

Ensuring green and sustainable practices in Rurban areas – Experience from Netherlands

Introduction:

Urban growth is one of the most significant drivers of social and economic change. It is a major force in the transformation of the landscapes surrounding cities. This transformation includes structural changes such as new land uses, constructions and infrastructures in the rural areas. In many European countries, managing the relationship between cities and the surrounding countryside has been a major planning challenge for a long time, as uncontrolled urban sprawl is a threat to agricultural production, green areas and recreational use of the landscape.

The London Green Belt, the Green Heart of the Randstad and the Copenhagen Finger Plan are well-known examples of efforts to manage urban growth while preserving green landscapes as a contrast to urban areas. Further, the strategic importance of urban growth has been acknowledged in the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP). The ESDP suggests a polycentric spatial development together with a new urban-rural relationship to achieve: “a balanced and sustainable development for the territory of the European Union”.

Background:

As an EU member State, Netherlands is subject to a common supra-national framework, yet it has its Rurban growth experience differs strongly from other European countries in terms of physical, socio-economic and urban growth dynamics. In the first half of the 20th century, the Dutch spatial planning system gradually evolved into a three-tier planning system consisting of a national, provincial and local level. Under the Spatial Planning Act (2008), spatial planning and land readjustment fulfil highly complementary functions in Rurban areas with the former being strong on controlling urban growth and the latter actively transforming the spatial structure of Rurban areas.

A key aspect of spatial planning in Netherlands is the focus on ensuring green Rurban areas. In the Dutch metropolitan areas, green qualities are seen as part and parcel of the landscape as a whole, including areas used by agriculture. The need for green recreational facilities is especially high in Rurban areas and near the cities, more so as green open spaces in the urban domain have been drastically reduced after several decades of compact city policies.

Details of the Policy:

Under Netherlands’s Spatial Planning Act (2008), green qualities are not confined to natural and semi-natural areas. Dutch metropolitan landscapes are multifunctional, in many cases fulfilling different functions at the same location, like agriculture, nature and water storage. Given the metropolitan context, the open character of green areas is highly valued, as illustrated by the well-known concept of the Green Heart (or Groene Hart- a relatively thinly populated area in the Dutch Randstad characterized by its rural character which contrasts the urban areas around it).

Under this policy, nature conservation and the realization of new nature - both by transforming agricultural areas into nature and by agricultural management programs – assume a crucial role in ensuring the environmental sustainability of Dutch Rurban areas. The national policy for creating a national ecological main structure is the key here. To develop and improve green qualities of Rurban areas, the controlling power of the local land use plan is not enough. The active transformation of green areas is realized through area-based and development oriented interventions under the national policy.

Impact:

Several studies note the positive impacts of the green policies followed by Netherlands in the Rurban areas. The availability of green spaces in these areas has had a positive impact on environmental aspects- especially in efforts to decrease air pollution and efforts to increase water catchment areas. In addition, green spaces have proved to be valuable public spaces as a means of social activity of the city or as an assembly point. Netherlands' thrust on including various disciplines – architecture, environmental and agricultural sciences, as well as education, health and art in policymaking has helped transform its Rurban areas into sustainable spaces. Therefore, the relationship created between the state and society is no longer one-way but multidirectional in the form of a local idea network which then relates to the global context.

Source: Busck, A. G., Hidding, M. C., Kristensen, S. B., Persson, C., & Præstholt, S. (2008). Managing rurban landscapes in the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden: Comparing planning systems and instruments in three different contexts. Geografisk Tidsskrift-Danish Journal of Geography, 108(2), 1-16; Syahid, C. et al. (2017). Sustainable Cities in the Netherlands: Urban Green Spaces Management in Rotterdam. Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities.