

Willingness to Cooperate of Dutch Agricultural Stakeholders in the Nitrogen Debate

University of Groningen

Faculty of Spatial Sciences

Author: Rick Fuhler (s3756955)

Course: Bachelor Project HGP

Supervisor: Dr. Yongjun Zhao

Date: 6/11/2021

Abstract

This research examines the relations between a faulty stakeholder management in the context of the Dutch nitrogen crisis and the willingness of the agricultural stakeholders to cooperate in future negotiations. A qualitative research method with a semi-structured interview layout is chosen to measure feelings, emotions, and experiences of the agricultural stakeholders effectively. The interviews resulted in notions of a lack of transparency, lack of inclusion of the agricultural stakeholders, and a lack of communication. This, however, did not affect the willingness to cooperate of the agricultural sector in future negotiations and, among some of the interviewees, even led to a higher willingness to cooperate. This can be explained by the fact that farmers have to defend their future incomes and that the associations represent the interests of the farmers. However, the relations between agricultural stakeholders and the authorities have worsened significantly by ineffective and overambitious policies.

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1. Introduction

The Dutch Nitrogen Crisis started in 2019 when the European Court of Rule ruled that the Dutch active nitrogen policy was not in line with the European Habitat Directive. It was perceived that too much nitrogen landed in the Dutch Natura 2000 regions (Greenfish, 2019). To bring back the emission of nitrogen, the Dutch government imposed drastic measures on the agricultural and construction sector. Furthermore, the current nitrogen policy – the so-called PAS regulations - would not be a foundation anymore on which building permits were approved, leading to a halt in various (big) projects, including enlargements of farms (Tweede Kamer, 2019). Being surprised by the sudden measures imposed on them, the farmers saw no stable future when statements about a 50% decrease of the cattle stock started to be mentioned in parliament, as well as the buy-out of large cattle farmers near Natura 2000 regions. As a result, the agricultural sector started going into protest. The protests dragged on for several months before a temporary “solution” was found, which many did not find satisfactory.

From the above, it is clear that the management process towards a satisfactory solution was not optimal. Various stakeholders felt betrayed by their government and argued that the government could have seen this coming (the overruling of PAS) (NOS, 2019). Since the current nitrogen measures are only temporary, it is interesting to predict how future negotiations about new nitrogen measures will develop. The current measures exist out of changing the diet of cattle, offering subsidies to build more sustainable stables, buy-out cattle farms near Natura 2000 areas, and offering farmers the option to switch to another career (Rijksoverheid, 2021).

Former negotiations did not go satisfactory, as perceived by the agricultural stakeholders (NOS, 2019), as their interests are not reflected in the current measures, and could thus be defined as 'stakeholder mismanagement.' This research will focus on to what extent the specific group of agricultural stakeholders are willing to cooperate in future negotiations.

Moreover, it will identify the stakeholder management process's weaknesses to learn a valuable lesson on why such upheaval and farmer protests arose in the Netherlands. Scientific literature up until this point has investigated what good stakeholder management is and how it should be organized. However, much less is known about what happens when the result is not satisfactory when stakeholders start to protest and what influence this might have on the stakeholders' motivations to strive towards a feasible plan. This research is aiming at filling that gap in the literature.

Sustainable development projects and initiatives often fail because of the lack of influence from relevant stakeholders. Also, the identification of stakeholders can be a problematic threshold in sustainable development projects to overcome. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that identifying relevant stakeholders and planning towards a possible result in cooperation with the stakeholders is crucial for development projects to achieve a desirable result that suits all. Firstly, it is essential to know what a stakeholder is. The International Organization for Standardization (2012) defines a 'stakeholder' as a "Person, group or organization that has an interest in, or can affect, affected by, or perceive itself to be affected by, any aspect of the project." This definition is holistic and might therefore make the identification of possible stakeholders a long and complicated process. Simultaneously, such a holistic understanding is considered one of the fundamental sustainability concepts (Linnenluecke et al., 2009).

As mentioned previously, this research aims at filling in the knowledge gap that exists concerning a faulty stakeholder management process, and in that way, to address to what extent such a flawed process influences the behavior of the stakeholders concerning their future relations. A 'faulty stakeholder management process, or, put simply, 'stakeholder mismanagement' arises when the project management, often being the initiator of the project, fails at the following points: Identifying stakeholders; understanding the needs, expectations, and concerns of stakeholders; interpreting the power and interest levels of stakeholders; engaging stakeholders early; identifying and managing stakeholder risks (Silvius & Schipper, 2019).

2. Research Problem

The key question that this research aims to answer is: "How did the willingness to cooperate of the agricultural stakeholders in the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis change due to an unsatisfactory stakeholder management process?" The "willingness to cooperate" could be defined as the extent to which a stakeholder is prepared to engage in and contribute to finding a satisfactory outcome in the project. A project or plan has a satisfactory outcome when the stakeholders' perceived interests are being taken into account during the implantation of the project or plan. One can thus not see from the eye whether or not a project or plan is satisfactory. Instead, satisfaction is subjective to every stakeholder and can thus not be examined by quantitative analysis but only through qualitative interviews. The aim is not to construct a new theory about stakeholder mismanagement but to examine the specific case of the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis and identify why such a process, in the context of a democratic country, did not meet the interests of the agricultural stakeholders. Then, we have to define which elements 'the willingness to cooperate' influence. These elements might be subjective and are thus to be found in the interviews. Nevertheless, literature that examines relevant cases related closely to the stakeholder management process – towards sustainability – is also discussed.

From the main research question, the following sub-questions can be logically derived. The first one being: "How transparent was the stakeholder management process, as perceived by the agricultural stakeholders?". The theoretical framework that follows in the next section of this paper identifies transparency as a prerequisite for a successful stakeholder management process. The project management must communicate their plans to the stakeholders. Also, stakeholders should be aware of each other's interests in the project. A lack of transparency could lead to stakeholders feeling that they are not included in the project, which could alter the willingness to cooperate towards a solution in the stakeholder management process. A lack of transparency or communication between the project management and stakeholders also has complications to what extent the stakeholders' interests are represented in the project. The protests in the Netherlands were a result of a lack of stakeholder influence. So the next question that then arises is: "Why are the interests of the agricultural stakeholders not represented in the measures imposed concerning the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis?".

Another hurdle in the stakeholder management process is the assessment of the power that the stakeholders may have. If the project plans are not designed according to power differences among stakeholders, there is a high chance of failure in the stakeholder management process. While a farmer might be an individual with little power, farmers can unite themselves to achieve a higher level of power, as is the case in the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis. The protests are an example of united power, in which the farmers were collectively able to disrupt the daily activities in the Netherlands. The next question then becomes: "Why did the management not account for power differences among stakeholders in the stakeholder management process?". As the theoretical framework will soon point out, the stakeholder management process is all about relations and maintaining good relations as the project progresses. In order to assess the willingness to cooperate of the different stakeholders, it is crucial to evaluate these relations among the stakeholders and identify how they changed as a result of the stakeholder management process. Therefore, the next sub-question is brought up: "How did the relations between agricultural stakeholders and the government change as a result of the process in the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis?" The research questions are listed below for clarity.

Main Research Question	How did the willingness to cooperate of the agricultural stakeholders in the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis change due to an unsatisfactory stakeholder management process?
Sub-Research Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How transparent was the stakeholder management process, as perceived by the agricultural stakeholders? • Why are the interests of the agricultural stakeholders not represented in the measures imposed concerning the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis? • Why did the authorities not account for power differences among stakeholders in the stakeholder management process? • How did the relations between agricultural stakeholders and the authorities change as a result of the process in the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis?

Table 1 – Research Questions

3. Theoretical Framework

Evidence has been found that a decision-making process with active stakeholder participation enhances the quality of environmental decisions (Reed, 2008) and enhances public trust towards the authorities or other project management organizations (Richards et al., 2004). Silvius and Schipper (2019) proposed multiple frameworks for the stakeholder management process, beginning with identifying stakeholders. They argued that it is crucial to include stakeholders that are affected while implementing the plans and beyond the implementation of the stakeholder feels that it is affected then. Therefore, it is crucial to identify stakeholders from a top-down perspective, as well as a bottom-up perspective, where the bottom-up method allows the stakeholder analysis to better reflect the perceptions and interests of the stakeholders themselves (Hare & Pahl-Wostl, 2002). Silvius and Schipper continue by assessing the stakeholders by the type of interest in the project. Transparency is a prerequisite in communicating the differing interests of the various stakeholders. The level of interest in the project is assessed, which will play a role in further negotiations. It is essential in any participatory process to align the differing interests of the stakeholders through the negotiations mentioned above. Negotiations might be cumbersome but can enhance cooperation and relation-building between the stakeholders, leading to an outcome that is much more tailored to the stakeholders' needs and wishes (Lynam et al., 2007). Silvius and Schipper conclude by proposing a framework that also considers the level of engagement and the relevant activities that come with it in the management process. The result is a comprehensive framework that states the stakeholders' interests when they are likely to be affected the most and their interest in the project. As well as the expectations that the various stakeholders have towards each other.

The list of prerequisites that emerge from these frameworks is used to assess where it went wrong in the process of the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis. Where the level of engagement is an abstract term, Rowe and Frewer (2000) give a more tangible definition by identifying three different types of engagement between stakeholders. The first type is "communication," in which information is shared with the stakeholders. The next level is "consultation", where information is being asked from stakeholders. And last, there is "participation", which is a two-way communication between stakeholders and the management.

While Silvius and Schipper's work is mainly theoretical, Rowlinson and Cheung (2008), albeit being embedded in managerial sciences, brought stakeholder participation and engagement to practice to see what the experiences of stakeholders are in development projects. Their work focused more on the interaction between the project management and the various stakeholders, which is the next step after the identification. Rowlinson and Cheung concluded that it is crucial to involve stakeholders from the get-go when the first plans come onto the table, as this is essential for high quality and durable outcomes (Reed et al., 2006). Once more, Rowlinson and Cheung plead for transparency, not only between the stakeholders' differing viewpoints and interests but also from the management towards the stakeholders, which was confirmed in Rowlinson and Cheung's interviews. The views on the project's success were heavily influenced by the level of empowerment given to the stakeholders by the management.

The framework proposed by Silvius and Schipper (2019) will help classify the interests of the stakeholders. This will form a deeper understanding of the motivation and the level of willingness to cooperate in future negotiations concerning the nitrogen crisis. The theoretical framework of Rowlinson and Cheung (2008), on the other hand, will help evaluate the

process of stakeholder management and indicates where mismatches in the process originated from, despite the work of Rowlinson and Cheung being more apparent in managerial sciences. Furthermore, their framework stresses relations, which is a fundamental part of this research. Together with interviews with multiple stakeholders, these two frameworks will sketch a clear picture of how the stakeholder management process went, where mismatches originated from, and if the stakeholders' willingness to cooperate in the future has changed due to that same process.

The stakeholder management process framework is, up until now, all about bringing the stakeholders together and start working towards a feasible compromise. It is argued that a participatory process anticipates on ironing out unsatisfactory outcomes before they become apparent (Newig, 2007). However, little attention has been paid to the power difference that may be present among the stakeholders. For example, a big firm may have more effective means and power to influence the plan or overrule it, leading to declining levels of engagement, as Broad et al. (2007) found to be the case in water management in Brazil. Garvare and Johansson (2010) are aware of these power differences and, therefore, introduce the terms 'primary stakeholder' and 'secondary stakeholder.' 'Primary stakeholders' are the most influential stakeholders (e.g., multinational firms) that could have more power in the process or even veto-power. Subsequently, 'secondary stakeholders' are, for example, local business owners or citizens.

Another important aspect in stakeholder management is the use of scientific knowledge in the decision-making process (Hage et al., 2010). Making decisions in the stakeholder management process derived from scientific knowledge of the problem at hand seems to positively impact the attitude of stakeholders (Chase et al., 2004, p. 635). Maas and colleagues (2020) measured the attitude of farmers towards a more biodiversity-friendly management model in the agricultural sector. They found that educated-, male-, and conventional farmers perceived environmentally-friendly agricultural management as less important than highly educated organic farmers.

4. Conceptual Model

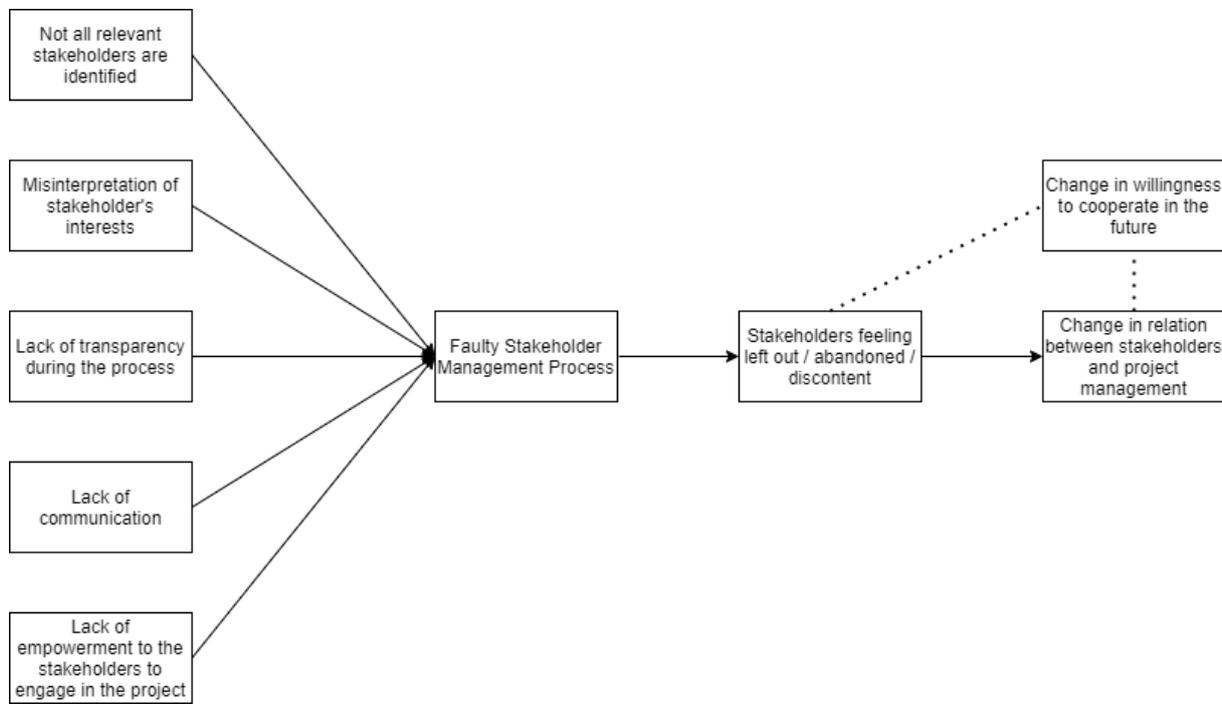


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of a faulty stakeholder management process and its influence on the willingness to cooperate of the various stakeholders in the future.

The conceptual model above reflects the prerequisites of good stakeholder management and shows that a faulty stakeholder management process is the result if any of these are not being taken into account. Consequently, stakeholders might feel left out of the process and become discontent with the result and overall stakeholder management process. Relations between the stakeholders and the project management might change as a result. Also can be seen from the conceptual model that it hypothesizes a change in the willingness to cooperate in the future. This research aims to find how the willingness to cooperate changes and how this might influence the stakeholders' stance in future negotiations.

The sub-question stated earlier are meant to guide the research through the conceptual model. The sub-question "How transparent was the stakeholder management process, as perceived by the stakeholder?" is meant to identify where it went wrong in the management process. This sub-question relates closely to the prerequisites of a good stakeholder management process, as stated in the conceptual model, and allows for modification to include notions of empowerment and communication, as these are based on the principle of transparency (Silvius & Schipper, 2019). The sub-question "Why are the differing interests of the stakeholders not represented in the current measures of the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis?" also relates to empowerment and communication and is more analytical. Interviewees are invited to elaborate more on their perceptions of why their interests were not included. This sub-question forms the link between a flawed stakeholder management process and feelings of being abandoned as a result. Then the question "Why did the management not account for power differences among the stakeholders?" builds further on the previous sub-question by investigating why the stakeholders could not find a compromise in the project. This question

forms the link between stakeholder's experiences and the change in relations. The last sub-question, "How did the relations between stakeholders and management change as a result of the process?" is in the conceptual model linked to the willingness to cooperate.

5. Methodology

This paper aims to examine how past experiences of the nitrogen debate in the Netherlands among farmers influenced their view of the government and their willingness to cooperate in the future. Because of this focus on experiences and motivations, a qualitative approach has been chosen consisting of semi-structured interviews among agricultural stakeholders. Agricultural stakeholders are chosen here as the nitrogen debate is a national phenomenon of which a sampling of all relevant stakeholders in the debate is beyond the scope of this research. The agricultural stakeholders are invited to participate via e-mail, and in some occasions, by phone. The goal was to get through them into contact with other agricultural stakeholders who are motivated to talk about the subject also known as the snowballing method. This resulted in ten interviews in total, of which six in-depth interviews and four interviews that were more orientational. Therefore the six in-depth interviews are presented in the Results section of this paper.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and lasted on average for 35 minutes, with the shortest being 23 minutes and the longest 55 minutes. Every interview started with some general questions that let the agricultural stakeholders introduce themselves and elaborate on how they were involved in the nitrogen debate. For the farmers, this also served to identify what kind of farm they had (biological or conventional) and how big. The main topics covered in the interviews included their overall vision of the nitrogen policy that is currently active, how the nitrogen policy influenced the stakeholders, and how they were informed about the plans. Deeper questions about experiences and perceptions of the process were asked shortly after. The topics discussed here were: a reflection of the stakeholder management process, the opinion of agricultural stakeholders on the government, and the level of trust in the government. Last but not least, interviewees were asked to what extent they feel that future negotiations are possible and if they would be willing to cooperate in making plans for the future.

All interviews were recorded, and the essential parts and take-away points are transcribed. Initials are used instead of full names to protect the privacy of the interviewees. Also, the organization of two of the interviewees is not mentioned for privacy reasons as well. All related content concerning a specific topic (e.g., transparency) is grouped to analyze the difference or similarity effectively in perceptions, emotions, and viewpoints about the nitrogen debate and its stakeholder management process. Quotations are picked from these transcriptions and displayed in the results section to illustrate the stances and perceptions of the interviewees. The results are split by topic so that the reader can get a convenient overview of differing perceptions per topic.

This research aims not to develop a new theory relating to a flawed stakeholder management process but rather to examine the Dutch case of the Nitrogen Crisis at a policy level, which indirectly affects future spatial plans regarding sustainable development. Instead, the aim is to identify if the willingness to cooperate of the stakeholders has changed due to the stakeholder process, and if so, why that is the case. Worthy to note is that the interviews were held online because of COVID-19 regulations imposed by the Dutch government.

6. Results

I examine here what influence the flawed stakeholder management process of the Dutch nitrogen crisis has had on the agricultural stakeholder in the Netherlands and their willingness to cooperate. The six in-depth interviews are being discussed and analyzed in this results section by grouping the responses by topic. First, the overall vision of the stakeholders on the problem is discussed, followed by an overview of the answers given concerning transparency, involvement, trust in the government, and the willingness to cooperate. The table below gives a brief overview of the interviewees.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Occupation / Role</u>	<u>Interview Length</u>	<u>Region (Province)</u>
M.H.	62	Male	Conventional Farmer / Camping Owner	0:23:21	Friesland
A.W.	25	Male	Biological Farmer	0:36:56	Groningen
G.Z.	56	Male	Biological Farmer	0:29:35	Groningen
N.M.	38	Female	Conventional Farmer	0:34:09	Gelderland
R.M.	28	Male	Chairman of a Young Farmers' Association	0:54:48	Utrecht
T.R.	52	Male	Chairman of a Nitrogen Cooperation	0:40:18	Noord-Holland

Table 2 – List of interviewees

6.1 Vision on the Nitrogen Crisis

The first few questions of the semi-structured interviews covered the respondents' vision of the Nitrogen Crisis. Do they acknowledge that there is a problem in the first place? And if not, why not? There were some mixed answers. For example, M.H., a conventional farmer from Friesland, said that the problem surrounding nitrogen emissions is created by ourselves. He is skeptical about the purpose of Natura 2000 areas, which are coined with the "characteristic Dutch landscape". M.H. gave examples that Natura 2000 areas are nothing more than eroded farmlands, and he thus questions why those are seen as natural areas, and his own pastures as production areas. Biological farmer A.W. from Groningen also struggles with the term "nature" and argues that this term is very much idealized by city-dwellers to be uncontrolled wild areas, while in fact they are very much controlled by, for example, the Dutch Forestry Commission. He goes on by saying that the natural areas in the Netherlands exist out of vegetation and wildlife that, without protection would not survive in present times, but which we want to protect as they historically used to appear in the Netherlands. Therefore he finds it unfair that farmers are to blame for the acidification of the soils combined with the disappearance of historic species while these species need strict monitoring anyway. He adds that at the same time, he, together with other farmers from the region, is trying to achieve higher levels of biodiversity on his farmland. However, that typical farmland is seen to be boring.

So, according to the vision of the farmers, the problem originates with what we deem to be nature and whatnot. N.M., a conventional female farmer from Gelderland, countered with

the question: "What is nature to you?". She says that farmland is just as much nature as any other green area in the Netherlands, but adds that they are not seen as such as they often cannot be accessed by visitors. Recent years have seen an increase in farmers opening up their farms for visitors. For example, G.Z., a biological farmer from Groningen, has done so. In the first place, he decided to open up his farm for visitors to educate children, but also adults, on what an average day looks like at a medium-scaled (biological) farm. In such a way, the place of production also shifts to a place of consumption, where people can enjoy the farm and its pastries. M.H. also anticipated on this shift from production to consumption, and his wife is leading a camping across the street on the banks of the Tjeukemeer. For future research, it would be interesting to see if visitors of such farm related activities would describe farmland more often with the term "nature".

However, the definition of "nature" is not the only concern. R.M., chairman of an association for young farmers and gardeners, explains that the measurement of nitrogen deposition in areas is also a reason for farmers to be skeptical about the problem. He says that these "measurements" are, in fact, just standard formulas that are being calculated, instead of actual measurements of the nitrogen deposition in a nature area. R.M. firmly believes that the deposition is skewed to the higher end because of these formulas and strives for justice in the sense of independent research. He also adds that the Wageningen University has conducted such research and shows that nitrogen emissions are, under certain conditions, much lower than we think it is, but that the authorities are not using this research in policy negotiations.

Furthermore, R.M. is skeptical about the role of the farmers in the Nitrogen Debate and thinks that they are not the only ones to blame. He says that nitrogen is not bound to national borders and that nitrogen deposition is a cross-border issue. Moreover, G.Z. argues that the industry is to blame as well, but that the government always protects them. Whereas most interviewees were skeptical about the issue at hand, T.R., chairman of a nitrogen cooperation, is more laid down. He said that "it is what it is" and that it is something that is going to be worked with for several decades. In contrary to other interviewees, T.R. seems to be more accepting of the problem.

6.2 Transparency

As seen in the theoretical framework section, a lack of transparency about the process is one of the main ingredients for a failed stakeholder management process. Therefore interviewees were asked to what extent they were informed about progress in the negotiations. The interviewees mentioned that they are generally well-informed about the latest updates but that it is much information that they would have to keep track of, especially for M.H., who is closely involved with the process. He mentions that it is hard to keep track of all information as being a farmer is a 24/7 job and that he has to attend several meetings in a week as well, not only meetings that are focused around the Nitrogen Debate. G.Z., who is not directly involved in the process, argues that it is all hard to follow as drafts are published with much jargon. He also adds that it is one bureaucratic mess to him. Other farmers share his opinions as he talked about one of his friends quit being a farmer and started working in construction because he did not like his profession anymore due to complex rules and regulations. A.W. says that there is much paperwork involved in the new plans and that it would decrease the charm of the profession.

While the information is readily available on the internet for all stakeholders to access, most do not read the documents for several reasons. For example, time restrictions, excessive use

of jargon, or the inability to find the documents in the first place. However, the associations such as the young farmers and gardeners association of R.M. are trying their best to get all the information across to their members. They publish explanation blogs, opinion pieces, and other relevant work on their website and sent it to their members via newsletters. Besides, information and knowledge are spread via conventions and member meetings in pre-COVID times. All in all, R.M. feels that his association is doing an excellent job in getting information across and sees it as one of their core activities.

6.3. Involvement

Transparency is only one part of a successful stakeholder management process as it stands for a one-way conversation of spreading information and knowledge. On the other hand, active involvement and participation stand for a two-way conversation with mutual participation between the management, or authorities, and the stakeholders. Of the interviewees in this research, two farmers were involved in the process by actively participating in (regional) meetings, namely M.H. and A.W. Also, the association for young farmers and gardeners is actively involved in the nitrogen debate and often publishes statements and drafts of its own proposals. Of these interviewees, A.W. was the most critical about the process and stated that the tone of the authorities during regional stakeholder meetings was quite condescending in his opinion. Moreover, he adds that the plans are made according to the policymakers' knowledge and not according to that of the farmers. A.W. follows up by saying that this leads to unrealistic and overambitious plans based on theory and not on practicality. He names the example of building regulations for stables, which in the future would store excess nitrogen below the floor. However, A.W. argues that this would pose severe health and safety issues.

R.M. of the young farmers and gardeners association stresses that overambitious plans are incredibly stressful for young farmers who just acquired or took over a farm. Also, he adds that the uncertainty of how regulation will play out in practice adds extra stress for young farmers. He, therefore, pleads for more clarity about the practicalities of the plans. Where M.H. and A.W. were involved in regional meetings, the young farmers and gardeners association is involved on a national scale. The influence of R.M. and his colleagues is somewhat limited compared to the more prominent organizations such as LTO. The most they can do is influence the process by lobbying among national politicians. From this, it seems that the influence of the farmers on national politics, and thus national decision-making, is almost non-existent. Especially when you consider that employees of the LTO are also often not educated in the agricultural sector, as T.R. from the nitrogen cooperation explains. So a two-way mutual conversation may be the case on the regional scale, but it becomes a different story when we zoom out to the national scale.

6.4. Trust and Willingness to Cooperate

A lack of trust between the stakeholders can be a massive barrier in the stakeholder management process. Except for T.R. from the nitrogen cooperation, all interviewed stakeholders explicitly said that they lost at least some trust in the authorities because of how the process went. However, as G.Z. mentioned, there was little trust to begin with, as he feels that farmers have been the scapegoats several more times in other problems. The main question of this research is how the willingness to cooperate in the future changes due to the

unsatisfactory stakeholder management process. R.M. from the young farmers and gardeners association was very clear about this and stated that it is the purpose of his association to stand up for the rights and interests of its members. Moreover, he is willing to stay involved or try to stay involved in the process until a satisfactory and realistic solution is found. So even though the process is long, challenging, and complex, there is no room for associations to stop practicing influence on the process. However, it is notable that relations between the agricultural sector and the authorities have worsened over the past few years.

Interestingly enough, also the individual farmers said that their willingness to cooperate has not declined. M.H. stated that he is even more motivated to talk about his interests in stakeholder meetings. N.M. and G.Z., both not directly involved in such meetings, said that if their interests were not reflected in the process, they would go into protest again without a problem. So even because of all the hassle in past negotiations, it seems that the agricultural sector is still as motivated enough, or maybe even more motivated, to take place around the negotiation table.

7. Discussion

Because the Nitrogen Crisis being a national problem, a specific focus on what seems like the most negatively impacted stakeholder group in the process has been chosen to examine if their willingness to cooperate in future negotiations has changed. The main reason why such a focus has been chosen is because of time constraints and the complexity of the problem. Another limitation of this study is that big organizations such as the LTO said they could not participate in the research as negotiations are still ongoing. At the same time, they are identified as a prominent national organization with a significant footprint in Dutch politics. From the above can be concluded that significant power differences exist between the different organizations that have a stake in the Nitrogen Debate. This also became apparent in the interviews where individual farmers were delegated to the regional authorities to discuss their interest in the debate. These talks were used mainly by the local authorities for consultancy and can thus not be classified as a two-way mutual conversation about the problem at hand. Fischer and Young (2007) offer a reasonable explanation for why these were not two-way conversations. They argue that stakeholders without enough (perceived) technical expertise about the problem are directed towards other levels of engagement. The Nitrogen Crisis could be considered a technical debate, but whether or not this is why local farmers do not have a significant influence on national decision-making has to be found in future research.

Hare and Pahl-Wostl (2002) argued that a bottom-up method of stakeholder management results in a better reflection of the interests from the stakeholders in a certain project. The interviewees were not fully convinced that such a bottom-up process was conducted in the case of the Dutch Nitrogen Crisis. As a result, the statement by Hare and Pahl-Wostl is strengthened in this case, as the interviewees pointed out that their interests are not reflected to a satisfactory amount in the process. Moreover the process, the regional meetings which two of the interviewees attended, cannot be classified as a two-way conversation or “participatory engagement” as Rowe and Frewer (2000) coined it. Instead, the meetings were used mainly for consultation. This meant that the regional agricultural stakeholders were not empowered to the greatest extent to have influence in the debate.

Important for future negotiations is to implement the five ingredients for successful stakeholder management: invite all relevant stakeholders, assess their interests, be

transparent, communicate, empower the stakeholders to engage (after Silvius & Schipper, 2019). Not all ingredients were present in the debate as the interviewees pointed out, but it is essential to design the process in such a way so all relevant stakeholders are represented instead of delegating power to the local authorities. Also does national politics need to find a way in which prominent cooperation's and associations can actively participate in the stakeholder process, as their influence now is dependent mainly on lobbying instead of expressing their interests in stakeholder meetings. Not only is it essential to include such stakeholders in the process, but also is it key to design plans with them so that the Netherlands can work together towards a realistic goal of nitrogen reduction.

8. Conclusion

From the five ingredients in the theoretical framework that mark a faulty stakeholder process (Figure 1), three were identified in the results: Not all relevant stakeholders are identified, lack of communication, and lack of empowerment to the stakeholders to engage in the project. As seen from the results, it is clear that not all relevant stakeholders could influence the process. Individual farmers were delegated to discuss their ideas and visions with local authorities, while national plans were discussed in national politics with few influences of national associations. A lack of communication from the government to the stakeholders about new rules, regulations, and plans leads to confusion, with only partial plans being proposed. Therefore, the whole process is coined with the term "bureaucratic mess" because it was hard for certain farmers to follow exactly what was going on. While much information has been available online and thus reflects good transparency, the fact that important information was left out of the proposals from the authorities results in low transparency. The reason why the interests of the agricultural stakeholders are not reflected in the plans is primarily due to how the process was designed. As A.W. said, instead of listening to agricultural professionals about what is feasible and what not, they made their own plans with limited knowledge about the sector. Resulting in laws and regulations that are hard to follow and goals that are not realistic.

Furthermore, the lack of influence in national politics leads to both frustrations among farmers and the organizations. Relations between the agricultural stakeholders and the authorities have significantly worsened due to the process but were already bad before the nitrogen debate. The experience of the farmers about the fact that they think that the authorities are not hearing them had a negative influence on the relations. Also became apparent from the interviews that the relations were affected by past experiences with the authorities in other debates.

Moreover, power differences exist between individual farmers, organizations, and the authorities. From this research became clear that the authorities dictate how the process takes form and do not account for power differences as the interests of farmers who are not a member of specific organizations are poorly reflected in national politics. Instead, they are delegated to talk with regional authorities, adding another level of complexity to the debate. This also directly indicates why some interests are not reflected in current nitrogen policies, simply because not every stakeholder can actively participate in the process due to several reasons: lack of time, bureaucratic complexity, and lack of trust in a satisfactory solution. The conclusion of this thesis is that the willingness to cooperate has, even though the negative feelings of agricultural stakeholders about the process, not deteriorated, and sometimes even fueled and extra motivation to strive for better plans. It is important for the agricultural stakeholders to ensure their future and thus they are likely to cooperate in the future, while

they sincerely hope that the process becomes more accessible for them in order to arrive at realistic plans. The associations back the other agricultural stakeholders as they see it as their goal to protect the wishes and interests of their members. Whereas it is clear that the stakeholder management process was unsatisfactory as perceived by the agricultural stakeholders, there is still hope for future negotiations if all ingredients for a good stakeholder management process as depicted in the conceptual framework section are present in the process.

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