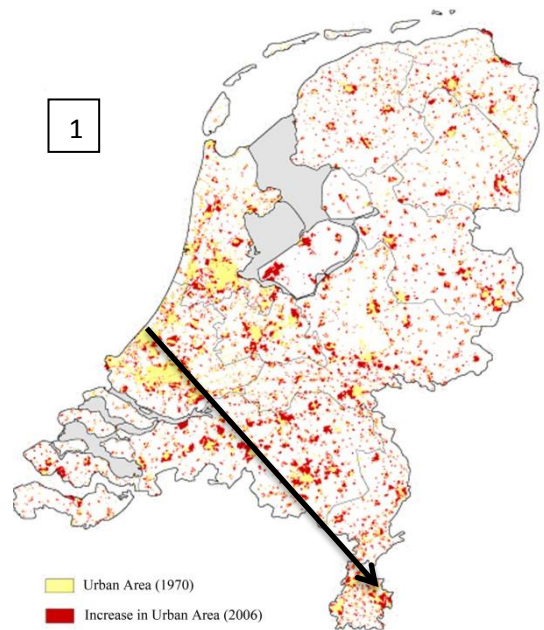
In its work on urban – rural relations, OECD differentiated between rural areas and intermediate areas, on basis of distance to a nearby city, population density etc. Based on OECD criteria, the Netherlands has almost no rural areas – the space outside the cities can be seen as intermediate areas. Interesting is how the Dutch manage their urban and intermediate areas, how they try to govern urban sprawl, how they try to manage environmental issues. Spatial planning has a long history in the Netherlands, and planning systems are very well established.

2. Heerlen

A different story.

In 1973, the largest Dutch pension fund (ABP, a very big financial institution indeed), opened its office in Heerlen, in the south east of the Netherlands. ABP had its offices in The Hague. In the south-eastern part, mines were closed in the 1960’s, and unemployment was rising. Dutch regional policy of the 1960’s, gave support to peripheral regions, and promoted deconcentration of the cities of Randstad. ABP was moved to Heerlen (see the arrow → on Map 1) and became the largest employer of the town. Likewise, other public or semi-public institutions were moved from The Hague to the North and to the East.

The deconcentration policy had its share of problems: employees resisted moving with their organization to another part of the country (from the Hague to a peripheral area, as it was felt at that time), unemployed



workers from mines could not easily be employed as administrative staff in the office, the costs of moving were high, better salaried employees of ABP looked for a place to live in the countryside nearby, etc. The deconcentration policy was discontinued in the 1970's. Stimulating firms to move to other regions in the Netherlands, never really worked. Firms make locational choices for their own good (market) reasons, like locational advantage, labour market, network of suppliers and partners, etc.

3. Where are the poor?

Poverty in Holland is a difficult statistical concept; in practical terms we can say that absolute poverty is physical (survival, food, shelter, clothing) and is almost absent in the Netherlands. So-called relative poverty leads to functional exclusion (and means for example not enough money for heating the house and no recreation), and can be witnessed in the Netherlands. Most of the poor Dutch live in cities; in Amsterdam 15,4% of the population is considered to be poor, Rotterdam 14,9%, The Hague and Groningen 14 %, and Heerlen 13%. There is overrepresentation of low-income people in cities, for two reasons. First is a better chance of getting a job or some income, and second is network (links to ethnic group as low-income in the Netherlands also has an ethnic dimension – for example African and Eastern European immigrants do not go to the Dutch countryside).

Photo on the right: a 'voedselbank' ('food bank'), a place where 'registered' poor people can get a weekly bag with food. About 35.000 households (85.000 people) in the country have to make use of this private sector community facility. Plenty of poor, with a different ethnic background who cannot find their way easily in Holland, do not make use of the voedselbank. As a result of the economic crisis, this number has increased substantially last years. Shops, factories etc. donate their leftover food to the Voedselbank, volunteers do the packing and distribution. Voedselbank also advocates reduction of wasted food.



4 Regional veggie bag

A very different story. At my home, we have a 'vegetable bag subscription'. That means that we get every week a (paper – no plastic!) bag with biological vegetables and fruits (and accompanying recipes), mostly from suppliers in the Rotterdam region countryside. This link between urban and countryside has become quite popular during the last years. Citizens want good vegetables from nearby places, and a cooperation of farmers organizes the production and the distribution. Orders go via internet, payments too. The producers organize every year a 'Summer tasting party', where the consumers can visit the farms, meet the people involved, enjoy food and the environment. The farmers get better prices for their products, and have funds to innovate or incorporate social projects. This enterprise (there are many of them) is a nice example of new forms of urban-rural linkages. Complementary assets, less pollution, more personalized ties.

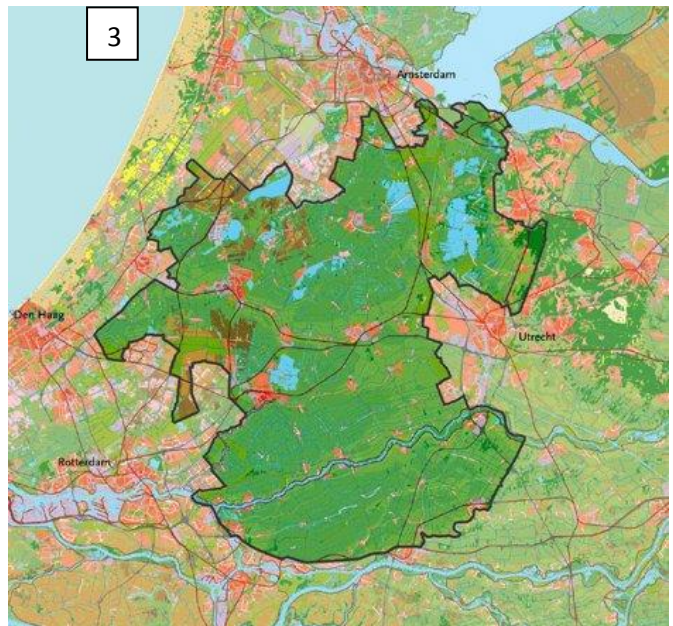
A similar story, but not regional, could be told for a Bed and Breakfast 'farmer' in the countryside of the Black Forest in Germany who combines agriculture and tourism. And this is Europe-wide: take a look at the website of www.pievedelcolle.com (in English), about a family in the Italian countryside who developed their farm into a beautiful spot for rural tourism (a video is www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnE5O3FxXzQ in Italian but it gives an impression). 'Rural tourism' is getting more popular, all over Western Europe. People from urban areas want to enjoy the countryside. Good transportation and internet make this possible.



5. The Green Heart

The final short story is about planning. Randstad (rim city, see the first story), contains a 'green heart', as the central green zone is called. In 1958, after the development of Schiphol airport (that developed into Europe's 4th largest airport), the discussion started about the green zone in the West of the country. In 1977, under conditions of growing housing markets, the government decided to put a hold on the urban extensions (many smaller municipalities wanted to benefit from the developments). It stipulated the name 'Green Heart', determined the borders, and issued planning laws. The function of the Green Heart is to provide fresh air, space and room for agricultural and recreational activities.

During the years after 1977, there have been many attempts (and quite a few successful), to turn parts of the Green Heart, into land required for development (industry, roads, housing). In 2004 the Green Heart obtained the status of national landscape. But this is in a Dutch way: it means that the environment has to be protected, but the Green Heart is not an area 'with a fence around it'. There should be space for vitality and development, and some room too for the expansion of the big cities. It is an example of what is called in Dutch 'polderen', a kind of muddling through planning process, with a lot of consultations, looking at all interests involved, long planning procedures, participation of parties concerned. Planning takes a long time, but the (serious) process means that big planning mistakes based on quick decisions, are avoided.



Polders in the Green Heart, Holland

