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Interfaces

MAP Position Paper

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF RURAL AREAS



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Summary and key messages

Within the topic of social dimensions of rural areas, this MAP focused on citizens' involvement in developments in the immediate environment: landscape, nature and quality of life. The final MAP dialogue primarily discussed on citizens initiatives with regard to nature management. This topic has broader significance because it touches on many aspects of broad prosperity and the core qualities of the south-east Drenthe region. Furthermore, it exemplifies a movement towards more participatory governance in rural areas.

Research shows that rural residents often feel a deep connection with the landscape and nature in their living environment, being proud of it and (partly) even build their identity around it. The significance of landscape and nature for the local quality of life and the well-being of residents, however, has so far hardly had a place in assessment frameworks for spatial vision and decision-making, for example when it comes to the design of nature and walking areas, housing and construction of wind and solar parks. Research also shows that residents when it comes to their immediate living environment from their own experiential knowledge can be well able to submit public interests. Nevertheless, citizen involvement in spatial developments and decision-making that affect nature and landscape in their living environment mostly stays behind.

During the MAP dialogue social organisation, local government representatives and researchers explored and shared their experiences with involving citizens, their wishes and ideas in the maintenance and development of their environments, local vitality and quality of life.

Some of the questions that need attention: What is the added value of citizen involvement in developments in nature and landscape? To what extent should citizens have a say and what is the balance in responsibilities between citizens and the responsibilities of government organisations and NGOs? What is needed to better hear and involve (the voice of) citizens and residents - both within villages and from municipalities? What obstacles and opportunities do we see to better organise this policy? How can policy contribute to (more) positive citizens involvement and what scientific knowledge is needed for this? These and other issues were discussed during the MAP dialogue and led to the following recommendations for policy and research:

- Citizen involvement in nature and land use planning should not only be perceived as nature management but be valued as an integral social intervention with important contributions to social cohesion and broad prosperity.
- Simplify the grant application process and support and facilitate grant applications for local citizen initiatives.
- Strengthen municipal capacity to coordinate and collaborate with citizens initiatives in nature management.
- Encourage exchange of experiences between municipalities with citizens participation and between different citizens initiatives.
- Develop instruments to quantify the value of citizen involvement, so that it is easier to take into account in policy decisions.

1. Introduction

This position paper discusses the topic of Social dimensions of rural areas. Social dimensions are understood in the context of the concept of broad prosperity. Broad prosperity is essentially about the *well-being* of people. It is a social concept which includes everything that people find of value for living a good life. The Dutch Plan Bureau for the Living Environment indicates the different aspects of the concept of broad prosperity: In addition to material prosperity, it also concerns issues such as health, education, environment and living environment, social cohesion, personal development and (in)safety. Moreover, it concerns not only the quality of life in the 'here and now', but also the effects of our way of life on the well-being of people 'elsewhere' (outside the region) and 'later' (future generations). Broad prosperity encompasses all social dimensions of rural areas (PBL, 2022).

In the SHERPA Discussion paper four sub-topics were identified: 1) wellbeing and social relationships in rural areas; 2) public goods provisioning and social networks; 3) bridging the rural-urban gap by promoting cultural activities; and 4) social inclusion of migrant population in rural areas. This MAP position paper touches upon the first two sub-topics, the wellbeing and social relationships in rural areas and public goods provisioning and social networks.

The MAP dialogue focused on Landscape, nature and quality of life in south-east Drenthe: citizens involvement in developments in the immediate environment. In the MAP social and nature organisations, citizens, local and regional government and researchers explored different experiences with citizens initiatives and involving residents in nature and landscape management. They discussed the needs in the area and how citizens initiatives contribute to the vitality and broad prosperity in rural areas. Some of the questions that were discussed: What is the added value of involving residents in developments in nature and landscape? How to balance citizen initiatives with governmental responsibilities? What is needed to better hear and involve the voice of residents - both within villages and from municipalities? What obstacles and opportunities do you see to better organise the different policy areas?

Based on those discussions this position paper provides answers to the following key questions:

- What are the needs of the area covered by the MAP in relation to social dimensions in rural areas?
- What are the policy interventions already in place, and what are examples of actions taken by local actors addressing these needs implemented in the area covered by the MAP?
- Which policy interventions (i.e. instruments, measures) are recommended by MAP members to be implemented at the local, regional, and/or national levels? How can the EU support these interventions?
- What are the knowledge gaps, and what research projects are needed?

2. Current situation based on background research and evidence

The province of Drenthe is one of the three Northern provinces in the Netherlands. The border region South and East Drenthe, occupies its own, self-sufficient position between Zwolle, Twente and Groningen and is uniquely located along the European corridor E233. The region breathes industry in a green landscape. In the southern cities there is a large concentration of employment within the top sectors High Tech Systems and Materials (HTSM) and chemistry/plastics. Tourism and the agro-food sector are important carriers of the regional economy. The region has a lot of potential and opportunities, but also has a large number of socio-economic challenges. In particular, the mismatch between supply and demand on the labour market is causing a growing shortage of qualified personnel. The options are also limited by demographic changes: ageing, dejuvenation and the migration to the Randstad. These developments have a major impact on the

housing market, resulting in a falling demand for housing. The maintenance of a good and accessible structure of facilities, in particular in the field of health care, also requires extra attention. The quality of life of the area is therefore at stake. Figures show a high unemployment rate, 'inheritable' poverty, poorer health, higher demand for care, declining facilities and a falling house value compared to the whole of the Netherlands.

In 2021, the broad prosperity in the province of Drenthe was mapped out through the Broad Prosperity Monitor. As in previous years, we see that Drenthe inhabitants are very positive about their life. They give their life on average a 7.9 out of 10. In North and south-west Drenthe the people are generally healthy, highly educated, happy and satisfied with their home. In addition, security is high and unemployment is low in these areas." Yet south-east of Drenthe is the area with the lowest broad prosperity. Municipalities in south-east Drenthe are lagging behind in particular in terms of health and socio-economic problems. However, this does not seem to have any effect on satisfaction with the living and living environment, because the perceived quality of life is undiminished and stable for years.

In order to gain insight into social cohesion, the theme of society in the CBS Regional Broad prosperity Monitor consists of four indicators, namely:

- Contact with family, friends or neighbours: People are happier and better off if they have more frequent contact with family, friends and close acquaintances or neighbors. The share of inhabitants of Drenthe who have digital or 'live' contact at least once a week (72%) is comparable to other provinces (national average is 71%). Between 2012 and 2019, the share of people who have one weekly contact moment with family, friends or neighbours in Drenthe fell from 76% to 72%.
- Trust in institutions, Trust in social institutions and the government is important for broad prosperity, it is essential for social cohesion and the functioning of society. The Regional Monitor of Well-being shows that in 2020 68% of Drenthe people had confidence in the House of Representatives, police and judges
- Trust in people among themselves: Trust in others is important to live comfortably, but also from the point of view of society, trust is important for mutual cooperation and willingness to help. Trust in each other has been stable in Drenthe for years. In 2020, 63% of the inhabitants indicated that most people can be trusted, nationally this is the same (63%). In the Drenths municipality of Emmen it is the lowest of the province (56%).
- The proportion of residents who do voluntary work. The number of people that are active as volunteers is an important indicator of social cohesion and of broad prosperity. The trend in south-east Drenthe is ambiguous, in Emmen it decreases where in Borger-Odoorn it rises and in Coevorden it follows the provincial trend. After Covid it is indicated that finding volunteers is important to get social life going again (Trendbureau Drenthe, 2021).

These indicators are enriched with regional insights from the Drents Panel on aspects such as loneliness, informal care and participation in neighborhood activities that say something about the extent to which people participate in social life.

Citizen power and neighbourliness (Noaberschap) is alive and well in the region. In addition to the urban centers, there are the small scale of villages and communities. In these areas demographic developments are felt in the capillaries of society, but also social cohesion and community initiatives flourish. This is the basis for working on socio-economic empowerment and quality of life from the area's own strength. In the environmental vision (Provincie Drenthe, 2022) the province together with representatives of governments, interest groups, market parties and residents, has identified the following core qualities of Drenthe:

- Peace, space, nature and landscape;
- Originality (authenticity, Drents own);
- Neighborliness (Noaberschap);

- Small scale and human dimension;
- Safety;

These core qualities come together in the topic of the MAP dialogue: Landscape, nature and quality of life in south-east Drenthe; Citizens involvement in the developments in the immediate living environment.

In order to thrive and live comfortably, an attractive living environment is of great importance. Research shows that people find nature and landscape of value for living a good life in rural areas. On average, the Dutch rural area receives a score of 7.5. Drenthe scores highest on average with an 8.1 (Buijs et al., 2019). People value their living environment higher when they see more animals, trees, hedgerows and flowers, according to the research. Stichting Het Drentse Landschap has noticed that the corona crisis has led to a revaluation of the nature reserves in 2020.

Rural residents often feel a deep connection with the landscape and nature in their living environment, being proud of it and (partly) it is even part of their identity. It is also part of the broad prosperity monitor. The significance of the landscape and nature for the local quality of life and the well-being of residents, however, has so far hardly had a place in assessment frameworks for spatial vision and decision-making. Current examples of decisions where citizens' involvement is relevant are the design of nature and walking areas, housing and the construction of wind and solar parks. Experience also shows that residents when it comes to their immediate living environment from their own social capital and experiential knowledge are well able to also take public interests into account. It is widely accepted in the Netherlands that improving rural livelihoods requires the effective participation of rural people and communities in managing their own social, economic and environmental objectives, through the empowerment of rural people, especially women and young people, through organisations such as local cooperatives, and by applying a bottom-up approach. Inspiring examples of citizens' involvement and community action exist, nevertheless, meaningful citizens' involvement in spatial developments and decision-making that affects nature and landscape in their living environment is not yet self-evident and many learning questions remain to be answered.

3. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform

This section describes the opinion and thoughts of the MAP when it comes to needs, policy interventions, potential knowledge gaps, and recommendations to strengthen the social dimension of rural areas.

3.1. Identified needs

The natural environment is an important factor in the quality of life and the broad prosperity in the area. In order to maintain or expand that function it is important to maintain the natural areas and keep them accessible. It is desirable to build on the core values of the area and strengthening the ownership and belonging to the area and the contacts and connection between inhabitants. With the aging population in the area, especially in the voluntary work, there is a need to rejuvenate the voluntary work scene in order to maintain the social cohesion and social capital also in the long run. Supporting citizens involvement in the management of the natural environment can be a means to that end.

Within the topic of broad prosperity, the MAP dialogue focused on citizen involvement in nature management. Three distinct forms can be distinguished based on who take the initiative: citizens, a company or one of the bodies of the local government. Each origin creates different dynamics. Due to the composition of the MAP with quite some representatives of citizens initiatives the MAP dialogue focused mostly on those initiatives where the citizens are in the lead and other actors potentially have a facilitating role.

During the MAP dialogue many different practical and strategic issues were raised that need attention in further developing citizens' involvement for social cohesion:

- Facilitating the involvement of citizens in nature management and the design of the living environment.
- How to deal with competitive land uses for example solar park and nature?
- How to strengthen the citizens politics?
- How to attract more youth involvement in citizens initiatives?
- How to ensure better alignment of citizens' initiatives with government bureaucracy. Or actually the other way around: how government bureaucracy can be better aligned with citizens' initiatives. How do you divide the roles and how do you achieve good working relationships and coordination with the municipal staff?
- How to facilitate appropriate financial support for citizens initiatives?
- How do you prevent a few people from deciding for the village what is going to happen? How do you align leaders with the wider community? How do you create an impulse for residents' perspective?
- How do you involve people more intensively than just hand and span services? How to draw up a joint vision for the landscape
- How do you come to a constructive conversation between citizens and politics, both locally and nationally?

3.2. Existing interventions and actions

Several policy interventions strengthen the social dimension of the rural areas in south-east of Drenthe. The most important being the social agenda, the Regio deal, the LEADER programme, Broad prosperity monitor and Landscape management Drenthe supporting citizens involvement in nature management. Below each of them is briefly described:

Social Agenda. This is the coordinating frame for the province to work together with municipalities and social organisations for the well-being of and with the inhabitants of Drenthe. Through the social agenda the province is committed to projects that increase the quality of life in cities and villages and trains experience experts on poverty and low literacy. Municipalities are responsible for the social tasks. The province wants to give a helping hand and wants to take innovative projects further. With the social agenda the province is working on a lively and social Drenthe.

Region deal south-east Drenthe. This is a partnership between the government and the region. The focus for the coming years is on living, working and well-being. To this end, the government and the region are jointly investing 40 million euros. The province and six municipalities in the area work together with residents, educational institutions, housing corporations and companies on various projects that contribute to sufficient and suitable housing, job prospects and appropriate care.

LEADER. To give the development of the rural economy of south-east Drenthe a boost the region has been given the status of LEADER area (Liaison Entre Actions de Developpement de l Economie Rurale). As a result, initiatives in this area that contribute to rural development and increasing the quality of life in rural areasthe can benefit from this European programme. The Local Action group (LAG) is the driving force behind the leader programme on behalf of residents, entrepreneurs and municipalities. The LAG is a connector, a collaborator at the forefront.

Monitor of Broad Prosperity Drenthe. The Monitor of Well-being Drenthe shows a wide range of eight themes, ranging from material prosperity to well-being and housing. The monitor makes a comparison between the regions of Drenthe and with the Netherlands as a whole. Where possible, the data are interpreted within the Drenthe context.

Landscape management Drenthe support to citizens initiatives. Many residents have therefore set a goal for their living environment and have started their own initiatives to renovate and protect the landscape. Landscape management Drenthe supports these initiatives and works together with the village, governments and other organisations to realise the wishes of the habitants. In recent years, thanks to these collaborations, many initiatives have got off the ground with wonderful results. Landscape management Drenthe is convinced that by connecting residents with organisations and governments, the quality of the landscape for people, animals and plants is preserved.

3.3. Recommendations from the MAP

The MAP dialogue focussed on citizens' involvement in the management of the natural living environment as a means to increase social cohesion and broad prosperity.

3.3.1. Recommendations for future rural policies

Citizen involvement in nature and land use planning should not only be perceived as nature management but be valued as an integral social intervention with important contributions to social cohesion and broad prosperity. The added value of citizen involvement should not be searched on the short term only and not unilaterally in efficiency. Managing nature by citizens involvement is not always faster, cheaper or better. Citizen involvement in nature and land use planning should be perceived as a long term investment and an integral social intervention. It contributes to different aspects of broad prosperity. It has the potential to support the building of trust in institutions and between government and citizens and strengthening a sense of belonging and ownership, connection and social cohesion, it contributes to contact and reducing feelings of loneliness and contributes to strengthening the quality of life. Citizen involvement makes a connection between the nature, social and health care domain.

Simplify the grant application process and support and facilitate grant applications for local citizen initiatives. Currently the process of applying for subsidies or grants, such as LEADER or other is deemed too complex for many citizens initiatives. Also the minimum amount of subsidy is rather high for citizens initiatives. It would be stimulating to create low-threshold opportunities for small-scale financial support for citizen initiatives. Also provide resources for process facilitation.

Strengthen municipal capacity to coordinate and collaborate with citizens initiatives in nature management. When citizens manage part of the natural area, this requires adaptations in the attitude and way of working of the municipality department that normally is in charge of this management. Citizens involvement in nature management requires a different mentality than the efficiency thinking that is mainstream. It is valuable to create spaces and procedures that allow people to become involved and co-create knowledge. It is recommended to train municipal workers in the communication and invest in building working relations. To avoid miscommunications and irritations it is important to involve municipal workers in the planning of the management of the natural area.

Encourage exchange of experiences between municipalities with citizens participation and between different citizens initiatives. Many municipality are developing experiences with citizens involvement. Some have more experiences than others. It would be valuable to build on the experience in the MAP and further support the exchange of experiences both between municipalities and between citizens initiatives. It would be inspiring to create a book with best practices.

3.3.2. Recommendations for future research agendas

The MAP dialogue did not discuss the need for research data and recommendations for the research agenda at length. However, one recommendation for applied research was identified:

Develop instruments to quantify the value of citizen involvement, so that it is easier to take into account in policy decisions. Though the added value of citizens involvement should not be searched in efficiency and monetary gain, in order to take citizens involvement in the nature management into account in policy making it is important to quantify it's value. It requires integration of different policy domains. For policy makers it is easier to give it importance when the value is quantified. It can then be part of the social cost and benefit analysis

Conclusions

The MAP process started with an interactive process to define the precise topic of discussion. The topic of social dimensions of rural areas was specified to the concept of broad prosperity and then narrowed down to citizens involvement in developments in the immediate environment. The final MAP dialogue primarily discussed on citizens initiatives with regard to nature management and their contribution to broad prosperity. This topic has broader significance because it touches on many aspects of broad prosperity and the core qualities of the region. Furthermore, it exemplifies a movement towards more participatory governance in rural areas.

The MAP recommends to value citizen involvement in nature and land use planning as an integral social intervention, in addition to the value for nature management. The involvement of citizens in their immediate environment has the potential for important contributions to social cohesion and broad prosperity. Further recommendations concern the simplification of grant schemes to better fit the needs and capacities of citizens, the building of capacity at municipal level to support citizens initiatives and the facilitation exchange of experiences between municipalities and citizens initiatives.

In this way the potential of citizens involvement in the developments in the immediate environment to contributes to an important movement towards social cohesion, sense of belonging can be realised and the social dimensions of rural areas strengthened.

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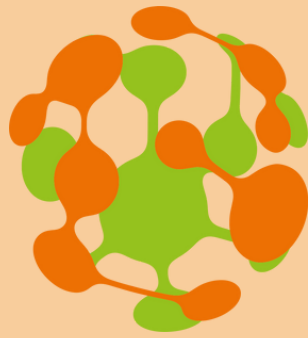
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