

ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERTIVES IN THE NETHERLANDS AS AN EXAMPLE OF NATURE AND LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

'Environmental co-operatives' are innovative associations of farmers based at local or regional level, which promote and organise activities related to sustainable agriculture and rural development in their locale. They also claim to be actively involved in the formulation and realisation of adequate rural policies within their operational boundaries. The activities taken up by environmental co-operatives are highly variable. In most cases they involve nature and landscape management, such as reducing environmental pollution on member farms, but may also cover water management, agri-tourism, regional quality production and organic farming.

Environmental co-operatives emerged in the early 1990s as a response to the crisis of productivist agriculture, a general concern over the deteriorating public image of farming and, most of all, the increasing body of environmental regulations that were seen by many farmers at that time as unworkable in the practice of their farms. There are now more than 100 such co-operatives and, collectively, they have developed into a social movement for the re-modelling of Dutch farming along the lines of environmental and economic sustainability.

The innovative element contained within the practices of environmental co-operatives is that they enable the construction of new networks to facilitate sustainable agriculture and rural development in the locality they cover. By (re-)creating linkages between farming, local ecology and landscape, and the wider social and institutional environment, environmental co-operatives play an important role in enabling a renewed embedding of farming.

The emerging new institutional relations between farming and state apparatuses involve essentially the following *exchange principle*. Responsible state agencies define *clear and quantifiable policy goals* with respect to the environment, landscape, nature, product quality, etc. for the area covered by the co-operative. The member farmers of the co-operative, in turn, promise not only to endorse these goals, but also to do everything within their reach to realise these goals in the most effective way. It follows from experience that environmental co-operatives are able, in many cases, to effectuate policy goals more quickly, more convincingly, more effectively and in cheaper ways than generic state regulations. Some environmental co-operatives commit themselves to go considerably further than the established generic policy goals.

In exchange for this *self-chosen obligation* (in Dutch *inspanningsverplichting*, literally 'commitment to act' or 'obligation to make an effort'), more flexibility with respect to the exact ways of policy implementation on member farms is assigned to the environmental co-operatives. That is, they are allowed to develop themselves the *measures and instruments* that they consider the most adequate in realising policy goals in the particular local context. Environmental co-operatives, therefore, represent a decisive step beyond the now reigning approach of centrally imposed generic policy measures.

The data collected by Polman & Slangen (1999) give us an idea of the reach of environmental co-operatives. On the basis of a postal questionnaire it was determined that the 81 co-operatives were composed of 6,600 member farms with about 134,000 hectares of land in use. This implies that 6% of all Dutch farms in 1999 were organised in environmental co-operatives and that member farms represented 7% of total agricultural land.

Various mechanisms are involved in the socio-economic impact of environmental co-operatives. First, the institutional framework of the co-operative facilitates members to take up new rural development activities and thereby realise *new farm revenues*. This is most obvious with respect to payments for nature and landscape management. On VEL and VANLA member farms, conservation payments on average contribute € 5,500 of revenues (VEL & VANLA, 2000), but large differences exist between farms. A similar effect occurs for other rural development activities. For example, some member farms converted to organic production or started with agro-tourist activities due to their involvement in the co-operative. Cost reductions amount to about € 135 per hectare, which for an average farm of 30 hectares implies a benefit of € 4,000 annually.

The additional effect of environmental co-operatives on the uptake of new rural development activities is that it opens up new opportunities that would have been impossible to access by farms individually. VEL and VANLA's activities, for example, resulted in the articulation of several previously non-existent conservation payment schemes, such as for the management of field margins, nature reserves, public roads and footpaths. The activities of the co-operatives with other entrepreneurs and the local tourist agency substantially improved the reputation of the area as a tourist destination, thereby indirectly creating new opportunities for farms to enter this market.

CASE STUDY:

VEL (*Vereniging Eastermar's Lansdouwe*) and VANLA (*Vereniging Agrarisch Natuur en Landschapsbeheer Achtkarspelen*) are amongst the first environmental co-operatives, established in 1992. They are located in the Frisian Woodlands — a region with beautiful man-made landscapes in which hedgerows of different kinds dominate the scenery. The region is one of the best-preserved small-scale landscapes in the Netherlands, largely because of the traditionally strong involvement of farmers in its management.

In the early 1990s the national government introduced regulations to counter the detrimental effects of ammonia deposition ('acid rain') in this region. The most important of these (known as the 'ecological guideline') stipulated that animal husbandry had to be severely limited. In the Frisian Woodlands this would have serious repercussions: the high density of hedgerows, ponds, etc. implied, in practice, that agricultural development would effectively be frozen. The regulation stirred strong feelings of injustice in the farming community. While some farmers threatened to uproot their hedgerows, others pursued a more constructive solution. Arguing that active management was in fact far more important for the continuity of the landscape than acid deposition, the following *exchange* was proposed. Farmers committed themselves to maintain and even increase their effort for preserving nature and landscape, on the condition that these same elements would *not* be considered as 'acid-sensitive objects'.

After a period of negotiation involving local, provincial and national governments, the deal proposed by the farmers was accepted.

Since then these environmental co-operatives (VEL and VANLA) have established excellent working relations with many organisations in the area, including various state agencies, ecology groups, private conservation agencies and tourist entrepreneurs. The range of activities was extended, essentially involving similar exchange deals. As part of the 'nature track', new schemes for nature and landscape management were designed and applied by member farms. VEL and VANLA are now blossoming organisations with more than 200 farm members between them. In the case of VEL member farms represent 1,600 of the 2,000 ha of farm land in the area.

Sources: De Bruin & Van der Ploeg (1991); Renting et al. (1994); VEL (1994); VEL & VANLA (2000)

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