

Contested sustainability transformations:

Battles over the legitimacy of nitrogen management measures in the Netherlands

Department: Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development

Research group: Environmental Governance

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Project description

Proposed nitrogen management measures by the national government faced abrupt and hostile pushback from farmers, rural communities, and wider supporters when first introduced in 2019, which erupted again in 2021/2022. This not only led to sustained discontent across rural communities, which has still not dissipated, but also to a new insurgent political party becoming the most popular nationwide in regional elections, and a potentially important force in forthcoming national elections. This case exemplifies how policy action for sustainability transformation can be deeply contested and even derailed when it clashes with social values, expectations, practices, and ways of life. As such, it provides an important case to learn about the socio-political dynamics of transformative action and resistance, to inform future policy action that is both ambitious and socially acceptable.

This Bright Minds project will study the dynamics and development of conflict over nitrogen management policy in recent years (~2019 to present). In particular, it will study battles over the legitimacy of these policy measures, to examine how legitimacy was promoted by policy proponents and attacked by opponents, how these struggles played out over time, and with what consequences for the overall policy agenda. It will trace the development and evolution of this conflict, focusing in especially on discursive and behavioural activities of different actors. It will do this by analysing media discourse (e.g. newspapers, television interviews, social media), policy documents, and other secondary sources. Additional methods or sources of data could also be possible. The core objective is to produce a detailed analysis of struggles over policy legitimacy which played out over time, to understand the dynamics of conflict and its consequences, and to inform thinking about the politics of future policy and governance. If possible, we will aim to publish the results of our work in a leading sustainability journal.

Job requirements

This project requires a Bright Minds student who is interested in concepts of contested governance, legitimacy, and sustainability transformations, and methods such as discourse and qualitative interpretive analysis. The student should be self-motivated to learn and to deliver, have attention to detail, a positive attitude, and be capable of working independently but also be proactive in interaction. Importantly, the student must have Dutch language skills. The Bright Minds project will contribute to a broader research team currently studying similar issues in climate change policymaking in the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, and therefore interact and learn within this research team.