

A Comparative Study of the Green Policy Plans from Groningen and Zwolle

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Summary

Sustainable development is becoming a central policy focus, including in the Netherlands. This research explores and compares the approaches taken in the green policy plans of Groningen and Zwolle and examines how these plans contribute to the sustainable development of their municipalities. A comparative policy analysis was conducted on the municipalities of Zwolle and Groningen based on their "Omgevingsvisie" (Environmental Vision(EV)) and associated documents. The comparison specifically focuses on three themes: green in urban areas, public participation, and environmental justice, which all play a significant role in sustainable development. Results indicate that Zwolle and Groningen each take unique approaches tailored to their specific challenges, with different focal points in their policy frameworks. For instance, the EV of Groningen places much greater emphasis on environmental justice compared to Zwolle. Meanwhile, Zwolle dedicates more attention to the participation process for green developments. Both put sustainable development at the core of their green policies.

Keywords: Sustainable development; Environmental justice; Northern Netherlands; Omgevingsvisie (Environmental Vision); public participation

Introduction

Urban areas all over the world are dealing with environmental degradation, population growth and climate issues (McDonald et al., 2011). This led to the introduction of policies to support a sustainable environment, but also enhancing the quality of life in the urban environment (Hausknost & Hammond, 2020). These policies encompass a wide range of strategies, from incentivizing renewable energy adaptation to implementing green infrastructure projects such as parks, trees, wetlands and community gardens. The implementation of these green infrastructures may deliver economic, ecological and social benefits, eventually with the possibility of leading to healthier, more resilient communities (Naumann et al., 2011).

The Netherlands is no exception, they are also experiencing problems related to climate change and subsequently, environmental degradation influencing the health of citizens (Bresser et al., 2005). To address issues like these, the Dutch government has introduced the "*Omgevingsvisie*" (in English, the Environmental Vision). The Environmental Vision (EV) outlines the main principles for the development of the physical living environment (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten, 2020). Every municipality and province is required to create an EV (Art. 3.1 *Omgevingsvisie* 2023). The vision includes future developments in terms of use, management, protection, and the use of the territory (VNG, 2020). In other words, sustainable development to make the living environment livable for future generations. Sustainable development is often referred to as "a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations." (WCED, 1987, p. 46)

This research will primarily focus on the green policies that are part of the EVs and other associated policy documents of municipalities. In this research, green policies refer to all elements within policy documents that relate to greenery or are significantly influenced by it. This includes parks, trees, meadows, and gardens as well as the creation of more green spaces. Additionally, the function of greenery in climate adaptation and its role in improving the living environment are key components.

The focus will be on the northern part of the Netherlands. In concreteness, the two municipalities Groningen and Zwolle, both have a worked-out EV containing green policies with the goal of sustainable development (Zwolle, 2021; Gemeente Groningen & Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2021). A more in-depth analysis of both municipalities can be found in the background section.

It is intriguing to examine if these EVs are taking concepts like environmental justice or citizen participation into account. According to Schlosberg (2007), environmental justice is often described as: "maldistribution-the fact that poor communities, indigenous communities, and communities of colour get fewer environmental goods, more environmental bads, and less environmental protection" (p.4). This is noteworthy because justice and equity must play a central role in sustainable discourses for them to have a chance of creating a more sustainable future (Agyemen, 2005)

The aim of this study, thus, is to investigate how the green policy plans implemented by the municipalities of Zwolle and Groningen differ and promote sustainable development, focusing on the different approaches taken by the two cities. So, which are the approaches taken in the green policy plans of Groningen and Zwolle, and how do these plans contribute to the sustainable development of their municipality?

To answer this research a comparative policy review of Groningen and Zwolle will be done. Also, already existing literature will be used to reflect upon the green policy plans and support relatable concepts. Furthermore, to answer the research question the following sub-questions can be formulated:

- *What are the key goals and objectives outlined in the green policy plans of Groningen and Zwolle?*
- *How do the approaches taken in the policy plans of Groningen and Zwolle differ?*
- *What are the measures introduced by Zwolle and Groningen to promote sustainable development?*

Comparing the green policy plans of Groningen and Zwolle may give more insight into different approaches taken by different municipalities to promote sustainable development. It will also give valuable insight into what actual approaches are taken by municipalities in the Netherlands to tackle specific problems or to reach specific goals.

Following this introduction, the paper will provide a detailed background of Zwolle and Groningen. It will then lay out the theoretical framework, establishing the theoretical basis for the research, followed by an explanation of the conceptual model. The methodology section will describe the methods used for the research and how the data is collected and utilized. This will be followed by an analysis of the data found about the municipalities. After that, the data collected about the municipalities of Zwolle and Groningen will be compared and discussed. The subsequent section will address the limitations, describing how certain research choices may have impacted the results and providing suggestions for future research. Finally, the paper will conclude by summarizing the main findings.

Background

Groningen and Zwolle are two cities located in the northern part of the Netherlands, in Figure 1. the municipalities of Zwolle and Groningen are shown.

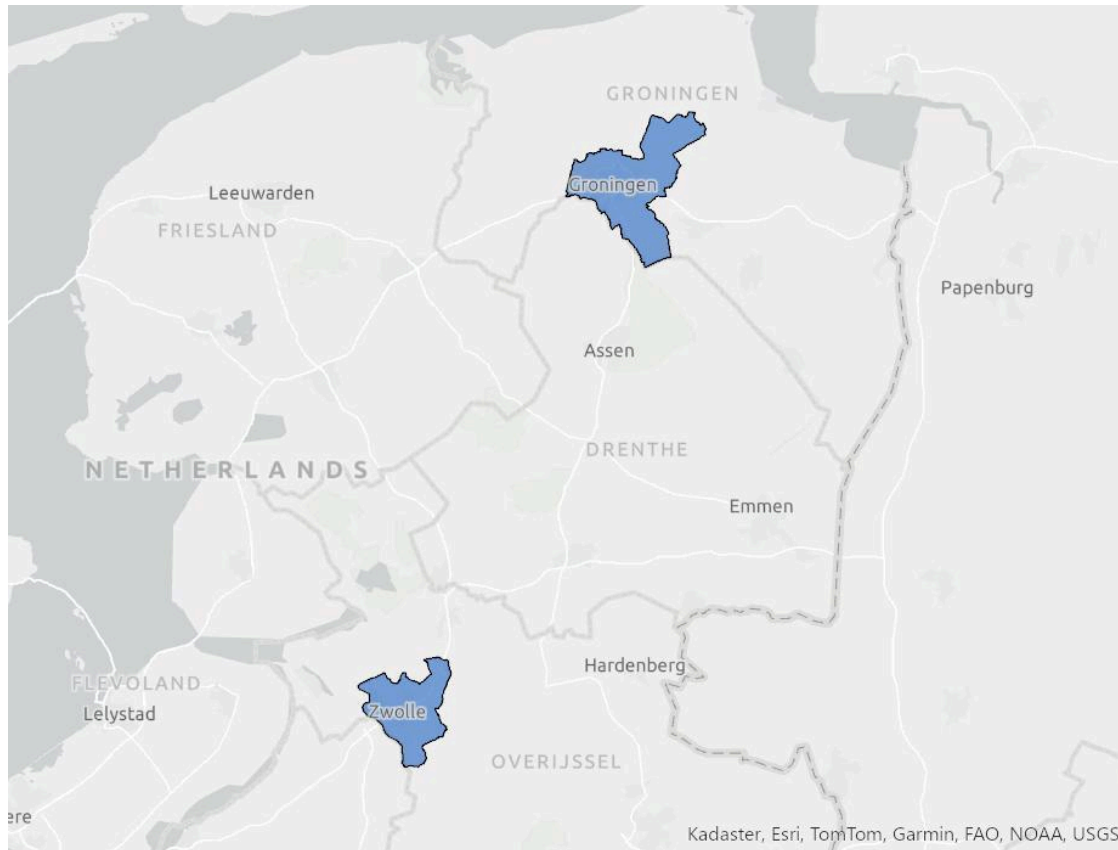


Figure 1. Municipality of Groningen & Zwolle (produced by the author, 2024)

The distance between Groningen and Zwolle is around one hundred kilometres, which means the cities are relatively close. Groningen is number 6 and Zwolle number 19 in the list of biggest municipalities in the Netherlands based on Groningen having around 240000 inhabitants compared to the 130000 inhabitants of Zwolle (AlleCijfers, 2024). Zwolle stands out because of its beautiful location within the landscape and its natural features, making it unique compared to other Dutch cities. Zwolle is situated between several natural areas (Zwolle, 2021). Groningen is known for having the healthiest physical living environment in the Netherlands, but it also deals with a lot of poverty, Groningen is among the poorest municipalities in the Netherlands. (Gemeente Groningen & Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2021). As stated before both cities have an already existing EV, where there is also a focus on sustainable and green development (Zwolle, 2021; Gemeente Groningen & Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2021). The close proximity between Zwolle and Groningen, combined with the existence of a comprehensive environmental plan that clearly emphasizes sustainable development, makes it interesting and feasible to compare these two municipalities. Their distinctive qualities and their relatively big size, despite their proximity, are precisely why they have been chosen for this comparison.

Theoretical framework

Sustainability is a term which is used and mentioned more and more, but what exactly does it mean? The topics around sustainability gained attention around the 1960s-1970s due to resource scarcity and unsustainable patterns of use (Baker, 2015). Also, the anxiety about health issues connected to industrial pollution intensified. Critique of the growth-oriented economic development model, which was introduced in the post-war period, started to gain attention (Baker, 2015). In 1980 the term sustainable development was introduced to the public arena due to the release of the 'World Conservation Strategy' by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (Baker, 2015). According to Baker (2015), this strategy focused on sustainable development was very limited, as it was primarily addressing ecological sustainability instead of linking it also to social and economic issues.



Figure 2. Sustainable Development Goals (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2023)

In 1987 when the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published 'The Common Future' the links between the economic, social and ecological dimensions were addressed. An often-used definition for sustainable development is the definition used in the WCED report also often called the Brundtland report. In the Brundtland report the definition is defined as follows (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 46): "Sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations." In this paper, the focus will be mostly on the ecological dimensions, as we are comparing the green policies taken by Groningen and Zwolle to obtain sustainable development. However, the green policies also affect the social and economic dimensions. We will use the Brundtland definition of sustainable development in this research.

The United Nations created seventeen goals which form the basis of sustainable development, see figure 2 (United Nations, 2024). In the EV of Zwolle, the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations are explicitly mentioned as the goals they strive to achieve (Zwolle, 2021). In the Environmental vision of Groningen sustainable goals just like the ones of the United Nations are mentioned, however, there is no reference to the sustainable development goals of the United Nations specifically (Gemeente Groningen & Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2021). The EV of Zwolle and Groningen is a policy plan, which focuses on how the municipalities want to reach their goals and ambitions for the next ten years. As the focus of this paper is on green (sustainable) policies, the focus is in particular on the goals: good health and well-being, life on land and climate action. However, most of the seventeen sustainable goals are interconnected. For example, good health and well-being are connected to clean water, just as climate action is connected to clean energy and clean water.

The EV is a policy document with a focus on the long term. The EV is flexible in form, allowing each municipality to tailor it according to their ambitions, timeline, and themes (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten (VNG), 2020). The vision is based on the Environmental Law, which includes requirements regarding participation (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten (VNG), 2020). Nevertheless, governments are allowed to develop their own participation policies. Consider factors such as accessibility, representativeness, and engagement. By clearly outlining this in the vision, it becomes evident to all stakeholders how they can contribute and participate in the process (Municipality of Groningen & Strootman Landscape Architects, 2021).

For an effective participation process, certain conditions must be met, such as:

- “1. There must be enough space in the process for participants' input.
2. The organization must be open to input.
3. Participants must be able to provide input” (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten (VNG) et al., 2020).

To clarify what is meant by green policies in this research, it encompasses all policies where greenery is significant, such as those concerning urban green spaces, parks, and private gardens. Additionally, it covers the roles of greenery in climate adaptation, improving the living environment, and its impact on public health. Green spaces have been shown to contribute to the mitigation and adaptation of cities to climate change and serve to be beneficial for air quality, biodiversity and noise reduction (Kabisch et al., 2015). Green/green areas are also shown to be beneficial for physical and mental health (Wüstemann et al., 2017), due to green areas functioning as places for recreation (Wolff & Haase, 2019). Thus, policy plans which lead to greenery may improve the well-being of residents, as well as improve air quality and help adaptation to climate change.

So, as stated before, there is a connection between green and the well-being of residents in a city, which according to Wolch leads to a key question if urban green is distributed equally among people with different social status and ethnicity (Cited in Wolff & Haase, 2019). In other words: is there environmental justice? As mentioned before environmental justice is

about: "maldistribution-the fact that poor communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of colour get fewer environmental goods, more environmental bads, and less environmental protection"(Schlosberg, 2007, p.4). A common issue is that environmental sustainability often has the function of tweaking our already existing green policies instead of being a process which has the power to transform. To be transformative, justice and equity should be embraced at the core of the sustainability movement (Agyeman, 2005). In the Brundtland report the definition of sustainability is said to be “a process of change” and has to “meet human needs” of all (WCED, 1987, p. 46). Showing the important link between environmental justice and sustainable development. This leads to the question: how is environmental justice considered in the policies of Zwolle and Groningen to promote sustainable development? Is it even considered?

Once again, it is visible how the various dimensions are interconnected, with the social and economic dimensions playing a crucial role in the development of the ecological dimension.

Conceptual Model



Figure 3. Conceptual Model (produced by the author, 2024)

The conceptual model (see Figure 3) comprises several components: the goals and ambitions of the municipality, the municipality itself, the community, environmental justice, participation, and the SDGs. This model illustrates the key components from the theoretical framework and their interconnections and is applied to analyze how the green policies of Zwolle and Groningen promote sustainable development. A logical starting point is the goals and ambitions of the municipalities regarding green, which aim to align with the SDGs. Environmental justice is a crucial element for achieving sustainable development, as it ensures that all community members benefit equitably from green policies (Agyeman, 2005). Environmental justice is influenced by the participation of both the community and the municipality. Participation plays a dual role, impacting both the achievement of environmental justice and the attainment of the SDGs.

Methodology

For this thesis qualitative research has been done, as this creates the possibility to analyze text in depth. Specifically, it is chosen for a comparative policy analysis, which can be used to explain differences and similarities between two or more variables (Pickvance, 2001, p.5). For a comparative analysis, two conditions have to be met: "a. Data must be gathered on two or more cases. The cases may be countries, cities, firms or families – the nature of the unit is irrelevant. b. There must be an attempt to explain rather than only to describe." (Pickvance, 2001, p.5). For this research two cases are selected, the municipalities of Zwolle and Groningen. They are compared on how their green policy plans contribute or lead to sustainable development in their area. The green policy documents of Groningen and Zwolle are not identical, however, for comparative analysis, it is enough if they are commensurable (Pickvance, 2001). The municipalities are commensurable based on having similar spatial configuration, climate and population. As there are a lot of different aspects within policy documents regarding green the area of research has to be narrowed down. The green policy documents of Groningen and Zwolle will mainly be compared on environmental justice, public participation and green in urban areas.

Data collection

A significant part of the data collection will be done by thoroughly analyzing the policy plans of Groningen and Zwolle, focusing mainly on the Environmental Visions (EVs) and other significant green plans (Landschapsarchitecten & Gemeente Groningen, 2020; Zwolle, 2021). The starting point for data collection is the EVs of both municipalities. The EVs, however, do not only contain green policies but also cover policies about the entire development of the municipality, so filtering will be necessary. In the EV of Groningen, reference is made to an additional document for green policies, which is the 'Groenplan Vitamine G 2020' (Strootman Landschapsarchitecten & Gemeente Groningen, 2020). For Zwolle, there is also an additional relevant green policy document for this research to be found, the 'Groene Agenda 2015-2025' (Gemeente Zwolle, 2015). All these documents can be found on the websites of their respective municipalities. Data on community participation can be found in the EVs and other associated documents, as well as on the websites of the municipalities of Groningen and Zwolle. Table 1 lists the documents analyzed for data from both municipalities. These documents were chosen for this research as they outline the significant green policy plans, clearly describing the goals and the overall approach toward these goals. Additionally, the websites of both municipalities provide information on public participation initiatives. Secondary data analyses will also be conducted to provide substance and context to the relevant concepts.

Table 1. Analysed Policy documents Groningen & Zwolle

Zwolle:	Groningen:
Omgevingsvisie Zwolle (in English, the Environmental Vision Zwolle)	Omgevingsvisie Groningen (in English, the Environmental Vision Groningen)
Groene agenda 2015-2025 (Revision GDP 1998)	Groenplan Vitamine G 2020
Website of municipality Zwolle	Website of municipality Groningen

Data analysis

The EV contains data on the municipality's ambitions and the types of trends and developments they are dealing with. Additionally, it outlines the strategies to manage these developments and how they aim to achieve their goals (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten (VNG), 2020). Furthermore, the EV includes extensive information on public participation, green in urban areas, climate adaptation, and environmental justice, which all play a role in sustainable development (Landschapsarchitecten & Gemeente Groningen, 2020; Zwolle, 2021). The vision is also designed in a way that promotes sustainable development (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten (VNG), 2020). Since the EV is a comprehensive document that broadly describes the approaches taken, it will serve as the primary data source for comparing Zwolle and Groningen.

The documents "Groene Agenda 2015-2025" and "Groenplan Vitamine G 2020" are more specific green policy documents (Gemeente Zwolle, 2015; Strootman Landschapsarchitecten & Gemeente Groningen, 2020). They delve deeper into the measures regarding greenery compared to the EV, with goals and measures that are more localized and area-specific. These documents expand on the EV by detailing measures to be implemented in specific areas, but they also contain current efforts. These documents will be used to provide additional information on certain approaches of the municipalities. The green policy document "Groene Agenda 2015-2025" from Zwolle is less relevant to this research as it is outdated compared to the EV of Zwolle.

Ethical considerations

In the context of this research, my role is that of an insider, having resided in Zwolle for over 19 years and currently living in Groningen. This insider perspective carries the risk of potential biases and already existing judgements regarding the policies to be reviewed. All data and documents will be stored securely on my personal computer and within the Google storage linked to my Rijksuniversiteit of Groningen Google account. This account offers more enhanced protection than a regular Google account, due to the collaboration between Google and the Rijksuniversiteit of Groningen. However, there is no need for specific disclosure as all the data is collected from publicly accessible sources.

Analysis and Results

Zwolle

The municipality of Zwolle has outlined its key goals and ambitions up to 2030 in the Environmental Vision. Inspired by the United Nations' SDGs, Zwolle's environmental vision centres on sustainable development (Zwolle, 2021). This vision also emphasizes increasing the focus on circularity. Regarding the emphasis on green spaces, there are several developments that Zwolle must consider. As a growing city with a significant housing shortage, the municipality aims to build 1,000 houses per year, which requires a lot of space. Additionally, Zwolle is surrounded by water, including the IJssel River, and climate change is putting pressure on water management, among other issues.

Zwolle's green ambitions include protecting existing green spaces, especially large green areas. More parks will be created as places of rest since the city is becoming increasingly busy, and as much additional greenery as possible will be created in the city. Zwolle also still has a surrounding countryside with a lot of open agricultural land, and the municipality wants to keep this land open. Promoting biodiversity and climate adaptation are also important points of focus.

As a guiding philosophy for creating this vision, the municipality adheres to five self-established principles/rules. In the context of this thesis, three of these principles are relevant:

- Sustainability is central; meeting the needs of the current generation should not come at the expense of future generations.
- The Environmental Vision serves as a guideline; ambitions can be adjusted through a proper process.
- A regional approach is taken, considering regional profiles (Zwolle, 2021).

Zwolle has a significant urban main green structure (see Figure 4). Preserving this structure is promoted by limiting new construction within this area, except for green-related buildings. The focus is primarily on connecting the green areas within the main green structure as effectively as possible. Additionally, Zwolle aims to use greenery to combat climate change in urban areas; the green spaces should act as sponges and reduce heat islands. As Zwolle develops into a denser city, this also means that a higher "density" of greenery needs to be created (Zwolle, 2021).



Figure 4. Stedelijke groenstructuur (Zwolle, 2021)

The development of green spaces in Zwolle was traditionally a municipal task, but there is now a shift towards more involvement from residents and businesses in the city, who are also given the opportunity to contribute (Zwolle, 2021). The creation of the Environmental Vision itself was done in collaboration with residents, strategic partners, and other stakeholders. This was achieved through meetings and discussions. (Gemeente Zwolle, 2020)

Zwolle emphasizes the importance of early stakeholder participation. This means collecting stakeholders' needs early on through conversations and meetings. New insights can then be

translated into solutions. However, it is up to the initiator to guide the participation process appropriately; the initiator can be the municipality itself or another organization. Two key principles are identified for participation:

1. Inclusive approach: everyone should have the opportunity to participate.
2. Time: everyone should have enough time to contribute or express their opinion (Zwolle, 2021).

The municipality aims to further increase the focus on participation and has already started consulting with the Zwolle community. Evaluation questions have been formulated as criteria for a proper participation process: "Are all stakeholders involved, and is participation proportional to the proposal? Is the right subject being addressed, and are all tasks, ambitions, and interests given attention? Has enough time been taken and given? Are the decisions made clear and understandable?" (Zwolle, 2021, p.100)

The municipality also intends to work more regionally to involve local initiators in the development of their areas, such as Zwolle's neighbourhood organizations. A regional approach will help make areas more sustainable. Zwolle also has a participation website: <http://www.zwolle.nl/doemee>. Here, you can find an idea map with ongoing initiatives, such as the creation of facade gardens and community gardens. Residents also have the option to adopt public green spaces (Zwolle, 2021)

It is also mentioned that a division has emerged in society where people living in poverty often reside in areas with less greenery and in poorer housing conditions. There is a clear link between health and the living environment. However, it is stated that the EV is not the place to address this division directly, but it is something that is being considered (Zwolle, 2021).

Groningen

Groningen clearly outlines the developments they foresee regarding green spaces in their EV. As is the case throughout the Netherlands, there is a demand for more housing. Additionally, they note an increasing appreciation for green spaces and a growing emphasis on sustainability and livability. This includes a rising need for high-quality meeting places and an increase in local food production. They also observe more extreme weather conditions and the challenge of addressing heat stress, waterlogging, and prolonged drought. There is also a risk of biodiversity loss, and invasive species are becoming more prevalent. Mechanization in the agricultural sector is leading to biodiversity loss and landscape degradation (Gemeente Groningen & Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2021).

Groningen's strategy regarding green spaces and these leading developments is clearly described. The strategy focuses on improving public spaces to make them accessible and pleasant for everyone. The goal is to create more diverse green areas that are easily accessible and contribute to biodiversity. Rural areas should be reachable within fifteen minutes. The social structure in villages needs to be strengthened, and the experiential and economic value of water should be optimally utilized. Additionally, in ecologically vulnerable areas, the focus is on controlling high recreational pressure. New developments are based on the qualities of the existing and historical landscape. Groningen's focus is less on cars and more on improving walking and cycling routes. Not to be forgotten, they are also working on sustainable developments through climate adaptation and the preservation of nature and biodiversity (Gemeente Groningen & Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2021).

There is a clear focus on increasing green spaces in the city centre. More space is being created for pedestrians and cyclists, including new walking routes. More pedestrian space will be developed throughout the entire municipality in the future. Streets will become attractive green living environments that invite play and social interaction. Parking spaces will be reduced and will not always be directly in front of buildings. Valued existing green spaces, both public and private, will remain open, which is established in the Nature-Inclusive Building policy. Permission will no longer be granted for buildings in the city centre and old neighbourhoods. Planning measures are being investigated to make private spaces more climate-resilient. The municipality's 'green gems' will be made more accessible (Gemeente Groningen & Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2021).

Additionally, the goal is to create 30,000 m² of green space each year. This will be achieved by introducing green areas in places where new homes will be built and by replacing hard surfaces with greenery as much as possible (Strootman Landschapsarchitecten & Gemeente Groningen, 2020).

Residents are encouraged to actively contribute to improving their own living environment. There is an intensive collaboration with residents on neighbourhood and village agendas. Investments are being made in a better democratic process, where different interests are considered early on. Groningen also invests in innovative forms of participation by experimenting with methods of direct local democracy (Gemeente Groningen & Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2021). The municipality has numerous projects where residents can take the initiative to set up their own green projects. Under the Edible Groningen project, over 70 initiatives have already been started to grow fruits and vegetables with neighbours in community gardens. Through Operation Steenbreek, 400 facade gardens have been created, and 200 roofs have been greened. For the green plan Vitamine G, residents were able to submit ideas. Residents and social organizations were invited to improve the green plan. (Gemeente Groningen & Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2021)

In Groningen, a high quality of life is linked to a social mission. Efforts are being made to create an inclusive, undivided municipality. Groningen has many neighbourhoods and people living in or near poverty. It is in these areas that an attractive living environment needs to be created, as this attracts new activities and job opportunities. Groningen aims to reduce social disparities, which are particularly prevalent in northern neighbourhoods (with much corporate-owned housing). These areas suffer from reduced livability and residents face lagging health outcomes. To address this, a robust multi-year approach has been developed under the 'Livability and Safety' program by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) (Gemeente Groningen & Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2021).

They also emphasize promoting a healthy population and the importance of supporting vulnerable groups, highlighting the significant role of public spaces in this effort. There is an opportunity here to improve health and quality of life, as these spaces are ideal for sports, social interactions, and play. Greenery and sufficient space contribute to this. Groningen actively seeks to tackle poverty. By making the environment attractive and creating jobs, poverty can be alleviated (Strootman Landschapsarchitecten & Gemeente Groningen, 2020).

Discussion

Looking at the municipalities of Zwolle and Groningen in terms of developments and corresponding ambitions, we see clear similarities. Both Zwolle and Groningen are dealing with climate adaptive measures to combat heat stress, waterlogging, and drought. Both municipalities also face a housing shortage, which requires space and calls for creative solutions regarding green spaces and the protection of existing green areas. Additionally, many trends, such as the growing interest in local food, are present in both municipalities. This is not surprising, considering the distance between Zwolle and Groningen is only an hour by car.

However, there are also differences between the municipalities based on what is outlined in their EVs and their main green policy plans. The differences lie mainly in the extent to which each municipality focuses on certain issues in the discussed documents. Zwolle focuses heavily on maintaining the main green structure that surrounds and runs through the municipality, given Zwolle's unique position relative to many natural areas, which is a significant characteristic of the city. In Groningen's vision, there is a clearer focus on poverty, as the municipality simply has a higher rate of poverty compared to other municipalities like Zwolle. Therefore, the differences are primarily created by the unique context and challenges of each municipality.

Zwolle and Groningen are increasingly experiencing that residents and local businesses actively want to help improve their living environment. Both municipalities discuss in their policy plans that they promote this by starting projects where residents can take the initiative themselves. Additionally, both municipalities find it important to give timely attention and space to various interests. Both municipalities already collaborate with neighbourhood organizations and indicate that they are working on an even better democratic process. Zwolle delves more into how they want to improve the participation process compared to Groningen in the discussed policy plans. Zwolle intends to introduce the following evaluation questions as criteria for a sound participation process: "Are all stakeholders involved, and is participation proportionate to the proposal? Is it about the right subject, and are all tasks, ambitions, and interests given attention? Has enough time been taken and given? Are the decisions made clear and understandable?" (Zwolle, 2021, p.100). Zwolle also wants to focus more on area-specific solutions to better involve different stakeholders in projects. As previously mentioned, three conditions must be met for a good participation process:

1. Early input
2. Openness to input
3. Participants must be able to provide input (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten (VNG) et al., 2020).

Both municipalities, according to the text, meet these points. However, there is something that neither municipality describes. It is also important that all 'groups' of people participate in the

participation process, not just certain groups. It is not made clear how both municipalities ensure that this is the case. However, this is crucial for getting a comprehensive view of all interests. Groups that do not participate on their own could be motivated by a system of compensation for an interview (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten et al., 2020).

Both Zwolle and Groningen, as previously mentioned, strive for more greenery in urban areas by replacing pavement with greenery as much as possible and expanding and protecting existing green spaces. The difference between the municipalities in their policy plans is mainly reflected in their approach. Groningen, being a true "cycling city," emphasizes creating more space and greenery in the city by prioritizing space for cyclists and pedestrians and limiting the use of cars in the city. Zwolle, on the other hand, takes less drastic measures in reducing car usage to create space. In Zwolle's vision, we see that the focus is much more on protecting existing natural values and green structures, with connecting these green structures described as an important ambition. Both municipalities also focus on using greenery in urban areas as a tool to combat heat stress and floods.

When we then look at the third point of comparison, environmental justice, we see a significant difference between the two municipalities. Groningen takes a clear stance in its plans towards reducing social inequality. The city explicitly acknowledges the presence of neighbourhoods where many people live in poverty, especially in the northern neighbourhoods, and focuses on creating attractive living environments to attract new activities and employment opportunities. Groningen emphasizes that public spaces, including greenery, play an important role in promoting a healthy population and the importance of vulnerable groups. Zwolle, on the other hand, only briefly mentions that it is an important issue but then states that the EV is not the place to address this. This is, of course, the municipality of Zwolle's own choice, as the EV is structure-free, and the themes can be determined independently (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten, 2020). However, Zwolle does mention in the EV that the vision is based on the SDGs, in which poverty and reducing inequality are central (Zwolle, 2021). This raises the question of why poverty and social inequality are not treated as important themes. Especially since equality should be at the core of the sustainability movement for it to be transformative (Agyeman, 2005).

Sustainability is central to both Zwolle and Groningen's green policies. Both municipalities emphasize the importance that interventions for present-day people should not disadvantage future generations, which is also part of the United Nations' definition of sustainable development (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This is reflected, among other things, in the protection of existing greenery, the focus on climate adaptation, and reducing car usage. Groningen also incorporates the element of equality for everyone. Zwolle, on the other hand, aims to become even more sustainable by seeking area-specific solutions and increasing the focus on circularity. Both municipalities also recognize the importance of public participation in achieving sustainable development.

Limitations and Future Prospects

Limitations

One of the limitations of this thesis is that the focus is only on a few documents, which include the green policies of both municipalities. However, there are many other documents related to green policies, such as specific documents for tree planting/maintenance, which were not included in the analysis. Due to the sizing and time constraints, the decision was made to focus mainly on the EV of both municipalities and the major structural municipal plans related to the environment. Consequently, some specific aspects of green policies may not be thoroughly addressed.

For Future Research

In future research, studies can broaden the selection of green policy documents from the municipalities to potentially uncover new differences and similarities between Groningen and Zwolle. By broadening the selection of documents reviewed, researchers may gain deeper insights into the unique approaches and strategies employed by each municipality in their green policies.

Conclusion

All with all the environmental visions and green policies of the municipalities of Groningen and Zwolle reveal similarities and distinctive approaches based on their unique local context and challenges. Examining how the municipalities approach their green policies provides insights into how they contribute to sustainable development. Both municipalities are trying to tackle climate change and housing shortages, these similar ambitions reflect their geographic proximity and the common challenges both municipalities have to deal with. Noticeable differences are found in their focus areas and strategies.

Both municipalities mention an increasing role of residents and local businesses wanting to influence the living environment. Various projects are being promoted that allow residents to take initiative and ensure that all interests are considered. Zwolle provides a more in-depth and detailed framework when it comes to the criteria for the participation process and the evaluation of the process.

In terms of urban greenery, both municipalities use it to combat climate change among other things, which promotes sustainable development. However, their methods to make their urban areas more climate resilient and green differ. Groningen is a cycling city and is emphasizing on promoting walking and cycling while limiting car usage to create more space and greenery. Zwolle is less focused on reducing car usage and is more focused on protecting, linking and expanding their existing natural values and green structures.

When it comes to the treatment of environmental justice in the policy documents reviewed there is a significant difference. Groningen explicitly aims to address social inequalities through its green policies. The presence of poverty-hit neighborhoods is acknowledged and the focus on improving the living environment to attract new activities and improve employment opportunities is a theme stated as important in their Environmental Vision. Zwolle does however not prioritize this within the scope of its Environmental Vision. This raises questions as environmental justice plays an important part in sustainable development on which the Environmental Vision of Zwolle is based.

Both municipalities emphasize sustainability in their approaches, as they mention their approaches should not disadvantage future generations, which aligns with the United Nations' definition of sustainable development. Groningen however integrates equality into its sustainability efforts, while Zwolle seems to focus more on area-specific solutions and the process of public participation. Both recognize the critical role of public participation in achieving sustainable development, underscoring the need for inclusive and comprehensive engagement processes. In the end, this comparative analysis of Groningen and Zwolle highlights the varied approaches to sustainable development, regarding the distinct characteristics and needs of each municipality.

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