

The end of the Dutch polder model?

A study how the Dutch agricultural agreement and consensus politics failed to green agricultural policy



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Summary

This study examines the failure of the agricultural agreement, a policy aimed at promoting sustainable agricultural practices in the Netherlands. It was designed to create consensus among various stakeholders on policy guidelines for sustainable agriculture. The study uses the Multiple Streams Framework, a theoretical model for understanding how policy changes occur. The framework analyzes the interaction between problem perception, policy and political interests. It examines the main actors involved, including farmer organizations, the Ministry of Agriculture, nature and environmental organizations and agribusinesses, and highlights their diverse and often conflicting interests. This is explored through a literature review and 14 interviews with organizations involved.

The research shows that the agricultural agreement faced significant challenges from the outset, caused by a high level of mistrust between stakeholders as a result of poor agricultural policy in previous years and a different vision of agriculture. Years of policy aimed at maximizing efficiency under the influence of chain parties and government policy have led to path dependency, which makes agricultural transition more difficult. As a result, policy outcomes have been extended for years to the expense of environmental and social objectives. The study identifies several key moments when political windows opened, such as the PAS government in 2019 and the general election in 2021, providing opportunities for significant policy changes. However, these moments were often not fully exploited due to various aspects in the political, policy or problem stream. These included political resistance, limited institutional capacity and the entrenched power of agricultural lobbies.

The study suggests that the presence of a policy entrepreneur in the form of Johan Remkes, a Dutch politician and former minister who was appointed as mediator, led to an agricultural agreement. However, the study concludes that the failure of the agricultural agreement was the result of a fragmented policy landscape and that the choice of an agricultural agreement was therefore a high risk choice from the start. It also suggests that the lack of a clear political entrepreneur during the negotiations had a negative impact on the negotiations. In order to formulate concrete policy, it is necessary to develop a clear vision for Dutch agriculture. At last, future policy initiatives must address the underlying power dynamics to foster enhanced collaboration.

Keywords: Agricultural policy, Multiple Streams Framework, Policy change, Stakeholder dynamics

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List of abbreviations

ACF	Advocacy Coalition Framework
ACM	Autoriteit Consument & Markt
BBB	BoerBurgerBeweging
BO	Brancheorganisatie
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CBL	Centraal Bureau Levensmiddelenhandel
CDA	Christen-Democratisch Appèl
CU	ChristenUnie
D66	Democraten 66
EU	European Union
FDF	Farmers Defence Force
FNLI	Federatie Nederlandse Levensmiddelen Industrie
GL	GroenLinks
GVE	De Norm Grootvee-eenheden
IPO	Interprovinciaal Overleg
LBI	Louis Bolk Instituut
LLTB	Limburgse Land- en Tuinbouwbond
LTO	Land- en Tuinbouworganisatie
Min I&W	Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat
Min LNV	Ministerie van Landbouw, Natuur en Voedselkwaliteit
Min VROM	Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer
MSF	Multiple Streams Framework
NPLG	Nationaal Programma Landelijk Gebied
NAJK	Nederlands Agrarische Jongeren Kontakt
PAS	Programma Aanpak Stikstof
PBL	Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving
PNA	Policy Network Analysis
PvdA	Partij van de Arbeid
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid
RvS	Raad van State
SER	Sociaal-Economische Raad
SGP	Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij
SP	Socialistische Partij
UvW	Unie van Waterschappen
VVD	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie
ZLTO	Zuidelijke Land- en Tuinbouw Organisatie

1. Introduction to the research

The Netherlands has always been an agricultural country, and because of its arable land, agriculture has always played an important role in its economy and society. However, after the second world war, agricultural policy became increasingly focused on intensification and production, which led to ecological limits being reached regarding climate change and biodiversity losses (Ministerie LNV, n.d.; Rijksoverheid, n.d.). Attempts to make agricultural policy more sustainable led to a lot of anger and incomprehension in the agricultural sector, which resulted in a strained relationship with the government. To break the deadlock, an agricultural agreement was drawn up, an agreement between stakeholders that laid down guidelines for agricultural policy. Such a policy measure is in line with the Dutch tradition of consensus politics. However, the agricultural agreement failed after several parties withdrew, which was a blow to consensus politics. The aim of this research is to identify and analyze the political and economic interests that influence Dutch agricultural policy and the agricultural agreement, and how these processes take place.

Food accessibility was a top priority for the Dutch government after World War II when initiatives to increase productivity were implemented. Farm productivity reached its peak in 2015 due to, which was five times greater than in 1950 due to larger, specialized and more intensive farms. This was driven by increased use of pesticides and fertilizers, complemented by advances in plant breeding and technology adoption, this is called the Green Revolution (Evenson & Collin, 2002). Intensification of grassland farms, improved barn designs and advances in animal nutrition technologies, together with more productive breeders, contributed to a surge in milk production in the mid-1960s, resulting in the phenomenon of "butter mountains" and "milk lakes" due to overproduction (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2017; van't Veer, Poppe, & Fresco, 2017; Van Lieshout, Dewulf, Aarts & Termeer, 2013). This policy of maximizing food production has ensured that 66% of the 4.2 million hectares of land in the Netherlands is used for agriculture (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2020a; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020b). Given the long-standing prioritization of agricultural interests regarding intensification and productivity in Dutch politics, there is a distinctive political connection between Dutch politics and the agricultural sector (Gallagher, Laver & Mair, 2011). It has fostered close ties between the government and the agricultural sector, with economic growth often being prioritized at the expense of environmental sustainability (Swinnen, 2018).

The Green Revolution led to a surge in food production worldwide but had its consequences. In the Netherlands, policy of years of state-led intensification has resulted in an imbalance of nitrogen emissions, a significant climate impact of agriculture, and a decline in biodiversity in the Netherlands. Around 15% of Dutch greenhouse gas emissions are attributed to agriculture. Approximately 74% of these emissions emitted by agriculture are caused by livestock farming and have a significant impact

on climate change (Dudley & Alexander, 2017). Pesticides are used to kill unwanted plants, insects, or other organisms in intensive agriculture. However, their use can lead to a reduction in the number of insects, plants, and flowers, as well as a decline in biodiversity on and around farmland (Chagnon et al., 2014; Compendium voor de Leefomgeving, 2013). At last, excessive amounts of nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and ammonia (NH₃) can have harmful effects on the environment, particularly on soil and water. This can lead to the overgrowth of certain plants which can outcompete other plant species. This, in turn, can have negative impacts on insect, butterfly, and bird populations. Dutch nitrogen emissions are the highest in Europe, with emissions per hectare approximately four times higher than the EU average. Of the Dutch emissions to air, 65% consist of ammonia and 35% of nitrogen oxides. Ammonia is primarily derived from agriculture and animal farming (Milieu Centraal, n.d.). These factors reduce biodiversity and disrupt ecosystems, undermining essential services such as pollination and natural pest control, and threatening food security (Compendium voor de Leefomgeving, 2013; Tsiafouli et al., 2015).

The reason why farmers are not encouraged to produce more sustainably is that there are economic barriers to doing so. Farmers in the Netherlands face challenges due to minimal profit margins and a heavy reliance on EU subsidies from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). In addition, farmers often face barriers when trying to reduce pesticide usage and improve animal welfare with the need to avoid additional expenses (PBL, 2023). Dutch farm produce prices are primarily determined by global markets due to the globalization of agricultural commerce. As a result, farmers face low prices and high production expenses. To cope with this, conventional farmers prioritize efficiency. Those who attempt to adopt a different approach will face competition from rivals who can afford to reduce operational expenses (Wojtynia, 2023). In addition, the companies that conduct business with farmers receive the majority of the income generated in agriculture and actively promote the maintenance of the current agricultural system due to their business nature and the financial benefits it provides. The decrease in revenue for pesticide and fertilizer vendors is a consequence of the shift towards more sustainable farming practices. Which would mean that changing the Dutch agricultural sector's system would result in a decrease in income for these companies (Ioris, 2018; Joosten, 2020; PBL, 2018a; van Dinther, 2020).

There are three main challenges that lock farmers into industrial agriculture: path dependency, the expectation of cheap food, and the concentration of power. Path dependency highlights that, due to large initial investments in infrastructure and technology, farmers find it financially and logistically difficult to move away from industrial agriculture once they have started. The expectation of cheap food has conditioned consumers to seek out low-cost products, putting pressure on farmers to accommodate this. Finally, the concentration of power within food systems means that a few dominant actors who benefit from and support industrial agriculture have significant influence over agricultural policies and practices (Frison, 2016). Reforming this system is challenging because of intense political pressure from

powerful agribusinesses and farmers' associations, which benefit financially from existing policies and use their influence to maintain the status quo. These actors possess multiple, interrelated forms of power that enable them to influence social actors, lobby governments and shape public discourse (Clapp & Fuchs, 2009; Clapp, 2021).

Now, the Netherlands and Europe as a whole is undergoing a paradigm shift from an agricultural policy that initially focused on maximizing efficiency, cheap products and economies of scale (Van Lieshout et al., 2013). Now, and in recent years, this policy has changed with more emphasis on reducing production and more nature-inclusive farming, a clash of systems seems to be taking place (Buitenhuis, Candel, Termeer & Feindt, 2020; Vermunt et al., 2022). Due to the rulings of the European Court of Justice in 2018, which found the current nitrogen policy to be in violation of the European Habitats Directive, the government was legally obliged to take immediate action to address nitrogen emissions (Raad van State, 2019; Remkes et al., 2020). The government was compelled by legal considerations to take action, and citizen groups such as Mobilisation for the Environment (MOB) were engaged in litigation against the state, demanding further action (Rechtbank Noord-Holland, 2019). Farmers were now receiving advice to reverse their practices following a shift in government policies. Previously, the government had supported farm expansion, often burdening farmers with substantial loans for financing. Now, there was a sudden push for them to downsize instead (Tullis, 2023). The lack of clarity surrounding agricultural policy has led to a marked deterioration in the relationship between the agricultural sector and the government in recent years. In 2018, 90% of farmers expressed a lack of representation by politicians, 80% felt a lack of representation by their own farming organization (Geelen Consultancy, 2018). To address the worsening agricultural relations and the need for sustainability and farmer income an agricultural agreement was initiated after advice from the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL) and the Social and Economic Council (SER) (PBL, 2018a; SER, 2021).

There would be consultation between multiple stakeholders including the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food security (LNV) agricultural organizations, Dutch provinces, and environmental groups, to support farmers in enhancing sustainability through innovation or extensive agriculture, despite high costs and financial challenges (Vermunt et al, 2022; PBL, 2023). The objective was to arrive at a policy consensus in the Dutch tradition of consensus politics, as exemplified by the Climate agreement and the North Sea agreement. However, despite months of consultation, a final deal failed due to high levels of distrust and the withdrawal of the Agriculture and Horticulture Organisation Netherlands (LTO), the largest representative of agriculture in the country with 35,000 members, highlighting the difficulty in achieving broad support among diverse farming practices (NOS, 2023b; Wisserhof, 2000). The inability to reach an agricultural agreement in the Netherlands highlights the challenges of uniting different stakeholders around sustainability, given the conflicting political and

economic interests of market, government and civil society actors (Erjavec & Erjavec, 2015; Ioris, 2018).

Societal perception has shifted that agricultural policy should not be solely focused on food production, but should also encompass objectives such as environmental protection, biodiversity, animal welfare, and an income generation capacity for farmers. The overall viewpoint is that agricultural policy should be viewed more integrally in order to achieve these goals (El Benni, Irek, Finger, Mack & Ammann, 2024). This research can help in improving policy-making to achieve this more integrated way of farming because of two reasons. First, researching this makes it easier to understand the complexities of policy change and resolves the uncertainties associated with policy making by understanding obstacles for this (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Migchels, de Jonge, Bracke, Vellinga & Sukkel, 2023). Second, it can provide insight into the dynamics between different stakeholders, including farmers, government, and interest groups. Learning from past experiences, future decision-makers can develop better models of collaboration for sustainable farming (Metz, Lieberherr, Schmucki & Huber, 2021). In this way, this research can have a direct positive impact on societal problems and potentially make a positive contribution to the current unrest in the agricultural sector.

This study examines the policy development of the agricultural agreement using Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) because it is actor-based and attempts to take situational considerations into account. The concept of policymaking as a dynamic process rather than a linear one is particularly helpful in situations where the policy process is unclear or complicated (Ackrill, Kay, and Zahariadis, 2013; Herweg, 2016). The goal is to establish a clearer understanding of the theoretical basis for the research questions and the problem, facilitating a more informed approach to sustainable agricultural policy development. The agricultural agreement provides a valuable case study for understanding why sustainability efforts in agriculture are struggling due to complex interests and lack of consensus. This research aims to validate the use of MSF in the complex field of agricultural policy within the Netherlands. Academics like Ackrill, Kay, and Zahariadis (2017) have suggested conducting further empirical research to test ideas and identify potential patterns and circumstances that influence policy change. However, research on the connections between policy formation in the Dutch agricultural context is still lacking. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to add to the scientific literature of the Multiple Streams Framework in different contexts. Understanding the policy process is enhanced by examining how problems become public policy and how the framing of problems influences policy formulation. In addition, examining Dutch agricultural policy contributes to new scientific insights into policy change.

Examining the Dutch agricultural policy field and the additional agricultural agreement is a relevant setting for analyzing environmental governance and policy change as a whole because it is a specific policy area where the locked-in policy is being shaken up. The combination of a highly politicized

agricultural sector and a major challenge in terms of policy change in the agricultural sector creates a special situation in terms of environmental governance and policy change (Swinnen, 2018). In addition, scholars suggest that new business and organizational models, as well as policy-making, should be designed in consultation with those directly affected by them. In this context, the agricultural agreement's recent attempt to draft a new social agreement for Dutch agriculture was considered a promising proposal (Vermunt et al., 2022). However, Koole (2019) argues that the Dutch ‘‘agreement democracy’’ can occasionally be at odds with democratic legitimacy due to the exclusion of parliament from these processes. This research can assist in the legitimization of these alternative policies by analyzing the relationships and influences in order to achieve a representative composition of stakeholders. Werkman & Termeer (2007) state that various actors have a distinct perspective on what the future of agriculture and its landscape should look like and why. These differences in attitudes and behaviors towards agriculture or agricultural policy are ingrained and hinder the advancement of public and policy discourse (Werkman & Termeer, 2007). This research will help to understand the complexities inherent in environmental policy as it can be argued that an understanding of attitudes and behaviors towards policies can assist in the communication and implementation of such policies. Given the given theoretical foundation, the primary research question is as follows:

"How did the interests and actions of stakeholders influence the development and eventual collapse of the Dutch agricultural agreement?"

In order to fully answer this main question, several sub-questions have been formulated. These sub-questions are designed to delve more deeply into the different dimensions of the theoretical framework that allows to find out the processes that played a role in the agricultural agreement, the sub-questions are:

- *What were the interests of actors involved in the agricultural agreement?*
- *How were policy proposals evaluated and selected? (considering factors such as technical feasibility, community values, cost-effectiveness, and public support)*
- *To what extent did influential individuals impact the development and selection of policy proposals?*
- *What possible opportunities and moments have there been for policy changes?*

In order to answer the main question, it is necessary to look at the different actors involved in the agricultural agreement, and to find out how they influenced the policy proposals, it is important to find out what their interests were, because in this way it is possible to analyze why they support or oppose certain policy proposals. In this way it is possible to find out the motivation behind their actions. In

addition, it is important to show how policy proposals were evaluated and what criteria were used to accept or reject them. This shows the extent to which practical considerations or value judgements motivated actors to exert influence and whether this influenced intended policy proposals. Exploring influential individuals can show the extent to which certain individuals or groups can guide or change the policy process. It can thus provide insight into the dynamics of power and influence in the policy-making process. Finally, it is also important to identify the actual moments of potential policy change, in order to find out what were the decisive factors for these policy changes. In order to address these questions, it is crucial to first understand the existing academic debate.

2. Literature review

This research is related to and attempts to contribute to the scientific debates on governance and policy change in agriculture. The following chapter presents applicable theoretical frameworks that provide further context for the study.

2.1 Common Agricultural Policy

The CAP of the European Union, created after World War II with the objective of ensuring a steady supply of food throughout Europe, is closely linked to Dutch agricultural policy. In its early iterations, the CAP aimed to safeguard European farmers from foreign competition, establish a common market for agricultural products, and provide common funding sources to sustain farming operations. Over time, the CAP underwent changes to meet different goals and circumstances. The original objective was to enhance agricultural output, which resulted in a notable expansion. However, because productivity subsidies constituted a significant component of the strategy, overproduction ensued, resulting in surpluses of goods such as butter and wine. The CAP underwent a significant transformation in 1992, shifting its focus from production-based subsidies to land ownership (McCormick, 2020). In the Netherlands, subsidies represent a significant proportion of farmers' income. In 2020, the average farm's income was approximately €78,000, while the average amount of subsidies received was approximately €19,000. This indicates that approximately 25% of a farmer's revenue is derived from subsidies provided by European subsidies (Berkhout et al., 2022).

Over the years, the CAP has stabilized farmers' incomes through direct payments and market interventions and supported rural areas through rural development programs (Henke et al., 2018). In recent years, there has been mounting pressure on the functioning of the CAP. This pressure has been exerted not only by the agricultural sector but also by environmental groups, which have expressed concerns for some time now. According to Pe'er et al. (2020) the area-based direct payments system in agricultural subsidies has been criticized for its inefficiency in supporting farmers' income and achieving environmental goals. There is a concern that direct payments often benefit landowners instead of those managing the land, leading to a system where the largest farms receive the highest amount of subsidies and livestock intensification is promoted. Efforts to cut payments and redistribute funds for more equitable distribution have been largely unsuccessful (Henke et al., 2018). The future CAP proposes result-based principles, yet there is a lack of indicators on farm management, land-use, environmental parameters, and economic performance (Pe'er et al., 2020).

Dutch agricultural policy is influenced by the CAP of the European Union. However, it is incorrect to assume that Dutch agricultural policy is exclusively determined by EU policies. While the EU has a

significant impact on agriculture, environment, and regulation policies, member states still have the freedom to shape their own policies within the framework provided by the EU. Member states are free to determine their own rules regarding a significant part of policy, including agricultural structure and animal welfare (PBL, 2018a). The new CAP gives Member States more flexibility and responsibility, with a focus on results and adaptation to specific contexts, including environmental and climate change efforts (De Castro, Miglietta & Vecchio, 2020).

For example, national interpretation influences the management of Ecological Focus Areas (EFAs) under the CAP, which are zones on agricultural land dedicated to environmentally friendly practices to support biodiversity. Member states select EFA options based on national priorities, and the specific options must be approved by the European Commission, so national legislation is important (Brown et al., 2021). Nevertheless, any change in policy must always be considered in the context of European policy that has made Dutch agriculture more productive and intensive. Restrictive national regulations can put Dutch farmers at a competitive disadvantage compared to other European farmers. However, this disadvantage can be absorbed by national legislation by compensating for lost income or additional costs. This requires adequate national policies (Gonzalez-Martinez, 2021).

One of the reasons why the CAP has not succeeded in making the agricultural sector more sustainable over the years is partly due to the strong presence of agricultural lobby groups in the European Union, which water down sustainable policy proposals. This strong influence of these lobby groups at EU level is also present at national level (Erjavec & Erjavec, 2021). Given the strong influence of agricultural lobby groups and their impact on policy, it is necessary to examine the mechanisms behind this influence. The intertwined relationship between the agricultural sector and policymakers is known as agricultural exceptionalism, a principle that has had a major influence on agricultural policy across Europe. Research on agricultural exceptionalism can give us greater insight into this influence and its effect on the agricultural agreement.

2.2 Agricultural exceptionalism

In the context of agricultural policy, the term agricultural exceptionalism refers to the distinctive and frequently advantageous status of the agricultural sector in comparison to other economic sectors. Ideally, policies should be efficient and promote productivity. It can ensure a fair distribution of resources based on transparency and stakeholder participation. In the agricultural sector, however, significant financial protection is offered with less efficiency. In addition, there is a disproportionate advantage for large farms and a lack of transparency due to the involvement of agricultural lobby groups, leading to industry-dominated interests (Guarino, 2023). An example of this is farmers protesting against increases in agricultural taxes and excise duties, after which these plans were

dropped. In addition, there are sectoral policies and their institutions, where parliamentary debates often highlight the exceptional nature of agriculture, making it difficult to integrate environmental considerations into policy (Vitkauskaitė-Ramanauskienė, 2020).

In the past, these policies were mainly structured for agricultural economic stability and national security in relation to food security. This justifies government intervention in order to mitigate the associated risks (Skogstad, 1998). A number of factors emerge in the context of agricultural exceptionalism. For instance, the agricultural sector is frequently shielded from international competition, a phenomenon that is exemplified by the EU's CAP. This is achieved through the implementation of subsidies and import tariffs, which serve to protect domestic agriculture. In addition, there are closed policy networks. Traditionally, agricultural policy is determined within closed circles of agricultural ministries and agricultural interest groups. These policy networks often exhibit a high degree of autonomy and exert considerable influence on politics (Daugbjerg & Swinbank, 2012). Furthermore, the field of agriculture frequently enjoys a unique status within society, being regarded as more than just a profession. There is a strong sense of identity in the agricultural sector, as it plays a crucial role in producing food for people while working closely with nature (Kamphorst, Donders, de Boer & Nuesink, 2021).

Agricultural policy in many nations is still based on the principle of agricultural exceptionalism and is still the case in the agricultural sector, even if it is presented as the value of multifunctionality. The concept of multifunctionality, which incorporates a range of values into the policy-making process, suggests that agriculture can provide a variety of social and environmental services that society values. However, due to the difficulty in marketing these services, they are likely to be undersupplied unless governments intervene to compensate farmers for their contributions (Greer, 2019). The transition from a policy framework based on exceptional arrangements to a 'post-exceptional' policy arrangement, characterized by more targeted policy results and strategic goals such as sustainability, climate impact and animal welfare, is perceived as a transformative shift (Zwaan, Alons & Voorst, 2023).

Agricultural exceptionalism has led to a unique relationship between the state and the agricultural sector, where agricultural interests have a strong influence on policy making and cooperation (Skogstad, 1998). This close cooperation makes it difficult to change policy from outside if the agricultural parties want to maintain the status quo, which complicates attempts to make national agricultural policies more sustainable. This close cooperation is referred to as corporatism, now that we know how agrarian exceptionalism led to a corporatist system, it is important to look at how this system influenced agricultural policy and how it relates to the agricultural agreement.

2.3 Corporatism

Corporatism in agricultural policy means a system where the government negotiates directly with agricultural groups, usually in an institutionalized way. This has often resulted in a package deal where both parties agree on policies that support industry interests in exchange for contributions and involvement in government policy (Wisserhof, 2000). Siaroff (1999) defines corporatism as the state, centralized unions, and employers managing the country's economy in a coordinated, cooperative, and systematic manner, presumably to the mutual advantage of all three parties. First, workers must be organized in a limited number of strong unions. Second, a few strong companies, which are part of a strong employers' association, control the majority of the economy. Third, there is a centralisation of wage negotiations between companies and unions. Finally, a strong state is actively involved in the economy (Siaroff, 1999). In recent years, opinions about the likelihood of corporatism spreading changed, as the institution seemed to decline in some countries during financial recession years. This gave rise to the theory that corporatism is a phenomenon thriving under favorable conditions that tends to collapse when resources become limited and interest groups have to bargain more fiercely to divide up a pie that is finite rather than constantly growing (Gallagher et al., 2011).

According to Andeweg & Irwin (2014) there is a high degree of corporatism in the interaction between Dutch interest groups and governmental agencies. Pressure groups have evolved from their original structure of organizations attempting to influence government policy from outside the government without participating in the process or taking accountability for the decisions made. Nowadays, organized interests are included in the decision-making process and stand by the decisions made in front of their members. Gallagher et al. (2011) add to this as it is noticed that European farming groups have a significant history of being deeply involved in the political system and having a disproportionate amount of influence over policy makers compared to other groups with an interest in agriculture, such as environmentalists. For a long time, agricultural policy networks were established based on the assumption that interest groups and decision-makers would be mutually dependent. As a result, the farmers lobby's influence is typically used in a highly institutionalized manner (Anania et al., 2015; Bednaříková & Jílková, 2012). Historically, ministries of agriculture have consulted with farmer organizations on a variety of issues. According to Ioris (2018) the involvement of companies, supermarkets, and investment funds restricts agricultural policy significantly. Disputes between farmers and governmental agencies are often resolved internally, with other interested parties excluded if possible. As a result, farmer groups have often participated in the implementation of policies. The close collaboration between farmers and the government service may seem corporatist at first glance. However, this decision-making organization resembles a tight policy network rather than an example of corporatism, as no other social partner has any formal participation in the political process (Gallagher et al., 2011, Termeer, 1990).

However, Wisserhof (2000) notes that Dutch agricultural policy underwent a change after the 1980s. The Ministry of Agriculture had to shift from a sole focus on agricultural production to a balanced approach that took into account the environment, wildlife, food quality, and animal welfare, in addition to agriculture, due to increasing environmental concerns (Bekke, de Vries & Neelen, 1994). The unions representing farmers were infuriated by the agricultural ministry's changing stance. It appeared that the government was no longer representing the farmers, and the unions were not consulted when developing policies. Miscommunications, disappointments, disputes, and fights between the unions and the ministry seem to have accompanied these events. The farmers began to doubt the legitimacy of the unions and distanced themselves from their previous representatives due to the unfavorable news of numerous regulations and restrictions. This resulted in the gradual phasing out of the long-standing corporatist system. However, In 1994, the ministry introduced a new technique for managing agri-environmental issues. Instead of relying on the typical regulatory route, individual farmers, agribusinesses, consumers, and environmental organizations were given more influence (Wisserhof, 2000).

Agricultural policy has long been shaped by a corporatist policy system. However, this system has declined in importance over the last few years. As the corporatist approach began to decline, more influence was given to other actors, such as civil society groups and private actors. Instead of the government strongly dominating regulation, these traditional boundaries were blurred and different actors were involved in the policy process. This shift is also referred to in the literature as moving from government to governance. Given the shift towards governance, it is important to examine how this has affected agricultural policy and whether the wider involvement of different stakeholders under the agriculture agreement has influenced this process.

2.4 Government to Governance

The concept of governance includes a broad range of organizations and individuals that extend beyond official state structures, surpassing the limitations of the traditional idea of government. To tackle social and economic challenges, it involves a dynamic process characterized by blurred roles and boundaries between the public, private, and voluntary sectors. Governance operates through autonomous self-governing networks, breaking away from hierarchical authority, recognizing the power reliance in communal action. In addition, governance emphasizes the ability to achieve objectives using innovative tools and methods, without relying solely on government authority (Rhodes, 2012; Stoker, 1998).

Richards & Smith (2002) depict this transition from government to governance as the transition from a 'Weberian State' to a "Postmodern State". This shift of responsibility increases the complexity of the

policymaking process. The Weberian bureaucratic state represents a traditional and centralized model of governance. It is based on a strong hierarchy, where decision-making follows a top-down structure. The state exercises control through a centralized authority, maintaining a clear and structured approach. In contrast, the postmodern state is based on a decentralized and adaptable form of governance. Governance in the postmodern state is characterized by hierarchy, which emphasizes networks and collaborative structures over strict hierarchies. This model is pluralistic which leads to diverse perspectives and encourages a decentralized state. As a result lines of accountability become blurred. Governance shifts from central control to central steering, reflecting a more dynamic and responsive approach (Richards & Smith, 2002).

Rhodes (2012) claims that there has been a shift in the pattern and use of state power from government to governance. Three waves of governance are identified: network governance, meta governance and interpretive governance. The first wave of governance, networked governance, represents a transition from a hierarchical bureaucracy to a model where the state relies on markets and networks for public service delivery. Network governance envisions a decentralized world where state power is dispersed among diverse networks involving public, voluntary, and private organizations. The second wave, meta-governance, refers to the governance of government and governance institutions, such as markets and networks. It describes the state's transition from direct control to coordination. In this system, other autonomous groups carry out policy, offer services, and exercise self-regulation. Examples of steering techniques include setting rules, sharing stories, and allocating resources strategically. The state's adaptive approach provides flexibility and reflects the complexity of modern government because various techniques are used in different circumstances and periods (van der Steen, Scherpenisse & Van Twist, 2015). The third wave of governance, interpretive governance, shifts the emphasis from institutions to meanings in action. It examines how actors' perceptions of behaviors and beliefs influence governance. This method highlights the ongoing process of interpretation, dispute, and action that results in dynamic rule patterns. It emphasizes how patterns of governance are socially constructed (Rhodes, 2012).

According to Steurer (2013) governance offers additional opportunities for partnerships amongst the three sectors of state, civil society and market, making alternative kinds of regulation feasible. Governments use a variety of hard (legally binding) and soft (non-legally binding) rules, as well as financial tools to influence behavior and advance desired social and commercial objectives. Business self-regulation is the voluntary establishment of public interest rules by individual companies or entire industries. This can take the form of industry agreements or codes of conduct. These actions are often influenced by and in response to external regulatory pressures. Civil regulation involves civil society organizations influencing businesses through formal standard-setting and informal pressuring. This can include confrontational tactics with stakeholders, market forces, and cooperation with governmental

actors. Co-regulation refers to cooperative steering practices among businesses, governments, and civil society actors. These actors use tools such as partnerships, certification programs, and negotiated agreements. They often operate outside of market and hierarchical governance structures and emphasize the intricate relationships between different regulatory approaches (Steurer, 2013). This trend is also apparent in agriculture, where a shift in roles has led to an increase in private partnerships and regulations. Agribusiness players are taking on regulatory responsibilities and often collaborate with social actors such as NGOs, who act as co-regulators. They monitor these established guidelines through the market or by joining a social organization. The Dutch agricultural industry has shown that promoting progress towards new public values necessitates a shared vision for the future, mutual interdependence between public and private stakeholders, and effective management tools. When public and private interests converge, well-organized private groups can promote animal welfare, environmental protection, or both. If win-win scenarios are not possible, it is important to reevaluate public roles. It is incorrect to view conflicts between top-down and bottom-up, as well as market and state, as mutually incompatible options (PBL, 2018a).

Dutch agriculture also underwent a shift from government to governance in the 1990s. According to van Tatenhove (1993) the state no longer solely controlled national policy, although it retained its normative authority. Private entities played a significant role in regional policymaking. Public-private partnerships had become increasingly common in policymaking. Regional policymaking networks involved both public and private entities, blurring the traditional boundaries between the state, the market, and civil society (van Tatenhove, 1993). The shift has left the agriculture industry unclear and directionless, which is having a detrimental impact on the industry as a whole. The lack of a coherent political discourse on the goals of agricultural policy and intended sectoral change, coupled with a lack of a collective vision for the future of agriculture and societal commitment to it, is a primary outcome of this disengagement. This lack of focus causes policy development to stall and makes it challenging to solve the problems facing the industry. Moreover, the agriculture sector is now subject to market forces without adequate protection or support from the government. This has left farmers feeling increasingly isolated (PBL, 2018a).

As a result, farmers and their organizations have become increasingly independent. It is noteworthy that formerly powerful farmers' organizations seem to have lost their direction. LTO now serves competing interests due to specialization and fragmentation in the industry. This makes defining clear interests and reaching agreements on viewpoints increasingly difficult. Farmers are no longer relying on LTO for knowledge provision due to technological advancements. Additionally, organizations advocating for specific interests, such as new interest groups, have become competitors. This makes it more challenging for legislators to work with the agricultural industry to cooperate and engage in negotiations, as it weakens the industry's lobbying strength (Karel, 2013).

The PBL (2018) emphasizes the necessity of a deliberate governance philosophy for agriculture that considers the ability of the government to coordinate and implement new public values. The government has a responsibility to oversee major initiatives connected to changing public ideals. It is important that policymakers direct the discourse towards tangible measures that align with evolving public ideals, while remaining within the frameworks of governmental authority. The many parties involved in the agriculture industry must work together to achieve this. In order to achieve this, it is essential to set an agenda that takes into account the complexities of the agriculture sector, which is characterized by a multitude of vested interests and fragmentation. By establishing a clear direction for the industry, decision-makers can prioritize issues and guide its growth, while ensuring that the general public's values and environmental goals are upheld (PBL, 2018a). The performance of this role is more challenging when the government's influence is diminished by the actions of market parties and interest groups.

The Dutch agricultural policy landscape is characterized by three important developments. Firstly, there is noticeable Europeanization, which emphasizes the multilevel character of the policy. Regulations are established at the European level but implemented nationally. Secondly, there has been a shift in the type of government interventions, with the role of government changing dramatically from an incentive to a regulator. Thirdly, there has been a shift in the relationship between the state, the market, and society. Private parties now play a more significant role in the agricultural sector, while the government has reduced its guiding role. When private parties play a larger role, this leads to the questioning of consensus building projects like the agricultural agreement. Even when a government body orchestrates such processes, guided by expert advice, the challenge remains whether these efforts can go beyond reflecting the interests of the most powerful influences, such as corporations and agricultural lobby groups, and achieve a more balanced representation.

As the number of different types of actors has increased, the importance of lobbying has also grown, as different parties seek to influence policy in their favor. Actors can exercise their power in various ways. To find out how different parties exert influence, it is important to look at the different forms of power and influence and how this may have affected the agricultural agreement.

2.5 Forms of power

The concept of power and influence is explained in different ways in the literature. According to Aarts (2003), there are three distinct faces of power which contribute to an actor's capacity to achieve desired outcomes in policy making. The first face of power is decisional power, which is characterized by the ability to influence decision-making processes. This is mainly present within the field of policy-making and political influence. The second face is discursive power, which involves the capacity to shape and

reframe discourses around a certain subject. This involves actors framing the 'discursive space' in a particular way for political discussion. The third aspect is regulatory power, which concerns the ability to reshape rules in both discourse and social institutions (Aarts, 2003).

Lukes (2021) also describes three faces of power: decision-making, agenda-setting, and thought control. The first face, decision-making, involves individuals or organizations taking actions based on their chosen course of action. The concept of agenda-setting is the second aspect of power, which involves controlling the topics of conversation. This includes influencing which issues are brought to the forefront and which topics are excluded. For example, those in power may shape the conversation to avoid addressing matters that could be advantageous to others. Agenda-setting power is demonstrated when citizens engage in activities such as demonstrations, advocating for their interests, and attempting to influence the discussion agenda. The third face of power is thought control, where certain issues are deliberately excluded from discourse to prevent individuals from recognizing or understanding their genuine interests (Lukes, 2021).

According to Clapp (2021), powerful agricultural companies have a great impact on politics, which has significant ramifications for representation and equity in society. Large agri-food corporations that dominate key markets possess the power to shape food governance and policy through various means (Berkhout et al, 2022). They can directly engage in lobbying efforts to influence lawmakers towards policies that align with their interests. To shape the policy agenda more covertly, leading companies in the seed and agrochemical industries often spend significant amounts of money on public relations initiatives to influence public conversation and narratives about their brand and products. One of these tactics is to present problems in a way that portrays their products in a positive light. Concentrated companies in the agri-food industry also frequently fund university-based research on subjects that align with their interests (Hendrickson, Howard, Miller & Constance, 2020; Howard, 2021). Market leaders possess structural power, which allows them to shape the regulatory environment without engaging in costly lobbying, advertising, or study funding. Governments may be hesitant to implement policies that could incentivize large enterprises to depart and take employment with them, given that these firms are substantial employers.

According to the PBL (2018a) the Dutch agricultural complex has various facets, which are increasingly leading to a fragmented social debate. The legitimacy of both the sector and government policy is under pressure in various corners of society. The social debate on agriculture is a complex subject due to the various problem definitions and perspectives. These differing definitions often result in conflicting solutions being proposed (PBL, 2018a). Smeets (2017) distinguishes between four viewpoints on sustainable agriculture, each with corresponding issue descriptions and solutions. The 'knowledge and innovation' approach identifies inefficiencies and losses as issues, which can be addressed through

technological innovation. The 'market functioning' viewpoint highlights unequal playing fields and failing markets in agriculture, where the market should incentivize farmers to produce sustainably. 'Spatial planning' emphasizes the spatial aspects of agricultural issues. Improved spatial planning is the solution, and political decision-making plays a crucial role. The 'system functioning' approach prioritizes the agricultural production chain, and collaboration within the chain is considered essential to finding a solution. Candel (2018) presents a final perspective on the issue of scale, arguing that the continuous increase in scale can be problematic for agriculture. The solution lies in smaller-scale agriculture according to this perspective. Because these varying perspectives have distinct definitions of problems and solutions, they will also prioritize different topics on the policy agenda.

So there are different ways in which different actors with different forms of power will try to exert influence. Now that we know how different actors can exercise different forms of influence, it is important to find out how this has influenced the agricultural agreement. However, in order to understand how different forms of power influence policy, we first need to understand how policy change works according to different scholars and frameworks. In this way, we can find out which way of looking at policy change can best explain the process of the agricultural agreement.

2.6 Policy Change

The process of policymaking involves the development and implementation of decisions by government agencies with the objective of addressing societal issues (Smith & Katikireddi 2013). According to Ley (2015) environmental policymaking is a challenging task as it often requires balancing a conflict of values. Creating public policy requires a decision-making framework. The policymaking process involves agenda-setting, policy development, policy adoption, policy execution, and policy assessment. Theories of public policy making are evaluated based on their ability to clarify the policymaking process (Ley, 2015). There are three types of policy shifts. Incremental policy shifts often occur gradually, with policymakers reaching consensus. Significant policy shifts occur when there is a significant shift in policy beliefs. A paradigmatic shift occurs when the underlying ideology, norms, and values that typically guide policy change are altered (Smith & Katikireddi 2013).

There are different approaches to analyzing how policy is made. Some theories suggest that policy changes occur at specific moments when several factors come together. Others emphasize the ongoing dynamics within policy landscapes, highlighting the complex relationships between different actors. Finally, some frameworks focus on how change occurs within coalitions that work together over time, reflecting the interplay of beliefs and strategies among group members. These different ways of looking at policy change show that the concept of policy change can vary. Frameworks like the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) see policy change as something that can happen suddenly. The MSF comprises

various streams, namely the problem stream, the policy stream, and the political stream. When these streams converge at the opportune moment, they create a policy window, which can be further strengthened by a policy entrepreneur. There are various ways to characterize an objective situation as a problem, and different actors may perceive something as a problem and try to convince others that action is necessary. Defining problems can be a challenging and politicized task, with numerous possible characteristics. The MSF highlights this difficulty. Policy communities, often composed of interest groups, scholars and government individuals are the forums for discussions and definitions of problem streams (Knaggård, 2015). Encouraged by individuals who may be referred to as "policy entrepreneurs," each distinct perspective on the issue often finds supporters. Although they may not have a specific solution in mind, these individuals urge the government to take notice of the issue and act accordingly. Defined problems can arise from the gradual accumulation of knowledge over time or from abrupt focal events like an abrupt deterioration of the situation (Herweg, Huß & Zohlhöfer, 2015). In the policy stream, various approaches to solving the issue are evaluated before selecting one. MSF suggests that policies with specific characteristics are more likely to be chosen, such as technical feasibility, adherence to community values, support from policy entrepreneurs, cost-effectiveness, and administrative and public support. In the same way that problem entrepreneurs advocate for government intervention in certain circumstances they deem problematic, policy entrepreneurs have a solution they think works well in nearly every circumstance. Policy entrepreneurs frequently focus on an ideology (Ackrill et al., 2017; Hoefler, 2022). The political stream is formed by the interplay between the national mood, elected officials involved in decision-making, and interest groups engaged on all fronts. When a problem is identified and a viable solution is found, it creates an opportunity for action. This brief period of time is commonly referred to as the policy window. This is where policy entrepreneurs connect a policy with a problem and work to gain the support of decision-makers through votes for the issue/policy package. If successful, new laws are passed. The mechanism proceeds to the next choice regardless of whether new legislation is made (Hoefler, 2022).

But there are also frameworks that see policy change as something about the dynamics within policy landscapes, such as Policy Network Analysis (PNA). PNA examines the relationships and interactions among different actors involved in policy-making. The PNA approach is a framework designed to explain relationships within a complex web of different actors. These actors may include governments, the private sector, NGOs and international organizations. PNA focuses on how these actors influence and shape policy outcomes through interactions, alliances and conflicts. In this way, the dynamics of decision-making can be determined, an important part of which is how the power relations between different actors work. In the context of policy communities, there are two types of policy networks: issue networks and policy communities. Issue networks are informal connections between a diverse range of actors on specific policy issues. Policy communities, on the other hand, are more closely knit groups with shared interests and a higher level of cooperation (Coleman & Perl, 1999). In addition,

there are three levels of scale that PNA examines: the macro level, the meso level and the micro level. The macro level refers to the broader context in which policy-making occurs. This encompasses global economic, political and social influences on national policies, globalization, international organizations, the rise of ideologies such as neoliberalism and economic crises. The meso level is concerned with the interactions that occur within networks. This pertains to policy networks, which are groups of actors that work together to achieve specific goals. Furthermore, the study of the balance of interests and the resolution of conflicts is a key aspect of this approach. At the micro level, the actions and relationships of individual actors are analyzed. The study places a significant emphasis on the individual policymakers and their decision-making processes, as well as their interactions with one another (Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012).

Finally, there are frameworks that focus on how change occurs within coalitions that work together over time. An example of this is the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). ACF is a framework designed to address "wicked" problems, meaning they involve multiple players from different levels of the government, significant technical disagreements, and severe objective conflicts. The framework assumes that participants can only have influence in today's complex governmental processes, both legally and substantively, if they specialize in policy subsystems. Within these subsystems, individuals consistently attempt to influence policy where specialization is crucial to accomplish this (Sabatier & Weible, 2019). The policy subsystem is the central analytical unit for comprehending policy procedures. It is defined by the policy issue, the geographical extent of the subsystem, and the players who either directly or indirectly influence its affairs. The subsystem initially comprises a wide range of elements that engage in complex interactions to generate outputs and consequences related to a specific policy subject. These elements comprise actor qualities such as belief systems and political resources, as well as material and organizational traits. In policy subsystems, integrated and non-integrated players are distinguished regarding a particular policy subject. At last, policy subsystems may experience dramatic or gradual changes, as well as periods of stability. During these periods of stability or change these policy subsystems are somewhat independent (Jenkins-Smith, Nohrstedt, Weible & Ingold, 2018).

All three ways of looking at policy change and exemplar frameworks have different advantages and disadvantages. A limitation of MSF is that the separation of three streams oversimplifies the actual functioning of policy processes. As a consequence, the crucial nuances and interconnections between the streams may be overlooked. Furthermore, the model places a significant emphasis on the role of timing and chance, given that the three streams must converge. This suggests that there is a high degree of coincidence within the policy-making process (Cairney & Jones, 2016). In addition, MSF is harder to falsify due to its flexible framework, as well as the absence of a hypothesis (Sabatier, 2007). This is in line with another criticism of MSF that argues that it has a high subjectivity of interpretation (Ruvalcaba-Gomez, Criado & Gil-Garcia (2023)). A limitation of PNA is its limited generalizability, as

it is focused on a specific policy network. Additionally, there is a strong focus on structures, which allows individuals within the network to exert limited influence. Furthermore, the analysis is constrained by a narrow focus on historical aspects of policy (Coleman & Perl, 1999). ACF also has some shortcomings. According to (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994) the framework does not give enough consideration to individual agency, as it emphasizes group behavior in coalitions over the agency of individuals within those coalitions. This approach does not acknowledge the impact of influential individuals or small groups on policy outcomes. Additionally, the ACF assumes that coalitions are stable. Coalition memberships can fluctuate and coalitions may form or disband in response to policy concerns or shifts in the political landscape. The ACF's focus on internal dynamics within coalitions and policy subsystems sometimes ignores the impact of larger institutional, socioeconomic, or cultural factors on policy processes and results (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994).

Despite the shortcomings of the MSF, this framework is chosen to analyze the agricultural agreement because it offers a greater degree of flexibility than the ACF and the PNA. In addition, the MSF is better able to take into account a certain degree of ambiguity and overlapping powers that are often present in national policy making. In addition, the complexity of the agricultural policy landscape is made clear by dividing it into three different streams. Now that the MSF has been selected, it is worth explaining in more detail what this framework entails and what variables are included.

3. Conceptual model

The MSF framework was developed by political scientist John W. Kingdon in the 1980s. The framework was designed to help understand how political agendas are set and how decisions are made. Starting at the point of bounded rationality, MSF highlights the importance of ideas, uncertainty, and time-based structure in the formulation of public policy. Meaning that decision makers are limited by information, time and resources which prevents perfect decision making (Baumgartner, 2016). MSF expands on this concept of streams in which three different streams in the form of the political, policy and problem stream are designated in policy formulation. According to Herweg (2016) the three different streams in MSF operate largely independently. However, the coupling of streams is even more important in MSF. Although they operate independently according to their own dynamics, streams can come together at certain critical moments that can lead to policy changes, this is called a policy window. Before a stream can be linked, it must meet certain requirements, which are explained below. When the requirements in all three streams have been met, or are ‘‘ripe’’, they can be linked by a policy entrepreneur. When policy entrepreneurs link the streams, it creates an opportunity for policy change during periods of significant opportunity, or a policy window (Øvald, 2024). However, each stream has to fulfill certain requirements to be activated.

3.1 Problem Stream

Which policies are considered depends very much on how certain issues are viewed and how they are framed, this is shown in the problem stream. This stream deals specifically with how issues are recognized and defined as problems that require government attention. It is activated when decision-makers, influenced by various factors, identify certain conditions as pressing problems that require government attention. For example, there can be focusing events that draw attention to previously unnoticed concerns among policymakers, the media, and the general public. As a result, these events attract a lot of public attention and therefore influence the policy process because this attention politicizes the solutions. Here, one should think of natural disasters, major accidents or health crises. Such occurrences are linked to specific issues and serve to greatly increase the urgency for change or action (Birkland & Warnement, 2016). A high-profile event, such as a major oil spill, can abruptly focus attention on environmental regulation, leading to rapid policy consideration and action due to increased public and government awareness. Birkland & Schwaeble (2019) mention the September 11 terrorist attacks, a Mexican earthquake and the Deepwater Horizon oil spills as examples of focusing events because of the major impact of these events on the related policy areas.

In policy making, actors will utilize a diverse array of indicators to proactively identify, monitor, and address emerging issues in the policy landscape. These indicators may include a multitude of rates,

ratios, and anecdotes, as well as measures that indicate the relative severity of a specific issue. They are generally objective measurements of issues. Indicators are frequently employed in the context of policy discussions as a means of identifying potential challenges, with the objective of gradually highlighting areas of concern (Jones et al., 2016). DeLeo (2018) mentions various indicators such as the number of cases of illness, usage of public transportation and frequency of drug overdoses. These are quantitative variables that say something about the state of certain issues. These indicators are used in different policy contexts to demonstrate the urgency of a problem and to encourage policy makers to take action. In contrast to quantitative variables in the form of indicators, there are also qualitative variables which are referred to as feedback. Feedback is about information about the performance or impact of policies and programs is received from a variety of sources, including within the government, interest groups, civil society and citizens. This information often reflects the experiences and perspectives of those affected by or involved in policy implementation and is therefore of a qualitative nature (Kingdon, 2014). DeLeo & Duarte (2022) mention the opioid crisis in the United States where qualitative indicators in the form of opioid related death rates and qualitative feedback in the form of public statements by doctors reflecting on the crisis influenced drug policy. In the context of agricultural policy, for example, environmental interest groups will use excessive nitrogen emissions to strengthen their position and will address its negative consequences in a normative manner.

Problems are generally dealt with by the institutions responsible for these issues. The effectiveness with which a problem is solved often depends on institutional capacity. The capacity of institutions to cope with challenges is referred to as load. It is unlikely that a new issue will receive attention from legislators if they are already engaged with a significant number of other, more pressing matters. In addition, this institutional capacity is linked to the amount of resources it has to deal with the challenges it faces (Jones et al., 2016). Zahariadis (2019) mentions the institutional complexity of the EU and how it can both constrain and enable policy decisions. In addition, the national legislative systems of the United States and the United Kingdom are compared, emphasizing how different legislative systems the speed of policy change and implementation. This field will focus on other pressing issues that have been addressed by the government, which have resulted in a lack of attention being paid to this particular area of policy. It will also assess the institutional capacity to address the challenges faced by governmental institutions and the potential impact of significant changes within these institutions regarding agricultural policy. The activation of the problem stream is determined by feedback, indicators, focusing events and load. When enough of these variables are met, the stream is ready to be linked (DeLeo & Duarte, 2022).

3.2 Political Stream

Whether certain policy proposals are viable depends heavily on the social or political relations in a society, these factors are indicated in the political stream. The political stream characterizes the present social and political climate and influences the kinds of policy proposals that are being considered by moderating the impact of public sentiment and the overall mood of the country. It also characterizes the makeup of government institutions. The allocation of power among interest groups is a crucial component of the political stream. Some organizations or groups hold greater leverage over the government and political system, which influences how people organize to support or oppose changes to policies (DeLeo & Duarte, 2022).

How organizations are organized and what organizations receive support depends on the mood on certain issues in society. The prevailing sentiment of the general public with regard to matters of policy, ideals, or potential solutions is reflected in the national mood. It provides insight into the prevailing viewpoints and attitudes that may influence policy decisions. The national mood plays an important role in determining which issues receive attention and which policy initiatives are politically feasible given the perception of these measures. This is partly because the preferences and priorities of the electorate are important for, among other things, popularity for political parties and thus the number of votes (Herweg et al., 2015). Zohlnhöfer & Huß (2016) mention how the national mood in the United States urged for sacrificing civil liberties in the interest of national security and how the German public opinion influenced the nuclear policy after the Fukushima nuclear disaster. The concept of national mood is challenging to define, but it will primarily refer to the social backing for agricultural policy in this context.

The national mood influences how people vote in elections, which then influences the government and the policies of the institutions. The collective political stance that political parties hold within relevant institutions and that informs their choices and activities is called party ideology. For instance, political parties may modify their stances or adhere more rigidly to them for electoral purposes. This also encompasses the occurrence of elections or the appointment of a new president that may result in a shift in political attention from one subject to another. This phenomenon has the capacity to influence the prioritization of policy issues and the formulation of government agendas (Mu, 2018). In these institutions, it affects the behavior of the parties, allowing or restricting different alternatives. Ultimately, the parameters of appropriate political behavior are established by party ideology, which shapes the dynamics of political processes (Jones et al., 2016). Herweg et al. (2015) mention how labor market reforms were implemented in Germany by the government when it became clear that addressing unemployment would be crucial for the next election. Despite initial resistance and lack of support from interest groups these reforms were pushed through because their successful implementation was seen

as necessary for electoral success. In this context, the analysis will primarily focus on the composition of the government at the time and the appointment of ministers. The ideological orientation of the political party in power will influence the outcome of elections and the composition of the subsequent government. This will subsequently influence the formulation of policy.

The composition of the government and the policies pursued have an impact on how vocal interest groups are with regard to certain objectives. This affects relations in the public debate and is called balance of interests. The concept of balance of interests refers to the collective position of relevant interests, which may include different advocacy organizations and stakeholders involved in a particular subject. These interest groups are typically composed of individuals who share a common interest and seek to influence public policy. They engage in campaigns that establish the policy agenda on a specific issue and a particular policy measure to resolve it. Frequently, these interest groups also have connections to the political arena in which they are attempting to exert influence. This influences the landscape of decision-making and policy development by reflecting the collective viewpoints of various actors (Henstra, 2010). Fuchs (2017) mentions how EU fishing policy was influenced by a high degree of NGO and EU parliament influence and how EU climate policy was made less ambitious due to a high involvement of business lobbies. The concept of balance of interests will be applied to the actors present in the agricultural policy landscape. For example, the rise or decline of political parties may impact the political landscape, as well as the increased activity of agrarian or nature lobby groups advocating for a specific issue. The activation of the political stream is thus activated by the balance of interests, the national mood and party ideology. The stream is prepared for linking when the required values of these variables are reached.

3.3 Policy Stream

Policy-making is influenced by the opportunities and limitations resulting from financial resources, technical feasibility and normative acceptance within society. The policy stream includes various proposed solutions to problems, which are subject to strong competition. This activity is often characterized as a 'loose connection' between civil servants, lobby groups, scholars, investigators, and experts who work together to develop solutions for specific policy fields. Over time, weaker ideas tend to sink to the bottom of the policy stream, while the best or most politically prominent ideas rise to the top. Policymakers often rely on pre-existing concepts from the policy stream instead of creating entirely new policies (DeLeo & Duarte, 2022).

First of all, the solution to a problem must be technically feasible. This technical feasibility can be defined as the capacity to develop and/or carry out an idea in a manner that ensures its viability as a realistic option. Proponents of a policy initiative will try to get this proposal onto the policy agenda by

highlighting the feasibility of implementation and financial resources (Lovell, 2016). Derwort, Jager & Newig (2022) mention how the assessment of the technical possibilities for the energy transition at the time led to increased investment to ensure that the technology at the time was adequate for the energy transition. Technical feasibility is therefore closely linked to the willingness to invest in new technologies. This resource adequacy refers to the attainability of the necessary resources for a policy proposal (Kagan, 2019). Angervil (2021) highlights how the adequacy of resources under the Obama administration, embodied in substantial financial commitments, has been crucial to the implementation of education policy reforms. Agricultural policy will be influenced by technical feasibility, which assesses the practicality and effectiveness of agricultural innovations in addressing environmental issues. It will also be influenced by resource adequacy, which depends on the willingness of governments to allocate sufficient financial and physical resources within the current political climate.

In addition to financial resources and technical capabilities, policy is also strongly influenced by the norms and values of a society. This value acceptability can be defined as the probability that a proposal will adhere to the prevailing value restrictions, thereby enhancing the probability of its survival. This applies not only in society but also in the policy community. So there must be enough resources and technical capabilities but it must also resonate with prevailing values (Cairney & Zahariadis, 2016). Kusi-Ampofo, Church, Conteh & Heinmiller (2015) show how a new health insurance scheme was introduced in Ghana because it was more in line with community values. In agricultural policy the focus will be on the sometimes conflicting principles of environmental policy and the intended importance of nitrogen-emitting activities. One potential solution to the issue of limited housing is to shrink the agricultural sector. This would allow for more housing to be constructed. Another example could be the focus on shrinking industry, with agriculture being kept out of harm's way.

3.4 Policy Entrepreneurship

For policy change to happen, there needs to be social and political support, sufficient resources and technical capacity, and a policy issue needs to be seen as urgent enough. In MSF, it is important that policy entrepreneurs turn the activation of the streams into actual policy change. MSF emphasizes the significance of policy entrepreneurs in both situations - individuals who are willing to make significant political and personal investments to ensure policy implementation. Entrepreneurs in government may include specialists, scholars, advocates, lawmakers, legislative staff, and administrators. They must be able to connect the dots between items from the three streams to take advantage of short-lived opportunities brought about by crises or political events (DeLeo & Duarte, 2022). This necessitates the presence of certain traits, such as tenacity, political intelligence, and negotiation abilities. They may also take the form of institutions or covertly operating policy networks (Schumacher, 2022). In addition, a policy entrepreneur must have the needed resources to operate, such as financial capital and temporal

resources, as well as intangible assets, such as reputation and energy. Policy entrepreneurs employ a strategy of resource allocation that is designed to advance their policy objectives (Jones et al., 2016; Schumacher, 2022). Combined with the resources and qualities of a political entrepreneur, the strategies implemented are also important. These conducted strategies include multiple activities such as negotiation techniques to framing information in a certain way, which are designed with the goal of influencing and aligning the various streams. Here one should think of building coalitions but also venue shopping to create conditions for finding their desired solution. This could also be done by excluding opponents and competing solutions from discussion, this can be achieved by delineating specific policy areas to exclude certain actors (Johannesson & Qvist, 2020). Gunn (2017) highlights an Australian economist who has had a major impact on Australia's economic engagement with Asia and on Australian climate policy through his expertise and advocacy. Policy entrepreneurs can also be organizations or groups of people. Ruvalcaba-Gomez et al. (2023) highlight how members of the newly elected Madrid City Council, with backgrounds in civil society, used their positions to implement open government principles during a crucial political window following a political change. In the context of agricultural policy, the focus will be on individuals and organizations that not only have access to the decision-making processes in agricultural policy, but also command respect because of their historical knowledge of the sector and can stimulate cooperation.

3.5 Policy Windows

There are critical moments in policymaking when the factors are in place for this actual adjustment of policy. It requires committed individuals who know how to translate political, social and technical aspects into policy. In MSF, at crucial moments, the political, policy, and problem streams intersect. Only then is a problem recognized on the government's agenda, and the public policy process begins to address it (Ackrill et al., 2017). Sometimes seemingly unconnected external focal events, such as crises, catastrophes, or the existence or absence of policy entrepreneurs inside or outside of governments, might cause policy window openings. In some cases, established events such as budget deadlines or periodic elections may present similar opportunities. Policy windows can also be opened by the emergence of pressing issues or events in the political stream (Béland & Howlett, 2016). Policy entrepreneurs can advocate for the consideration of their preferred problems and solutions on government agendas due to this convergence. Some events, such as those that follow elections, have predictable timing, but there are also periods when it is reasonable to assume that they will occur (Howlett, 2019).

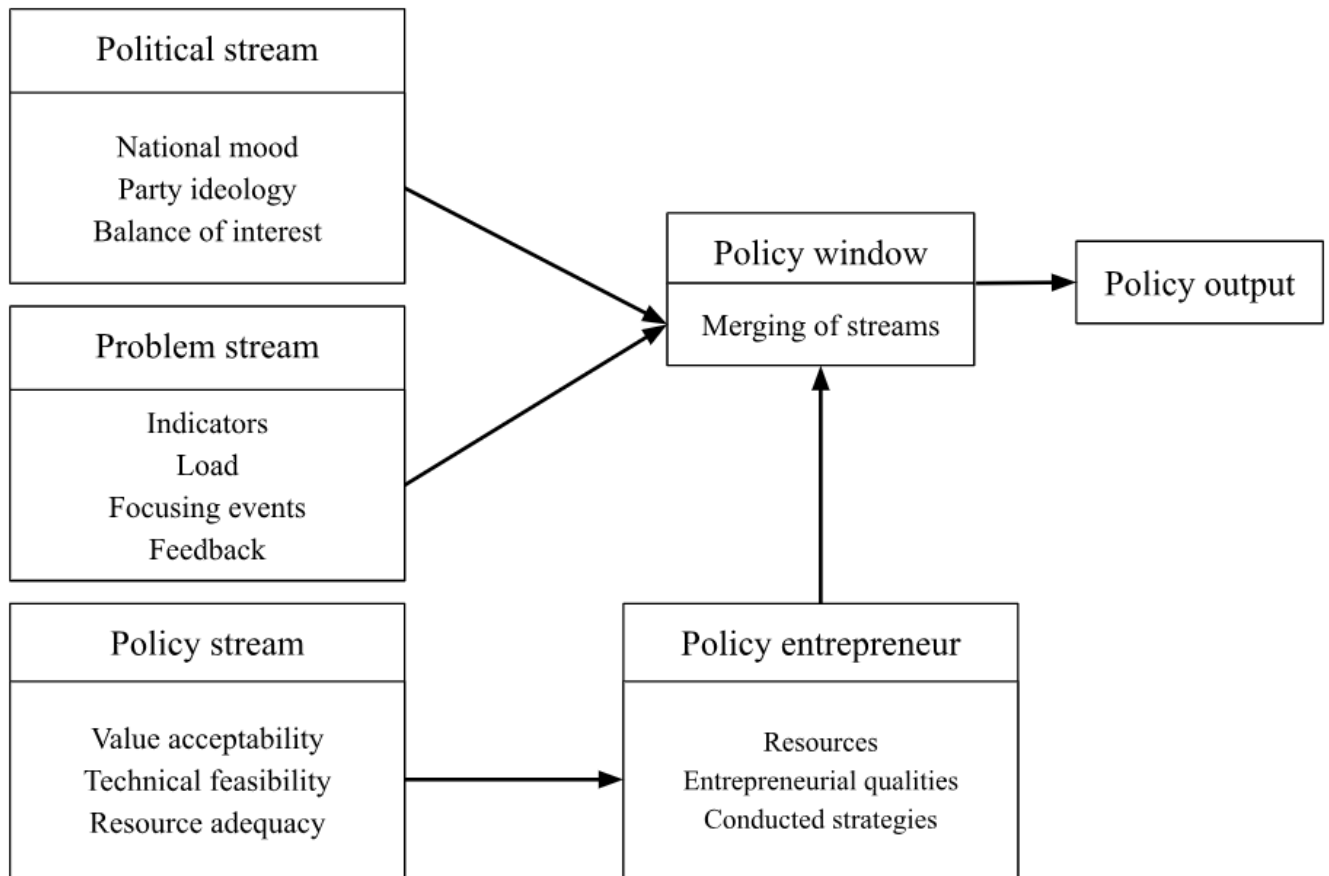


Figure 1: Conceptual framework, adapted from Mu (2018)

As can be seen in the conceptual model, there are three streams with their corresponding indicators, these indicators may or may not apply in the empirical analysis, when all of them apply, a stream is activated. In the case of the political stream, this happens under the influence of a policy entrepreneur who proposes certain solutions based on personal preferences and possible solutions. When all three streams are activated by the fulfillment of the corresponding indicators, a policy window can open. This means that there is an opportunity for policy change, and when policy change occurs, it leads to a policy output. Saurugger & Terpan (2016) highlight how during the economic crisis in the Eurozone, the problem stream was characterized by debt issues across multiple countries. In the policy stream, discussions led to the development of stricter financial policy and the politics stream saw a coalition led by Germany advocate for new policies where the European Commission and European Central Bank are mentioned as policy entrepreneurs. How operationalization will take place in the context of this study is further explored in the next chapter.

4. Methodology

4.1 Philosophy

The three main components of research are epistemology—the process by which knowledge is generated—ontology—what is known about the human world that researchers can learn about—and philosophical perspective—the researcher's own philosophical stance that directs their work (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Ontology concerns the certainty of assertions a researcher may make about reality, specifically the nature or existence of objects under study. There are diverse ontological stances, including the binary opposition between realism and relativism. Realist ontology maintains that there is only one reality that can be investigated, comprehended, and considered as truth, and that the existence of the actual world is distinct from human experience. According to the theory of relativist ontology, reality is perceived as being created by the mind and is relative to each individual experiencing it at a particular moment and location. Therefore, there is no single objective reality (Van Thiel, 2014). Epistemology covers all aspects of validity and techniques of knowledge acquisition. This includes defining knowledge claims, methods for creating or gaining knowledge, and assessing its application. Researchers' approaches to gaining knowledge are influenced by epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Moon & Blackman, 2014).

This research is based on the ontological perspective of structural realism. Structural realism acknowledges the existence of one true reality but recognizes that structures around how that reality is defined can change (Moon & Blackman, 2014). This is because the research acknowledges that there is an objective reality concerning policies, economic factors, and political influences. It can be said that certain aspects of the policy and its effects on the economy and politics exist independently of individual perceptions. The dynamic nature of policy structures are acknowledged, recognizing that definitions, measurements, technologies, and norms surrounding policies can change, influencing the interpretation of reality and the historical context behind them. Regarding epistemology, this research is the best fit for the constructionist perspective. This perspective allows for an exploration of how different actors construct their understanding of policies based on cultural, historical, and social perspectives and their actions accordingly. It is particularly valuable for revealing the diverse ways in which lobby groups, government (officials), and other stakeholders frame and interpret agricultural policy (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

4.2 Strategy

This study will use a qualitative research approach to understand the actions of actors and the occurrence of events using the Multiple Stream Framework. The study uses a qualitative research design and case

study methodology to investigate Dutch agricultural policy and the collapse of the agricultural agreement. Qualitative methodologies enable a comprehensive investigation of the factors contributing to the agreement's failure. The case study approach facilitates in-depth analysis of a particular instance by enabling a thorough investigation of the background, key players, and complex dynamics that contributed to the policy's failure. Because of this, the case study is a frequently used research design in qualitative research. According to Yin (1989), case studies can be used to determine the cause of an event. The researcher should have minimal influence over the research environment to study the phenomenon in its natural context. The study can be single or multiple cases. Additionally, the researcher may choose an exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory case study. This research focuses on a single explanatory case study, this methodology is particularly useful for understanding the complexity of environmental governance issues and comprehending the interaction of various elements within the specific agricultural setting under study (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

This study is deductive in character, as is typical of deductive research, which is typically chosen when there are numerous current theories that can be investigated and which usually focuses on the past or the present. The principal methodology employed in this study is top-down deductive reasoning. In order to test theories or hypotheses, a deductive technique focuses on identifying a particular case from a broad generalization. In order to test theories and hypotheses, individual situations are examined from a generalization (Imenda, 2014). In deductive research, a literature study represents the initial step towards the creation of a conceptual framework. Subsequently, a codebook may be created in conjunction with a questionnaire to assist with the collection and analysis of data, which will be discussed further below (Pearse, 2019). However, this research also exemplifies an inductive approach, whereby it is open to the emergence of further indicators during the course of the interviewing process. The research acknowledges the potential for the emergence of additional indicators during the investigation, despite its predominantly deductive nature.

4.3 Operationalization

The operationalization phase involves converting theoretical ideas into quantifiable entities. This process does not always require translating abstract ideas into numerical forms for analysis. Instead, it may refer to variables and quantities that can be measured (van Thiel, 2014). The operationalization phase in this study involved translating theoretical concepts from the literature into measurable variables and indicators. The theoretical concepts of political stream, policy stream, problem stream, policy entrepreneurship & policy window all have their own variables. These variables, in turn, have indicators that were explored through literature review and interviews. These indicators were then coded during their collection. In particular, the operationalization focused on understanding the different streams, the opening of a policy window and the presence of policy entrepreneurs, testing these concepts against

specific variables and indicators. The complete overview of the coding scheme can be found in the appendix.

4.4 Data collection and analysis

The data gathering technique for the study project employs various approaches to get a complete understanding of the factors that contributed to the collapse of the agricultural agreement. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to obtain first-hand information from key stakeholders, decision-makers, and experts involved in the agreement's development and implementation. This allows for an exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences (Knott, Rao, Summers & Teeger, 2022). The semi-structured interview is a technique for gathering data by asking questions within a pre-established theme framework. An interview is usually conducted with the interviewee, guided by an interview schedule or guide. Questions may be provided beforehand, but there is also an opportunity for follow-up inquiries in response to ambiguous or intriguing answers. This method allows the researcher to collect a significant amount of data, which can then be analyzed qualitatively to gain additional insights (Adams, 2015). This study uses non-probability sampling for the semi-structured interviews, which involves the intentional selection of interview subjects by the researcher. This strategy is typically employed when there are limited research units available, and the selections are based on the study's conceptual basis (van Thiel, 2014). To thoroughly comprehend and dissect the agricultural agreement policy process, it is essential to conduct in-depth interviews with process participants. The conceptual framework also emphasizes the importance of well-chosen and knowledgeable participants. Therefore, a probability sample would not benefit the analysis.

A total of 14 individuals were interviewed for this study, all of whom are connected to the agricultural agreement in different ways. The diversity of stakeholders involved should provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the agricultural agreement. Among those interviewed were representatives of four advisory and reflective bodies: the PBL, the Louis Bolk Institute (LBI), the SER and the Consumer and Market Authority (ACM). The PBL and the LBI both presented their reflections on the draft agricultural agreement, in which they analyzed the feasibility of the draft agreement. Furthermore, the ACM provided advice on the legal feasibility of proposed measures within the agricultural agreement, as well as possible implications of price agreements discussed at the agriculture tables. The SER played an important role in the initial exploration of the agricultural agreement. Two professors were also interviewed, each affiliated with different universities: Utrecht University and the Open University. The professors specialize in environmental governance and food system governance, respectively. Of the nine parties at the main negotiating table, six were interviewed. These included representatives of the provinces (IPO), the Ministry of LNV, LandschappenNL, foodchain party CBL, and BO Akkerbouw, an umbrella organization under which

LTO falls. Finally, two parties who participated in some sector tables were also interviewed. These parties are the Union of Water Boards (UvW) and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management (I&W).

Although not all members of the head table were interviewed, all were approached to participate in the study. Several reasons were cited as to why some members did not want to or could not do an interview. For example, some expressed concern about the confidentiality of the interviews, while others indicated that they were already involved in several studies and did not have time for another interview. Some members also indicated that they preferred to express their views through official channels or written statements. Despite these limitations, it was decided to focus the study on the members of the main table. This decision was made because within the time frame of this research, it was not feasible to interview all stakeholders from the different sector tables. By focusing on the main table, there was still the ability to gather a wide range of perspectives and insights regarding the agricultural agreement.

In addition, desk research of secondary sources, including journals, scientific articles and reports will be conducted as it can add a stronger theoretical framework and contextual understanding to the conducted interviews (Bowen, 2009). At last, to gain valuable insights into the broader social impact, primary materials such as newspaper articles will also be examined to document public discourse and attitudes surrounding the agricultural agreement, as primary sources can allow researchers to learn more about a time period or particular event (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012). Summarizing: the sources that will be analyzed will consist of government reports, press statements, draft agreements, newspaper articles, meeting reports, and transcribed interviews. The transcribed interviews will be imported into Atlas.ti for the purpose of coding and categorizing dominant discourses. To facilitate the interpretation of the collected data, Atlas.ti will be utilized for coding the data into smaller units, allowing for effective comparison. These codes may encompass various elements, including meanings, perceptions, events, activities, relations, behaviors, and more. Coding is considered an important aspect of research as it helps to organize and interpret data through systematic analysis and pattern identification. Furthermore, coding allows for a nuanced understanding of complex phenomena and supports data-driven conclusions (Baralt, 2011).

4.5 Validity and reliability

Validity in qualitative research involves the correct use of research tools, processes and data. This way the research is able to validate the research finding within the specific sample and context. When evaluating the validity of qualitative research, it is important to consider ontological and epistemological factors. These factors can present challenges to the research's validity (Leung, 2015). This research uses data triangulation to enhance the validity of its findings. Data triangulation enhances

validity in qualitative research by reducing bias and increasing credibility. As Descombe (2009) states, it is critical to recognize the personal perspective and bias in research. By bringing together multiple and diverse sources of information, triangulation minimizes the impact of individual perspectives and strengthens the overall validity of the study (Golafshani, 2003). In qualitative research, reliability is often defined as consistency, recognizing the challenges posed by diverse perspectives (Leung, 2015). Silverman (2021) proposes five approaches: Refutational analysis, constant data comparison, comprehensive data use, inclusive of the deviant case and use of tables. These approaches collectively contribute to a more reliable qualitative research process by addressing potential biases and ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives and cases (Silverman, 2021). In this research, reliability is enhanced by giving a full and comprehensive documentation of the methodological aspects, such as the interview guide and questions. In addition, the researcher's commitment to identifying subjective viewpoints, thoroughly reviewing the literature, and using reliable theoretical frameworks helps to reduce bias, promote replicability, and ensure a methodical and reliable methodology throughout the research (Roberts & Priest, 2006).

The fact that not all stakeholders were interviewed limits the study's external validity. However, a significant proportion of the main table – representing a diverse range of viewpoints – was interviewed. These included two farmer groups, a chain party, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature, and Food Quality, and a nature organization. While not all of the specific organizations were represented, BO Akkerbouw and NAJK could have compensated for the absence of Agractie and Biohuis. Similarly, the involvement of CBL could compensate for the absence of FNLI. This ensures that throughout the study, a broad range of viewpoints and interests within the main table were considered. Furthermore, the reliability of the findings is also compromised by the inability to interview the sector tables. As previously stated, it was not deemed feasible to interview all the sector tables due to the limited resources available for this study. Nevertheless, this study assumes that the main tables, which were a direct extension of the sector tables, can provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationships surrounding the entire agricultural agreement, given the diversity of interviewees at the main table.

5. Empirical analysis

The empirical chapter examines the events from the introduction of the PAS in 2015 to the failure of the agricultural agreement in 2023. This eight-year timeline shows how agricultural policy has changed under different Dutch governments and how the issue of nitrogen has become significantly more prominent on the political agenda.

5.1 The preparation and implementation of the nitrogen policy

In 2008, the Dutch cabinet Balkenende IV (2007-2010) introduced the PAS. In the next cabinet Rutte I (2010-2012), Henk Bleker, State Secretary for Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation endorsed the PAS during the Rutte I government, despite indications that it would be legally untenable.

Table 1: overview of the five Dutch governments during the development of the PAS and the agricultural agreement (2008 - 2023)

Government	Period	Coalition
Balkenende IV	2007 - 2010	Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA), Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA) & ChristenUnie (CU)
Rutte I	2010 - 2012	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD), Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA) & Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)
Rutte II	2012 - 2017	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD) & Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)
Rutte III	2017 - 2022	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD), Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA), Democraten 66 (D66) & ChristenUnie (CU)
Rutte IV	2022 - 2024	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD), Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA), Democraten 66 (D66) & ChristenUnie (CU)

The Rutte I cabinet aimed to cut executive organizations and reduce the size of government due to the deterioration in public finances and the increased budget deficit caused by the 2008-09 economic crisis. The Rutte I cabinet's policy agenda, driven by financial security and budget constraints, focused on reducing government spending, reorganizing tasks and ministries, and cutting the number of civil servants to lower the national debt. The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) and the Ministry of LNV were abolished and their responsibilities were transferred to other ministries in order to reduce costs. In Cabinet Rutte II, the Ministry of Infrastructure returned, although

the Ministry of VROM remained dissolved (Algemene rekenkamer, 2013; Parlement.com, n.d.). The product boards were also abolished. A product board was a public law organization that represented companies in the same production column, could levy taxes, make rules and act as an advocate and advisory body to the government (SER, 2004). Former ministers continue to denounce the abolition of these ministries, claiming that it was a contributing factor to the nitrogen crisis. They argue that the environment was downgraded as a result of the abolition of these ministries (Schuttenhelm, 2021). Interviews conducted have confirmed that the Ministry of LNV lacks both expertise and historical knowledge, as a result of changes and restructuring in 2010 and 2012:

“The Ministry of LNV, VROM and the product boards have been abolished. Well, these three actually ensured the sectoral and regional link between governments and the agricultural sector and also provided the necessary implementation power. [...] In fact, the whole approach has been thrown overboard and abolished. You can see that the link between policy and implementation, or policy and sector, has disappeared, and because there was no longer an approach, the situation has simply deteriorated”. (Interview 14)

There is a shortage of officials with in-depth dossier knowledge about the policy history of previous ministries, including European policy and the history of land development projects, which undermines their authority and effectiveness in negotiating with the agricultural sector. According to interviews 10, 13 & 14 this has resulted in the agricultural sector having less confidence in the government, which makes issues such as nitrogen emissions and water quality more difficult to resolve. After the re-establishment of the LNV Ministry under Rutte III, many knowledgeable officials left, causing a loss of momentum, and their replacements were criticized for lacking the necessary expertise to manage the agriculture and horticulture sector effectively according to interview 8. Despite being deemed legally untenable by the Environmental Impact Assessment Commission in 2011 and 2012 and receiving similar rulings from the RvS, the Rutte II cabinet persisted with the PAS, ultimately enacting it in 2015.

5.2 The decline of the nitrogen policy and future policy directions

In 2017, the Administrative Law Division of the RvS posed questions to the Court of Justice of the European Union regarding the legal viability of the PAS and its alignment with the European Habitats Directive (Raad van State, 2018). The interim evaluation of the PAS, scheduled for release in 2018, concluded that it was not possible to determine the precise impact of the measure until that time according to interview 1 & 3. The limited scope for setbacks was a contributing factor (Marra, van Pul, Wichink Kruit, Lagerwerf & Berkhout, 2019; Remkes et al., 2020). In 2019, the RvS ruled that the PAS was in contravention of the European Habitats Directive. The RvS ruled that the system of the PAS, which permitted the authorization of future positive effects, was unlawful. The aforementioned rulings effectively rendered permits based on the PAS invalid (Raad van State, 2019).

A significant challenge with the PAS was that, in theory, the Ministry of Agriculture was the primary entity responsible for implementation, yet there were 14 other individuals with their own powers. Furthermore, the provinces were held to be responsible for the restoration of the natural environment, while the farmers were obliged to reduce their emissions without any form of supervision. Throughout the existence of the PAS, critics have been present. In addition, the absence of the PAS would have necessitated the resolution of fundamental questions pertaining to livestock, land use, and nature conservation. However, the ministry was unable to do so without encountering significant resistance (Hendrickx, 2019). The interviews indicate that the absence of a vision was, to some extent, a consequence of the political opposition it would have entailed. Formulating a vision necessitates the exercise of discretion regarding the permissibility of certain actions in specific domains:

“In the south-east, many animals are kept and crops are grown on land that is not suitable for them. To stop allowing this is within a certain vision a painful choice that politicians and the sectors are not yet ready to make” (Interview 6)

This process has encountered considerable political and sectoral resistance which could be a reason that the government was reluctant to propose such a vision according to interviews 1, 3, 6, 7 & 12.

In 2018 the PBL already published a report, saying that in order to move beyond the status quo, where minor issues are repeatedly addressed, it is first necessary to initiate a political discourse about the values to be upheld. While there is a great deal of debate about agriculture, it tends to focus on specific incidents, policy instruments and single values, such as greenhouse gas emissions or the application of rules. It was recommended that values and ambitions be pursued politically, which implies the establishment of distinct values for agriculture and the living environment. Politicization makes evident that agriculture and its development direction are also largely a matter of choice, which choices can be made and what consequences those choices have. It is only through the articulation of values that structural policy can be formulated. In order to find a solution to the impasse in the agricultural sector, the PBL proposes the establishment of an agricultural agreement with the objective of fostering joint steering. The agreement should comprise a coalition of parties that enjoys broad support, including farmers, government representatives, civil society actors, financial institutions, and other relevant stakeholders. This would facilitate a re-evaluation of the role of agriculture in Dutch society (PBL, 2018a). However, this coalition would be difficult to manage as increased fragmentation in the agricultural sector is prevailing: “What you see in politics is also happening in the representation of agricultural interests. LTO is eaten up on the right by the Farmers' Defence Force and on the left by green farmers” (Interview 1). This means that the more radical LTO members may switch to FDF because of the lack of radicalism in LTO.

In September 2018, the then Minister of Agriculture, Carola Schouten, published her vision for the future of Dutch agriculture. The necessity to transition to more sustainable production methods, such as circular agriculture, was particularly emphasized. The vision outlined three key points, namely a farmer-centric earning model, greater appreciation of food, and the implementation of innovative agricultural techniques. This encompasses the steering of land-based agricultural practices (Ministerie LNV, 2018). According to interviews 7 and 9, Carola Schouten's agricultural vision made a positive contribution to the transformation of the sector and tried to change it. "However, the ministry failed to implement this vision properly" (interview 7). Despite the fact that not enough was happening at the time, "something was set in motion" (interview 11). The report remained a vision, and there were no concrete measures and no funding made available for this. Furthermore, a decline in the livestock population was not mentioned. The minister sought to gain broad support by entering into agreements with stakeholders. The coalition parties CDA and D66, as well as the farmers' organization LTO, expressed support for the report, but emphasized the need for concrete measures. In contrast, the opposition parties GroenLinks and the Party for the Animals felt that the plans were not sufficiently far-reaching (van der Storm, 2018; Winterman, 2018a; Winterman, 2018b). In a report published the same week, PBL once again advocated for the establishment of an agricultural agreement with the objective of achieving a shared vision (PBL, 2018b).

In September 2019, D66 politician Tjeerd de Groot proposed halving the Dutch livestock herd to restart halted economic projects and create nitrogen space for housing construction. He emphasized that the agricultural sector, despite its high nitrogen emissions, offers relatively smaller economic benefits, aligning with D66's focus on circular agriculture as outlined by Minister Carola Schouten in 2018 (NOS, 2019a). The political coalition partners VVD, CDA and CU expressed their disapproval of Tjeerd de Groot's statement. They stated that they hold the agricultural sector in high regard and that the issue was not limited to the agricultural sector alone (NOS, 2019b). Farmers' organizations critically rejected D66's proposal to halve the livestock population, denouncing the plan as unrealistic and ineffective. Furthermore, D66 was accused of making the statement with the intention of winning votes in urban areas (Winterman, 2019) At the time, a reduction in the number of livestock was virtually unthinkable: "Helma Lodders (VVD) and Jaco Geurts (CDA) were the agricultural spokespersons at the time and they worked very hard for agriculture. halving the number of livestock was a no-go area" (Interview 1). That month the nitrogen committee, chaired by Johan Remkes, recommended area-specific nitrogen measurements focusing on targeted remediation of high-emission or outdated farms near Natura 2000 areas (Remkes et al., 2019).

In October, Minister Carola Schouten informed Parliament of her plan to work with municipalities, provinces and water boards to reduce nitrogen, emphasizing an area-based approach that places

significant responsibility on local authorities, while provinces coordinate nitrogen rights between the construction and agricultural sectors (Ministerie LNV, 2019). In consequence, farmers' protests subsequently arose at several provincial houses, where the provinces of Gelderland, Drenthe and Overijssel withdrew their policy rules and several other provinces adjusted the rules or made other commitments (Nieuwe Oogst, 2019).

In November 2019, the Rutte III cabinet implemented an emergency nitrogen reduction plan that included lowering the speed limit on motorways to 100 km/h, increasing subsidies for cleaning up pig farms and proposing a regulation on the protein content of cattle feed concentrates. However, the feed concentrate regulation was abandoned after strong protests from the agricultural sector, including FDF (Metro, 2020). In April 2020, the Rutte III cabinet introduced a new nitrogen policy with a budget of €2-3 billion, mainly focused on the agricultural sector, but also including measures for the industrial and mobility sectors. The package funded voluntary buy-outs of high-nitrogen-emitting farms near Natura 2000 areas and supported the development of new technologies for manure treatment in stables and cattle feed production. The government's objective was to reduce nitrogen emissions by 26% by 2030 (Boezeman, Vink & Van Hinsberg, 2023; NOS, 2020a). Although the agreement at the end of 2019 did not include a reduction in livestock numbers, there seemed to be a shift in policy at the time:

“The shrinking of livestock was a taboo subject and was even agreed in the coalition agreement. And that went to slip away. [...] Rutte issued a press release in December 2019 saying that there would be no general shrinking of the livestock population. He concluded that with the farming collective. And in fact, a few months later, they announced the first buyout scheme anyway. So there will be a shrinkage.” (Interview 1)

In the summer of 2020, the nitrogen committee under Johan Remkes issued a critical statement in their final report, concluding that the new nitrogen policy was not ambitious enough, had too many uncertainties, and was overall too similar to the partly problematic PAS. The committee identified the government's 26 percent nitrogen emissions reduction by 2030 as the most critical point, suggesting that it should be almost doubled to 50 percent. Furthermore, the committee cautioned that a voluntary buyout of livestock farmers in proximity to nitrogen-sensitive nature reserves would not be an adequate solution and that a forced buyout should be contemplated (NOS, 2020a; Remkes et al., 2020). The PBL and Remkes reports redefined the policy agenda on nitrogen and agriculture, emphasizing the necessity for the implementation of mandatory measures.

In October 2020, Minister Schouten published a nitrogen law with the intention of reducing nitrogen emissions, thereby enabling the construction industry to continue with its building projects. Schouten highlighted that a 50% reduction by 2030 was not a socially feasible goal, given the intense protests from farmers. The cabinet allocated 1 billion euros for the construction sector and declared that small

construction projects could commence without a nature permit. The package included a measure for voluntary buyouts of livestock farmers and funding for farmers who wish to transition to sustainable agriculture (Eerste Kamer, 2020; NOS, 2020b). Although the law had the support of the coalition, the minister needed a majority in the lower house, which the cabinet initially lacked. Green-leaning parties such as the PvdA and the Green Left (GL) found the law too lenient, while parties such as the State Reform Party (SGP), 50Plus and the Socialist Party (SP) were concerned about its impact on farmers. In the end, the three opposition parties supported the legislation and secured the necessary majority, despite reservations from the LTO about its effectiveness for farmers and from environmental organizations about its provisions for nature conservation and the effectiveness of the proposed technical innovations. (Hakkenes, 2020; NOS, 2020c). The exemption for the construction sector was criticized for about a year, until it was finally overturned by the administrative law department of the RvS. (Boezeman, Vink & Van Hinsberg, 2023).

The PAS ruling in 2019 could have created a policy window as a focusing event, signaling a critical opportunity for change. The PBL and Remkes Commission reports on the state of nature served as indicators and feedback, underlining the urgency of tackling nitrogen emissions. However, these were not sufficient to drive effective nitrogen action before the 2021 elections. In the problem stream, the LNV ministry was unable to implement effective policies due to the loss of institutional capacity from 2010 to 2017, despite attempts to do so seems to be absent. In the political stream, support for the agricultural sector was still prevalent among parties such as the VVD and the CDA, and only D66 was prepared to take far-reaching measures such as halving the livestock herd. Nevertheless, in the policy stream, it is evident that these types of measures were not popular at that time, both in politics and society. The mandatory buyout of farmers was a topic that could not be discussed, as there was no concrete budget yet, despite Remkes' endorsement of this in his first nitrogen recommendations. This was the start of the first measures in the policy stream. Remkes acted as a policy entrepreneur, attempting to bridge the gap between the problem, policy, and political streams. He engaged stakeholders through discussions and proposed targeted remediation of high-emission farms and area-specific nitrogen measurements. Nevertheless, the limited policy window appeared to be primarily attributable to the political context. Public opinion played an important role in shaping policy decisions. Societal opposition to measures such as halving livestock numbers influenced policy makers. Farmers' protests and opposition from farming organizations highlighted the deep-rooted concerns within the farming community, making it politically difficult to implement aggressive nitrogen policies.. However, the coalition would not be in power for long, as new elections would be held in March 2021. This would quickly create opportunities for new policy.

5.3 The parliamentary elections of 2021

The 2021 parliamentary elections in March were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on election logistics, focused on economic recovery and pandemic mitigation. However, it revealed significant divergences among political parties regarding agriculture and nature policies. The key issues were the future direction of agriculture, the extent of government involvement and the role of innovation, including new housing techniques, robotics and precision farming, where opinions varied widely between political parties. There was also considerable debate about the balance between agriculture and nature, particularly in relation to livestock numbers, with some parties advocating a reduction in livestock numbers and the conversion of farmland to benefit both nature and agriculture. (Boezeman, Tiktak, Hellegers & Hoek, 2021). Conversely, some parties strongly opposed any reduction in livestock numbers or the conversion of agricultural land for nature and agricultural purposes, focusing instead on restoring the natural environment within existing protected areas. An analysis of the party programs showed that D66 advocated a combination of innovation and technology, a reduction in agriculture and the expansion of nature reserves, while CU emphasized innovation to reduce agriculture for nature conservation. In contrast, the CDA prioritized innovation and technology, but was against reducing livestock numbers and instead advocated maintaining current agricultural practices and using technological improvements to reduce nitrogen emissions without reducing the agricultural sector; the PvdA, GroenLinks and SP supported a decline in agriculture and the expansion of nature, although GroenLinks and SP were more critical of innovation and technology (Boezeman, Tiktak, Hellegers & Hoek, 2021). The election manifestos showed a paradigm shift, with 11 of the 15 parties in parliament, including coalition members CDA, CU and D66, but not VVD, supporting the reintroduction of the VROM ministry to centralize spatial planning control (Van Dinther, 2019)

The 2021 parliamentary elections resulted in the VVD securing 34 seats, followed by D66 with 24, PVV with 19, and CDA with 15. The Rutte IV cabinet was inaugurated in January 2022, comprising the same coalition partners VVD, D66, CDA, and ChristenUnie (Kiesraad, 2021). Furthermore, the 2021 elections marked the advent of a farmers' party in the Dutch political landscape, following decades of absence of a similar ideological party. The FarmerCitizensMovement (BBB) emerged as a significant political force. BBB was established in 2019 in response to the PAS ruling. It sought to address the public's discontent with the government's nitrogen policy and to challenge the perceived cultural divide between rural communities and urban elites (Otjes & De Jonge, 2024). According to interview 1, as a result, the politics regarding agriculture changed. The election of the BBB ushered in a mood in politics in which agriculture became an even more sensitive issue:

"After that there was a kind of fear among politicians. 'Well, this is going to cost us votes and this is going to go wrong'. And it's not just agriculture, it's also the mood of a number of people around it and the mood of the BBB is actually the mood of the country against the city'" (Interview 7)

In May 2021, parties from the construction, nature and agriculture sectors published a joint report entitled "A Sustainable Balance" (or "Acceleration Agreement"), proposing a plan to reduce nitrogen emissions to meet nature targets and restart stalled projects, thereby creating development space for economic sectors. The report builds on Carola Schouten's nitrogen reduction law with a 26% reduction in 2030, but goes even further, to a 40% reduction in 2030. The agreement emphasizes a sectoral approach with innovations such as extensification, improved fertilizer and manure storage, better housing systems, and allocates a significant budget for farmers leaving or relocating, with almost half of the funds earmarked for innovation initiatives (Bouwend Nederland, LTO Nederland, Natuurmonumenten, Natuur & Milieu, VNO-NCW, MKB Nederland, 2021). While the Rutte cabinet had earmarked €6 billion for reducing nitrogen emissions, the proposed investment amount in the Acceleration Agreement was almost €16 billion. In a response, the PBL concluded that the plan was very tightly timed, with an emphasis on strengthening nature and relocating and converting farms, even though this is difficult to achieve in practice. In addition, the plan is heavily focused on technical nitrogen reduction, which may lead to technical lock-in if climate targets for agriculture are also tightened (Boezeman, Van den Born & Vink, 2021). Some farming parties, including FDF, accused the LTO of stepping in without other farming organizations. They charged that the Acceleration Agreement did not have the support of the farming sector and accused the LTO of acting alone (De Lijster, 2021). As there is a limited nitrogen space in which to operate, there is a shift in focus at the national level. In order to free up nitrogen space for other sectors, such as construction, the political constellation has changed as different interests, such as agriculture and infrastructure, compete for nitrogen space. As a result, political parties are forced to compromise: "The fact that road construction and aviation are in a squeeze, which are, so to speak, the 'sectors of the VVD' at national level. That is a reason to say that something has to be done (about nitrogen emissions)" (Interview 3).

In June 2021, the SER published a report, requested by Minister Carola Schouten, on the potential benefits of an agricultural agreement for long-term policy stability and the restoration of trust between farmers, chain parties and the government. The report called for clear frameworks and conditions, sufficient financial resources for measures and emphasized the importance of an integrated approach (SER, 2021). Around the same time, the CDA made a political breakthrough by accepting the inevitability of livestock reduction, although it continued to oppose the compulsory purchase of farmers' land (CDA, 2021). The fact that the CDA changed its position was a turning point: "So the taboo of shrinkage (the livestock population) was really off and then you see (Derk) Boswijk (CDA) declaring that shrinkage has to be looked at, so these parties start to turn" (Interview 1).

On 6 September 2021, a document was leaked which revealed that the cabinet was developing scenarios in which the livestock population would be reduced by over 30 per cent. The CDA stated that the plans were too strict, while parties D66 and Party for the Animals viewed the measures positively (Tiktak, van den Born, Boezeman & Hinsberg, 2021; Winterman, 2021). A week later, another leaked document showed that the Dutch state prosecutor had recommended revoking the licenses of farmers who emitted high levels of nitrogen near nature reserves. This would be quicker than expropriation and voluntary buyouts would leave too little time to build houses or roads. LTO and Farmers Defence Force reacted angrily to the leaked plans, further straining relations between the organizations and the government (Winterman & Hoedeman, 2021). Despite the controversy, it became evident in October 2022 that the next cabinet would adopt a more ambitious and stringent nitrogen policy. The CDA proceeded to take another step, agreeing to the compulsory buy-out of farmers. This surrender of old positions by the CDA led to the BBB growing in the polls and more outrage among agricultural organizations (Dietvorst, 2021). The growth of the BBB was partly due to the fact that farmers perceived it as the most representative party, leading to a significant loss of support for the traditional farmers' party, the CDA, with 98% of respondents feeling unrepresented by the government. In addition, respondents said that Agractie and FDF were more representative than the LTO, while a poll of Dutch citizens showed that 38% supported the farmers' protests (Kanne & Van Der Schelde, 2021).

In the coalition agreement of the Rutte IV government, the nitrogen reduction target was made more ambitious, aiming to halve emissions by 2030, five years earlier than Minister Carola Schouten's proposal for 2020, which aimed for a 26% reduction by 2030, following the advice of the Remkes Commission. In addition, a National Program for Rural Areas and a Rural Transition Fund worth around €25 billion have been set up to complement the funding from the structural approach to nitrogen. While the goals and budgets were agreed upon, the means of achieving these goals remained undecided, focusing primarily on environmental objectives such as purchasing farms and agricultural land. The program financed environmentally friendly barn measures and nature projects aimed at protecting biodiversity and improving water quality, specifically contributing to CO₂ reduction, nature protection, and water quality improvement according to interview 4. Nevertheless, Mark Rutte demonstrated through his recent cabinet appointments that the nitrogen dossier was becoming increasingly ambitious (Boezeman, Tiktak, Hellegers & Hoek, 2021; Rijksoverheid, 2022a). At the same time, the ACM and Wageningen Economic Research published their annual Agro-Nutri monitor, which examines price formation in the food chain (Willy et al., 2021). The aim of this report was to gain insight into the price development of conventional and sustainable products in the Dutch food chain, focusing on the barriers to switching to sustainable products and the distribution of gross and net margins in the food chain. The research found that organic products receive a larger share of the consumer price due to higher production costs and lower supermarket margins, but the biggest barrier to sustainability is low

consumer demand, despite consumers claiming they are willing to pay more for sustainable products according to interview 2. This runs counter to the perception that supermarkets are to blame for low margins on agricultural products. Although there are several links in the supply chain, they are often not all named: "We, as the supermarket industry, feel that we are also somewhat instrumental in being used by farmers to put pressure on society" (Interview 8). In addition, there are too many financial barriers for farmers to make the switch. Increasing consumer demand for sustainable products is crucial. In addition, this needs to be done on a broader scale than the Netherlands and above all on a European level (Willy et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a significant proportion of the issue can be attributed to the Dutch consumer culture:

“Sure, there are consumers who are willing to pay for it, but if you look at sustainability on a large scale, you will see that the average consumer is not willing to pay for it. [...] It's also pretty typical of the Netherlands that the problem really lies with the consumer. If you look at France, for example, people are much more used to buying high-quality products and paying a bit more for them. In the Netherlands, we're really known for wanting the cheapest possible products” (Interview 2)

As mentioned above, the perception of agricultural policy has changed in recent years (El Benni et al., 2024). However, this does not mean that Dutch consumers base their choice of agricultural products on this, and price seems to be the deciding factor (Berkhout et al., 2022).

The prominence of nitrogen on the policy agenda was significantly diminished in 2020 due to its overshadowing by the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, a policy window opened up in the period following 2021. As a result of the Remkes report, it had become clear that nitrogen had to be reduced, the problem stream remained 'ripe' during this period as nitrogen would remain on the political agenda and was also recognized and framed by most stakeholders. The shutdown of construction and other sectors due to insufficient nitrogen space further highlighted the necessity of reducing nitrogen emissions for other sectors to operate effectively, influencing the political priorities of parties like the VVD. Furthermore, it can be observed that there is a demand for more government intervention in the political stream. However, the mandatory buyout of livestock farmers is not included in the policy window, which has not yet been accepted at that time. The political window is witnessing a reinforcement of the nitrogen policy due to the election results. D66, which won 24 seats, has consistently advocated for a more stringent nitrogen policy, including the reduction of nitrogen emissions by 50% by 2030, a goal that was incorporated into the coalition agreement. This was the first time that the nitrogen policy agenda was also concretely and prominently translated into more concrete policy through decision-making power. This was also the result of the CDA changing its position on livestock reduction later that year. The fact that LTO was a member of the acceleration agreement in the spring of 2021 also indicates that there was a movement within the sector. However, there appeared

to be widespread discontent in the agricultural sector, which had begun the beginning of the shifting of the political stream. This led to the addition of two new forces to the political stream, namely Agractie and FDF had created a challenging situation for LTO. The acceleration agreement and the elections can be regarded as a policy window that opened, despite the fact that the subsequent goals were not aligned with the cabinet's objectives later on. However, tensions over nitrogen policy would reach a new peak in 2022.

5.3 The nitrogen policy implications of Rutte IV

In March 2022, the newly appointed Minister of Nitrogen, Christianne van der Wal (VVD), announced that although compulsory farm purchases were not included in the coalition agreement, they remained a possible option. The government began talks with farmer representatives about farm buyouts, but these talks ended in April 2022, with some provinces expressing dissatisfaction with the government's approach (Olde Hanhof, 2022). This approach led to tensions between the central government and the provinces, as some provinces felt that the government's policies were too top-down and not sufficiently tailored:

“What we see is that there will be a stalemate between the state and provinces in which the state focuses on controlling and testing. And provinces are working with all their might to get good area processes done. Keeping parties on board and taking steps in that and that seems to drift apart a bit at times” (Interview 5)

In June 2022, Van der Wal published the National Rural Area Program (NPLG) for the transition of rural areas, focusing on nitrogen reduction, water quality and greenhouse gas reduction, with area-specific programs and regional targets for each province. The program also outlined principles for spatial planning and land use based on the carrying capacity of local water and soil systems, and proposed cooperation between local governments and private parties (Rijksoverheid, 2022b). In the presentation of the NPLG, the minister displayed a map illustrating the reduction of nitrogen. This initiative, which was spearheaded by the government, resulted in one of the most significant protests to date, with tens of thousands of farmers participating (NOS, 2022a). The first signs of cracks in the cabinet came when, the day after the NPLG was published, the VVD congress narrowly passed a motion with a 51% majority questioning the need for the nitrogen policy and advocating a focus on technological innovation rather than agricultural shrinkage (Den Hartog, 2022).

A month later, the cabinet announced that funds would be made available for the voluntary sale of farms. Those who had previously applied for buyouts were often dissatisfied with the 65% offer. The minister opted to enhance the buyout scheme to 100% of the farm value (NOS, 2022b). In consequence

of the protests, the government resolved that Johan Remkes would once more prepare a nitrogen report, this time with the objective of acting as a mediator between the government and the sector, given that these dialogues had become infeasible as a consequence of mutual distrust (Remkes, 2022). Despite the increase in the buyout amount and a new start for the nitrogen committee Remkes, the unrest continued. In August, a conflict arose within the coalition when CDA party leader Wopke Hoekstra stated that as far as CDA was concerned, the nitrogen target of halving by 2030, which was stated in the coalition agreement, no longer needed to be achieved (Klaassen & Van Soest, 2022). According to interview 12, this particularly increased the tense relations between CDA and D66, which were furthest apart in the coalition on the issue of nitrogen. The coalition experienced an increase in administrative tensions following the decision of Agriculture Minister Henk Staghouwer to resign from his position (Van der Goot, 2022). Staghouwer was tasked with formulating an agricultural vision and offering prospects to the agricultural sector. However, his perspective was not endorsed by parliament according to interviews 1, 6, 7 & 10. Staghouwer's resignation after his vision showed that setting a vision for agriculture remains a politically charged issue:

“Staghouwer sent a letter to parliament in June 2022 trying to come up with a different vision, but he got a kind of red card from the entire parliament, including his own party. It was insufficient and that led him to resign in September. It shows that it's really tough to come up with a vision like that and put it into words” (Interview 6)

In October 2022, Johan Remkes published a report as an independent discussion leader between the government and the agricultural sector, proposing the purchase of around 600 peak loaders within a year to reduce nitrogen emissions and recommending the removal of critical deposition values from the law. He concluded that the relationship between the sector and government had deteriorated significantly due to years of scale-up and intensification policies, leading to technical lock-in and poor communication. This vacillating policy, characterized by a one-sided focus on nitrogen and a lack of responsiveness to sector initiatives, had increased tensions between the agricultural sector and other sectors, as well as between urban and rural areas. Remkes asserted that the agricultural sector would be stronger if it were unified in its approach (Remkes, 2022). However, according to interviews 1, 3, 6, 10 this is made more challenging by the increasing fragmentation of the sector, resulting in more extreme views becoming dominant:

“Well that whole agriculture file is polarized up to and including within the farmers' circle, especially with emergence of Farmers Defence Force, Agractie and also radical wings on the flanks of LTO who are strongly influencing its stance. So a minority of radical farmers. The young farmers who of course feel that tension tremendously. [...] If I summarize it briefly, you have a North - South tension, you have the generational tension and then you have a plant based - animal based tension. [...] Certainly horticulture, they prefer to stay away from livestock, because that's actually where all the problems are” (Interview 10)

It would be beneficial for the Netherlands to develop a comprehensive vision for the future of agriculture. Furthermore, it is necessary to determine which types of agriculture should be carried out in specific areas through the implementation of zoning. Why there is such a strong North - South divide can be explained in the structure of LTO and the type of agriculture they represent:

“LTO consists of three organizations, you have LTO North, that is North and South Holland, Fryslân, Groningen, Drenthe, Overijssel, Gelderland. Then you have the ZLTO. That is Brabant, Zeeland and then you have the Agriculture and Horticulture Association (LLTB), which covers Limburg. Their lobbying is based on the structure of agriculture in these areas. [...] In the south you have a lot more intensive dairy farms, where farmers generally have more cows than they have land” (Interview 7)

Zoning is chosen because of these differences in livestock density rather than a general standard, as a general standard would increase regional differences according to interviews 6 & 10. This line of thinking was advised to be developed into a supported agricultural agreement, although if this was not feasible, a clear government plan should be drawn up (Remkes, 2022).

What can be observed is that the policy window closed in the spring of 2022 after Minister Van der Wal stated that a compulsory buy-out of livestock farmers may be necessary, although this was not included in the coalition agreement. In addition, the NPLG nitrogen map caused an uproar in the political stream. When we see in the policy stream that more money is slowly being released for measures and mandatory buyouts are increasingly on the political agenda, and in the problem stream that nitrogen is becoming an established problem due to the stagnation of other sectors, we see that government policy, which is seen as too top-down, is affecting political relations. The VVD showed that it is internally divided over the nitrogen approach and that the CDA is prepared to abandon the 2030 nitrogen reduction target. The decision-making power of the relevant authorities was influenced by agenda-setting power due to these events. The public opinion and demonstrations that were held during this period influenced the policy agenda. At that point, the political stream appears to be blocked and there appears to be no policy window for policy change. A vision proposed by the Minister of Agriculture, Staghouwer, was deemed politically unviable, resulting in his departure. In the wake of the Remkes Committee's second report and the SER's favorable counsel in 2021 for an agricultural agreement, there appears to be a resurgence in the political stream, with positive reactions from stakeholders to these recommendations. In the policy stream, the Remkes report again highlights the necessity for compulsory buyouts, given the uncertainty surrounding the efficacy of technical innovation. Nevertheless, the issue of mandatory buyouts of livestock farmers remains a controversial topic. The launch of the agriculture agreement can be seen as the reopening of a policy window. In the political stream, the parties involved are once again willing to engage in discussions. The possibility of buyouts of farmers, whether voluntary or otherwise,

remains on the policy agenda. Furthermore, the need for a transition in agriculture remains a key policy issue. Johan Remkes can be regarded as a policy entrepreneur. His previous report has established his reputation in the agricultural sector, and as a former director, he possesses a wealth of institutional knowledge. He initiated the strategy of an agricultural agreement after it had already been recommended by the PBL and the SER. Consequently, he was able to unite the political stream by convening all relevant parties at the negotiating table. This was of significant importance in finding common ground between diverse stakeholders with conflicting interests. In the policy stream, he proposed the mandatory buyout of farms and succeeded in persuading the cabinet to allocate additional financial resources for the reduction of nitrogen. He also initiated the problem stream by acknowledging the necessity for the agricultural sector to undergo transformation while also acknowledging the legitimacy of the sector's distrust of the government, which has been the result of misguided policies. With the recommendation for an agricultural agreement, there seemed to be new opportunities for sector-approved policy change. The first discussions about the design of the agreement would take place later that year.

5.4 Preparation and start of the agricultural agreement

On 25 November 2022, the cabinet published its revised nitrogen plans based on Remkes' advice, which included accelerating the voluntary purchase of peak loaders to quickly legalize PAS reporters or start construction projects, and incorporating sustainability strategies for the heavy industry sector. In addition, the government announced its intention to conclude an agricultural agreement with agricultural organizations, nature organizations and decentralized governments by the beginning of 2023 (Ministerie LNV, 2022). LTO and Agractie expressed appreciation for the voluntary buyout scheme, yet voiced concerns about the additional restrictions for remaining farmers and advocated for a scheme without coercive measures. They did not consider the prospects for farmers to be particularly promising. However, both parties expressed positive views about the planned agricultural agreement and expressed a willingness to continue negotiations (Agractie, 2022; LTO, 2022).

The agricultural sector showed significant fragmentation and division, leading to the emergence of new organizations representing different sectors within the industry, while supermarkets, the processing industry and nature organizations gained influence and were invited to the main discussions (Broersma, 2010). Agractie opted to participate in the primary table, which would include LTO, NAJK, Agractie, Biohuis, environmental organizations, provinces, and the ministry of LNV. The most vocal party in the field, FDF, had chosen not to participate in the talks. This is because they wished to remove the maximum number for livestock units (GVE standard) from the table and believe that there are minimal clear prospects for the future (Lageschaar, 2022). The maximum number of livestock units that could be held was a non-negotiable aspect of the sector from the beginning according to interview 6, 7, 8, 14. This would continue to be a problem in the negotiations:

“What was unmentionable for the sector was filling in land-based agriculture as a future prospect based on an GVE standard. That was a restriction for them not to keep more than so many animals, but that was unmentionable for the sector” (Interview 6)

In selecting the parties invited to the main table (as well as the sector tables), the agricultural agreement organization aimed for a balance between practical workability and diversity and representativeness. Due to the extreme diversity of the chain, it was deemed impractical to choose a single representative to speak for all chain partners. In interview 7, Nature organization LandschappenNL stated multiple times that they can only inform other national nature and environmental organizations of developments, rather than speaking on behalf of all of them. This shows that several sectors were experiencing issues with representation, with some parties feeling that the table was incomplete or that they were unable to speak for the entire sector, which was also stated in interview 1. In February 2023, the talks at the head table began, mainly to set out the lines for the rest of the process. The initial discussions of the main table focused on establishing procedures and elaborating on fundamentals. Later, they became more exploratory, with participants sharing their predictions for the agricultural industry in 2040 and proposing necessary actions or modifications to achieve these predictions (Landbouwakkoord, 2023b). The initial focus of negotiations at the negotiation tables was to restore trust between the sector and the government, which was considered essential for successful future talks according to interviews 7, 13 & 14. Some parties characterized the initial talks as "therapy". This means that it was not only about the policy outcome, but that a benefit of the agreement was that the parties were talking again after a long absence of proper communication:

“It's therapy, I think that's how it worked. So that people started talking to each other, because there had been friction for a number of years, I think, between the sector and the government in particular, and that clashed and people didn't talk to each other very much and there was very little talk there. About which way we want to go. And that is what I think the agricultural agreement set in motion. So I think that the biggest added value of the agricultural agreement, even in retrospect, was that it was therapy and that it got us talking again” (Interview 14)

Due to the unique traits and difficulties of the numerous sub sectors within the agriculture sector, six sector tables were developed: one for dairy and calf farming; another for arable farming; a mixed sector table covering multifunctional agriculture, short chains and smaller sectors; pig farming; poultry farming; open-air vegetable and bulb farming; and a mixed sector table. Their responsibility was developing specific strategies for their respective sectors (Landbouwakkoord, 2023a). At these tables, over fifty parties collaborated to develop agreement proposals that support the sustainable future of agriculture. The sector tables first convened in January 2023, with representatives from governments, chain parties, natural organizations, and main agricultural organizations in attendance. The tables

followed a two-phase approach, as outlined previously. Phase two aimed to gather 'input' for agreements, while phase one focused on the sector's future vision (Landbouwakkoord, 2023b). The sub-tables within the consultation process were designed to facilitate consensus on relatively straightforward issues, while more complex matters such as manure problems were addressed at the main table according to interviews 12 & 14. This approach ensured that the main table dealt with the most difficult issues, making decision-making more difficult and adding emotional weight. Meanwhile, the sub-tables operated informally with no set guidelines for document preparation or detail, providing flexibility, but potentially benefiting from a more structured approach to improve efficiency and streamline processes due to participants' lack of experience with this method according to interviews 4 & 13.

While the agricultural agreement was being negotiated, provincial council and water board elections were also held on 15 March. The elections brought significant changes: the BBB won a fifth of the vote and became the leading party in all 12 provinces (Kiesraad, 2023). The conflict between agricultural interests and environmental policy dominated the campaign. The BBB portrayed itself as the party for the agricultural sector and rural areas. Even though the party only won one seat in the lower house in the national election of 2021, it was nevertheless able to stir a large amount of discontent before the provincial elections. It achieved this in three different ways. Initially, the party capitalized on dissent with the government's nitrogen approach by opposing the suggested agricultural changes. Second, by highlighting the purported cultural divide between the elites of the urban centers and the rural areas, the BBB generated frustrations in the rural areas. Lastly, the party took advantage of widespread discontent with how the coalition handled a number of previous crises. In this way, the party was able to change the policy agenda by putting the agricultural sector in a different light. All the coalition parties lost seats in the senate due to the elections with coalition party CDA losing the most. Despite voicing disapproval of the coalition's nitrogen policy, CDA was unable to influence policy modifications, resulting in a major loss for the party of 40 percent (Otjes & De Jonge, 2024). After the BBB's victory in the provincial elections, there was a clear change of mood at the negotiating tables. Some parties saw this as an endorsement of their position, making them less willing to negotiate or compromise according to interviews 4 , 7 & 12. The week after the election, Agractie announced its withdrawal from the negotiations. Agractie said it saw too little movement from the cabinet and that too many regulations were being imposed on the agricultural sector:

‘‘The political landscape started to shift because of the BBB victory, other things that could no longer keep the cabinet afloat, and so the position of one half of the negotiating parties, read: the government, which gradually became continuously weaker. Yes, in fact, there was no stopping it, especially if you then start betting on something that you know for sure afterwards is actually a no-go for a large part of the sector. This puts so much

pressure on these negotiations that they think: 'after me the flood'. We'll just quit, we'll see what the consequences are'' (Interview 8)

Agractie was also concerned about the attitude of the LTO, which is struggling with a loss of support and, according to Agractie, was moving too much with the government (Nieuwe Oogst, 2023a). This coincides with the image of the LTO as an administrative party and a traditional representative of the sector, an image that the CDA also had and is struggling with. This also explains the rise of BBB and Agractie as more extreme parties according to interviews 1, 7 & 10. By the end of March, the sector tables had reached a consensus on their vision of the future of agriculture in 2040 and the actions required to achieve this. The sector tables subsequently transmitted these findings to the main table (Nieuwe Oogst, 2023a).

What is observed at the start of the agriculture agreement is that the policy window appears to be open for policy change. In the political stream, stakeholders are present at the table. However, it could be argued that the proportions at the tables were not evenly divided given that there was one nature organization at the table. This was partly due to the fact that the perception in the sector was that agricultural policy should be made with agricultural parties, resembling agricultural exceptionalism according to interview 4 & 7. However, a positive change is taking place where the parties get back to talking to each other after a long time of miscommunication ("its therapy"). In the problem stream, there appears to be a degree of consensus on the necessity for an agricultural transition, although there is a lack of consensus on the future vision for agriculture. The problem seems to be primarily in the policy stream, where there are conflicting values and a difference of opinion on the relationship between shrinkage and innovation and the amount of money that is allowed in return. The fact that Minister Adema is unable to spend money on policy initiatives further complicates the status of the policy stream. A shift in the political stream is occurring following the provincial state elections in March 2023. The agrarian parties perceived a sense of empowerment as a consequence of the regional political shifts and the prevailing national mood surrounding agriculture and rural areas. Despite the absence of any tangible developments at the negotiating table, Agractie proceeded with its actions, which prompted the more radical elements of LTO to question the efficacy of their representation.

5.5 Collapse of the agreement and aftermath

The draft agreement, which was due in mid-May, failed to materialize after the LTO saw too few starting points for the agricultural sector. All parties agreed on the need for extensive farming to ensure a reduction in livestock numbers by 2030, but disagreed on the most effective means of achieving this. The main point of contention was the amount of land available for agricultural use, in particular whether housing and infrastructure should be allowed on agricultural land. While the agricultural parties argued

for the continued availability of agricultural land and opposed restrictions on the number of animals per hectare, the cabinet favored a limit on the number of animals per hectare, which would be particularly problematic for farmers in North Brabant and Limburg; the LTO proposed an 'accountable substance balance', whereby livestock farmers would have to comply with emission standards but could choose how to achieve them, including through technological innovation (LTO, 2023). During this period, the first provincial coalitions were established, with BBB entering the coalition in 10 of the 12 provinces. In these provinces where they govern, they were assigned the agriculture portfolio. Furthermore, no province stated that there would be a forced buyout of farmers. Additionally, most provinces committed to halving nitrogen emissions by 2035, in contrast to the policy of the national government (NOS, 2023c). In addition, there was a proposal for agricultural nature management in which 180,000 hectares of agricultural land would be converted to nature-inclusive agriculture (PBL, 2023). However, agricultural nature management is very expensive, so there was no consensus on this in the cabinet:

“You just saw that there was a deal on the table. What ultimately didn't happen was a lot of money for agricultural nature management, for example. But there was very little support for this in the cabinet. Because it's expensive, it's too expensive and it may not yield enough (natural gains). [...] This is not included in the budget, and it is necessary to consider that it was three or four times larger than the current expenditure on agricultural nature management in the Netherlands” (Interview 1)

The agreement was terminated in June 2023 after LTO withdrew from the consultation process, stating that the draft did not offer sufficient prospects for the sector, with too much focus on targets and obligations without concrete support. LTO also highlighted issues such as the lack of a level playing field in Europe due to high Dutch cost prices, insufficient European focus and the inability to reach concrete agreements with the cabinet on the legalization of PAS notifiers and interim operators, the target realization date (2030 or 2035) and alternatives for the critical deposit value in the legislation. (Nieuwe Oogst, 2023b). The GVE standard continued to be a challenging topic of discussion according to interviews 1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10 & 13. because LTO is divided into 3 different organizations representing different forms of agriculture, the organization was under great pressure:

“I think that there was really a group from the LTO South in particular that did not want it and that LTO as a party in the whole wanted to avoid tearing it up and therefore left the table. [...] A large part of the LTO wanted to continue. They saw the money that was available for the transition. They already complied to a large extent, for example with the land requirements, but especially in those intensive areas and on land that is already vulnerable to water quality. That's where things have to change and that's where the pain is” (Interview 6)

This was later acknowledged by Piet Adema who stated that southern Dutch farmers were holding the agricultural sector "hostage" due to regional differences in practices, which led to LTO's withdrawal (Omrop Fryslân, 2023; Visser, 2024). The remaining parties deemed the agreement to be untrustworthy

in the absence of the largest agricultural party (NOS, 2023b). Following the breakdown of talks in June 2023, the PBL reflected on the May 2023 draft agricultural agreement and concluded that stability could be enhanced through a widely accepted agreement. The PBL emphasized the need for the proposed transformation pathways - livestock reduction, extensification and innovation - to create a robust and sustainable agricultural sector and facilitate long-term investment. It also noted that more land would be needed for nature in agriculture to meet EU-wide nature targets, and encouraged market actors to provide a structural premium for sustainability to encourage responsible farming practices.

According to the PBL, one drawback of the draft agreement was the overly optimistic target range forecasts for 2030, which made it appear improbable to reach. Additionally, due to the lack of specific agreements on the execution of planned development paths, it was unrealistic to expect the draft agreement to reach the 2030 targets for climate and nitrogen. The PBL concluded that it was not possible to estimate the effects due to the vague formulation of the measures. For example, the draft agreement aimed to reduce livestock by 25-30% by 2035. However, it lacked additional measures to supplement the current policies for voluntary cessation schemes in order to achieve this goal. According to PBL, achieving such a significant reduction in cattle through voluntary programs in such a short period of time would be challenging. Furthermore, the necessity for enhanced central and national management was highlighted, as superregional decisions regarding space are necessary for nature, agriculture, and other purposes. This approach would prioritize locations with the poorest state of nature when allocating funds for agricultural nature management. Moreover, it should provide farmers with a clearer understanding of the location of agricultural clusters throughout the Netherlands. In addition, the PBL stressed the importance of ensuring that government and commercial entities, such as banks and supply chain parties, devote sufficient attention, resources, and facilities to the various transition pathways during the development and implementation of the agricultural agreement (PBL, 2023). The PBL identified a major shortcoming in the draft agreement, noting overly optimistic projections for 2030 targets and a lack of concrete agreements on implementation pathways, making it unrealistic to expect the draft to meet climate and nitrogen targets by 2030. The PBL highlighted the challenge of achieving a 25-30% livestock reduction by 2035 through voluntary cessation schemes alone, due to insufficient additional measures and the difficulty of implementing such reductions in a short timeframe. In addition, the PBL emphasized the need for improved central and national governance of land use decisions, prioritization of nature management, and ensuring that government and commercial entities allocate sufficient attention, resources and facilities to support the transition pathways outlined in the Agreement (PBL, 2023).

Reasons for the failure of the agricultural agreement included the lack of consensus on the problem at the negotiating table from the outset and the lack of a clear vision in advance. In addition, it was based on a sectoral approach that could not sufficiently involve and support the inevitable losers, such as

intensive and dairy farming according to interviews 8 & 10. Finally, the agricultural agreement can be seen as a form of corporatism, the problem being that the political landscape in agriculture no longer looks like it once did:

“It is also an old reaction to try to negotiate in a corporatist system. If you have a deal with the LTO, you have that support base, and that is not really the case in agriculture any more. [...] The landscape is no longer so corporatist, it is much more pluralistic, the political and interest landscape has become much more pluralistic, so there are many more partial interests. There's no clear overview such as: ‘as long as I've got a deal with LTO, I'm fine’” (Interview 1)

Upon reflection, it can be observed that the design of the agriculture agreement negotiations was flawed. This is evidenced by six interviews (1, 2, 4, 6, 7 & 14) which asserted that the agricultural agreement was inherently destined for failure due to the diversity of interests, fragmentation of the sector and a lack of realistic expectations. In addition to the previously mentioned misalignment between the main and sector tables, it can be argued that the design of the ministries and their relationships to each other were also inadequate. The cabinet's approach to the negotiations was set up in the wrong way. The minister of agriculture, Adema, was present during the negotiations on behalf of the cabinet, given that he is responsible for the LNV portfolio. Additionally, Minister Van der Wal, who is responsible for the portfolio of nature and nitrogen, oversees the implementation of nitrogen measures and the associated budgetary considerations. Minister Van der Wal is responsible for the management of the transition fund, which contains 25 billion euros. Minister Adema conducted the negotiations on behalf of the cabinet with regard to the agriculture agreement (De Witt Wijnen, 2023). However, according to interviews 1 & 4, this approach has the disadvantage that Adema lacks financial control, which necessitates constant consultation with the other members of the cabinet regarding the various budgets from which he can offer the sector at the negotiating table, including those pertaining to nitrogen, climate, infrastructure and water management. It's clear here that different ministries have different interests:

“We also know that the minister didn't have any money. There was a nitrogen fund, but there was also a minister, Van der Wal, who wasn't the minister of agriculture, who was in the nitrogen fund. She was the fund manager for nature and nitrogen, not the minister of agriculture. He couldn't spend the money himself, he had to go back to the Council of Ministers every time to ask, "How much money do I have?" And the ministry of finance wasn't too keen on agriculture and subsidies. They didn't want that” (Interview 1)

In the context of the negotiations surrounding the agricultural agreement, several individuals are referenced in the interviews who were perceived to have the potential to act as policy entrepreneurs. In several interviews, Roy Meijer from NAJK is mentioned as an individual who has attempted to foster connections between the agricultural sector and younger farmers and stakeholders, with the aim

of promoting a cooperative atmosphere according to interviews 6, 7, 8, 10 & 12. Furthermore, Chris Kalden, the second chairman who assumed office in March, was frequently referenced as a potential policy entrepreneur who played a constructive role through his experience and also compelled parties to make decisions in interviews 7, 13 & 14. Finally, Minister Adema is mentioned by interviews 7, 8, 10 & 13. Adema commenced his tenure as an inexperienced minister but subsequently demonstrated a capacity for growth and development in his role. The dedication of Adema is referenced with greater frequency in the interviews, and several significant interventions are attributed to his involvement of other ministers in the process. However, it is also notable that this may be due to the fact that he himself lacked budgetary authority according to interview 1. Nevertheless, it can be argued that this variation in perspectives may indicate the absence of a single, dominant policy entrepreneur.

What can be observed is that the collapse of the agricultural agreement highlights the significant fragmentation within the agricultural sector, exacerbated by the rise of political parties such as the BBB and more radical groups such as the FDF and Agractie. This diversity in the political stream has complicated policy-making, with successive cabinets facing the challenge of navigating this fragmented landscape. The end of the agreement reflects deep-seated problems within both the problem and the policy streams. Following the departure of Agractie, LTO felt compelled to adopt a more radical stance in order to maintain its support base, thereby sharpening policy positions. On the policy front, certain non-negotiable issues - such as PAS reporters, the GVE standard and approaches to target management involving innovation or reduction - became major sticking points. These critical issues are of paramount importance to farmers and have made compromise difficult, leading to a stalemate where no party is willing to make significant concessions. This impasse caused the political window to close as the agreement unraveled. Ultimately, the efforts of policy entrepreneurs such as Roy Meijer, Piet Adema and Chris Kalden were not enough to navigate the complex political landscape and achieve a negotiable consensus, resulting in the LTO withdrawing from the negotiations and effectively sealing the fate of the policy window at that time. Over the years, there have been open policy windows, and policy changes have taken place as a result of changing relations in the streams. Now, with the collapse of the agreement, the policy window would remain closed for the time being.

6. Discussion

In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the agricultural agreement, contact has been made with all parties at the main table to ascertain their perspectives on Dutch agricultural policy and the agricultural agreement. Additionally, some "neutral" parties were interviewed to provide an outside look on the process. However, due to the incomplete composition of the interviewees, the results are not entirely reliable, and personal preferences within organizations must also be considered. Furthermore, the agricultural agreement was terminated just one year ago, which has resulted in a lack of scientific research on the subject. Consequently, it has become challenging to obtain peer-reviewed sources. The objective of semi-structured interviews was to address this gap. However, the nature of semi-structured interviews also means that not all results can be reproduced in a one-to-one context, given the content and relationships in the conversations. The absence of LTO among the interviewees represents a significant limitation in this study. The input from LTO would have been valuable, particularly given the large role they played in this case. However, this research was unable to engage in discourse with LTO and the analysis was based on other sources. Furthermore, it would have been beneficial to consult with the FNLI, as a representative of the processing industry, given their significant role in the Dutch agricultural economy. A subsequent study would be well-advised to include the opportunity for in-depth interviews with these parties. This may be more feasible if the agricultural agreement is more distant in time and the subject matter is less politically charged.

MSF has been demonstrated to be a valuable theoretical instrument for the analysis of Dutch agricultural policy by means of the separation of the three streams. However, a limitation of MSF is that these streams are regarded as entirely distinct aspects, whereas in reality they are frequently closely interrelated. In practice, the process of policy-making is often much more integrated than the model suggests as stated by Cairney & Jones (2016). In addition, the MSF's focus on timing and opportunities may result in an underestimation of the structural and long-term forces that influence policy change. These forces may include the acceptance of values such as the shrinking livestock population. Furthermore, MSF works with abstract objects such as streams and windows, which necessarily entails some degree of subjectivity and personal bias (Ruvalcaba-Gomez et al., 2023). Additionally, the retrospective analysis of potential policy windows is inherently influenced by the researcher's interpretation afterwards, this is a relatively minor point regarding MSF and must be recognized (Descombe, 2009).

The objective of this research was to analyze the Dutch agricultural policy of the past 15 years and to provide an explanation for the failure of the subsequent agricultural agreement. The intention was to gain insight into the relevant actors operating in the policy landscape and how agricultural policy is made. As the agricultural policy landscape undergoes transformation, the government is compelled to

implement measures that the sector perceives as “lacking broad support”. A consideration of the theoretical framework reveals that the phenomenon of agricultural exceptionalism may give rise to inefficiencies and a reliance on government support, which could potentially hinder innovation or development as illustrated by Skogstad (1998). The question can be asked whether the agricultural agreement did not work because the landscape is no longer corporatist, or that corporatism only works under favorable conditions, as Gallagher et al. (2011) argue, and that the current status of agriculture in the Netherlands is simply too unfavorable. Finally, it can be concluded that the shift to governance can lead to fragmentation and a lack of policy cohesion, which makes it more difficult to interpret public values (van Tatenhove, 1993). Furthermore, the role of market parties in governance structures was not a prominent focus of this study. They were not referenced or only briefly mentioned in the interviews. The influence of these parties will need to be determined in subsequent research into governance. It is crucial for future research to investigate how the impasse in policy can be resolved and to provide an explanation for the increasing fragmentation in agriculture. Follow-up research can focus on the reasons why certain parties are or are not invited to the negotiating tables in the light of agricultural exceptionalism. This can provide insight into the criteria and processes that lead to the selection of stakeholders, and how this affects final policy outcomes. These studies can assist in informing and supporting possible future negotiations. For instance, a more detailed analysis of the stakeholders in the agricultural sector could be conducted. Furthermore, research could be conducted into the success factors of agricultural agreements in other countries.

What can be concluded is that the broad trend of Europeanisation has resulted in a shift in the role of government, whereby the focus has moved from that of an economic stimulator to that of a regulator. This has led to a change in the relationship between the state, the market and society. These three trends partially coincide with the development of an agricultural agreement. The government is no longer able to implement policy without the involvement of a multitude of parties, given the growing influence of market and sector interest groups. Due to this fragmentation, multi stakeholder processes like the traditional Dutch polder model and the agricultural agreement are vulnerable to powerful actors that are dominating these events if we take the triangle of government, market and civil society into account. LTO Netherlands may be considered the most significant party, representing traditional agricultural interests. LTO's main objective was enforcing less strict measures, with a particular focus on securing financial support for the sector. LTO was confronted with a challenging situation from the start, as it represents a diverse range of interests surrounding the intensity of agricultural areas. Agractie and FDF parties were involved in the consultation process as more radical parties that viewed the current agricultural transition negatively. However, Agractie subsequently withdrew from the consultation after the provincial elections, while FDF never joined. This strategy aimed to delegitimize the agricultural agreement and exert pressure on other agricultural parties like LTO. To channel this influence, it is up to the government to enact clear and decisive legislation. This would create a strong framework for

agricultural policy which is transparent and clear. Regarding the government, the Ministry of LNV was keen to achieve the set nature goals and also had to continue to engage in dialogue with the agricultural sector in order to involve them in the plans. The ministry was at odds with the provinces and municipalities, showing difficulties in government layers. The decentralized municipalities were caught between different parties, given their proximity to implementation. The primary concern was the practicality of achieving the desired outcomes. A major factor influencing the outcome of the agricultural agreement was the uneven distribution of relationships at the negotiating tables, resembling agricultural exceptionalism. This led to a strong influence of traditional agricultural organizations such as LTO while other organizations had less influence. Furthermore, there were the supermarkets, processing industry and nature organizations, all of which had interests but were less vocal in the public debate and at the tables.

The efficacy of technical innovations such as new barn systems to reduce ammonia emissions is being questioned by several parties, although this is being investigated further by the agricultural sector. Furthermore, it can result in a situation of path dependency, with significant costs for farmers. A considerable sum of money was made available for the management of agricultural ecosystems, yet there was minimal support within the cabinet for this initiative due to the high financial cost and the lack of clarity regarding the intended outcomes. The reduction of livestock has consistently been a politically contentious measure. Over time, the necessity for compulsory buyouts became increasingly apparent, with parties such as the CDA and VVD also advocating for this course of action. However, this ultimately led to a political rise of the BBB, accompanied by farmers' protests. Ultimately, certain policies proved untenable for the agricultural sector. The prospect of a compulsory reduction in livestock numbers, coupled with compulsory buyouts, proved particularly contentious. The GVE standard emerged as the primary point of contention in the agriculture agreement. The government sought to impose a lower GVE standard than that which the sector was willing to accept, with the intention of placing significant constraints on livestock farmers, particularly those in the south. LTO, representing all farmers, was concerned about the potential for an internal rupture between the northern and southern regions as a result of this GVE standard. Consequently, they opted to withdraw from the agricultural agreement, despite the fact that northern based farmers who already met the GVE standard were satisfied with it. All this shows that certain positions, mainly of an ideological nature, ensure that the policy stream appears to be stuck.

The period preceding the agricultural agreement saw the emergence of a policy entrepreneur in the form of Johan Remkes. As chairman of the nitrogen committee, which was established by the cabinet, Remkes was responsible for the publication of two reports. The committee presented policy proposals that were occasionally perceived as controversial, including suggestions to reduce the livestock population and implement compulsory buyouts of livestock farmers. Furthermore, the committee

proposed the establishment of an agricultural agreement, which facilitated the resumption of negotiations between all parties. During the negotiations, three individuals were identified as policy entrepreneurs: The individuals who played a pivotal role in the negotiations were Roy Meijer, Chris Kalden and Piet Adema. Although these individuals played a positive role in the negotiations and brought parties closer together, it can be argued that they did not play a decisive role and therefore perhaps should not be seated as policy entrepreneurs. One might question whether the failure of the agriculture agreement indicates the absence of a policy entrepreneur during the negotiations, who could have facilitated the resolution of the stalled discourse. A review of the literature and interviews indicates that there were several instances where the streams (partly) converged, creating a potential policy opportunity in a policy window. This occurred in 2019 following the PAS ruling, in 2021 following the parliamentary elections, and during the agricultural agreement. It can be observed that at these specific instances, the streams converge. In 2019, however, the primary cause of this phenomenon is the court ruling. In the policy and political stream, it is evident that the agricultural sector continues to receive substantial support, while the implementation of measures is met with considerable resistance. Nevertheless, developments in 2021 have already begun to diverge from those observed in 2020. Nitrogen continued to present itself as a problem, and with the acceleration agreement, a change of direction had begun to emerge in the sector and in politics. Furthermore, the acceleration agreement facilitated the acceptance of certain policies, as they were initiated by LTO, among other entities. Furthermore, the election of D66 ensured that the achievement of the nitrogen targets by 2030 was included in the coalition agreement. During the agricultural agreement, there appeared to be a convergence of perspectives, but the impasse ultimately stemmed from differences in opinion regarding potential policy measures. The policy window appeared to close following the publication of the NLPG program in 2022 and the provincial council elections in March 2023. This was due to changes in one or more streams as a result of political changes and policy proposals. The question remains as to how far these individuals can be described as policy entrepreneurs, and whether their presence could actually have brought about policy change.

7. Conclusion

This research employed MSF to explain the events in Dutch agricultural policy and the agricultural agreement. Prior to this research, it was anticipated that the agricultural agreement would represent a pivotal moment in agricultural policy, opening a policy window that had remained stalled for many years. However, following further research into the relevant literature and the interviews conducted, it appears that there were also potential policy windows in the years leading up to the agricultural agreement, which were open to varying degrees. It is also evident that the agricultural agreement would prove challenging to achieve in advance, given the interests of the parties involved. One possible explanation for this is that over the years the policy landscape has become increasingly polarized due to inconsistent policies.

The more radical parties, such as Agractie and FDF, ultimately had little influence on policy making. However, they did leave their mark on LTO, which, as the largest agricultural representative, was in a difficult situation given their diverse support base (north vs south). Johan Remkes played a role as a policy entrepreneur by playing a key role in the initiative for the agricultural agreement. However, no clear policy entrepreneur could be identified during the negotiations, which ultimately led to the collapse of the agricultural agreement. The Dutch agricultural policy landscape is a complex web of interest and power relations. The agriculture agreement was a form of corporatist policy in a policy landscape that had become much more pluralistic. This made it extremely challenging to negotiate such an agreement because the parties involved had to represent a much more diverse range of interests. The rise of political parties such as the BBB and the radical farmer groups like FDF and Agractie highlight the fragmentation within the sector. This diversity in the political stream has complicated policy making, with successive governments facing the challenge of making policy in this fragmented landscape.

The stakes for agriculture in the Netherlands and Europe are ultimately tied to environmental stability, economic viability for farmers and good governance structures. The failure of the agricultural agreement underscores the difficulty of achieving consensus among diverse stakeholders with conflicting interests and highlights the necessity for a clear vision and regulation. In the face of increasing climate change and declining biodiversity, there is a need for effective agricultural policies that contribute to these problems. There is a need for good governance as the current system is not able to solve these problems, leading to eroding trust in governance. Achieving a balance between all competing interests is crucial for the future resilience and sustainability of Dutch agriculture. Effective policy interventions must address these challenges to ensure a prosperous agricultural landscape.

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9. Appendix

9.1 Interview list

	Interviewee	Date
1	Senior researcher, Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL)	29th of March, 2024
2	Coordinator and advisor for agricultural agreement, Consumer & Market Authority (ACM), Dutch independent public regulator	8th of April, 2024
3	Professor Environmental Governance, Open University	10th of April, 2024
4	Policy advisor, Dutch Water Authorities (UvW)	10th of April, 2024
5	Program manager, Interprovincial Consultation (IPO), association of the twelve Dutch provinces	11th of April, 2024
6	Policy advisor, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management	11th of April, 2024
7	Policy advisor, LandschappenNL, Dutch nature organization	12th of April, 2024
8	Director, Central Food Trade Bureau (CBL)	23th of April, 2024
9	Crown member, Social and Economic Council (SER)	26th of April, 2024
10	Member of supervisory board, Louis Bolk Instituut, knowledge institute for sustainable agriculture, nutrition and health.	2nd of May, 2024
11	Professor Sustainable Food System Governance, Utrecht University	2nd of May, 2024
12	Policy advisor, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food quality	8th of May, 2024
13	Board member, NAJK, Dutch Young farmers organization	14th of May, 2024
14	Director, BO Akkerbouw, umbrella organization LTO	21st of May, 2024

9.2 Interview guide

- In what way have you been involved in the agricultural agreement?
- Can you outline for me how agricultural policy is normally made?
- Why did there have to be an agricultural agreement? And why at that specific time?
- Why would an agricultural agreement solve the problems Dutch agriculture is facing?
- Do you think there is an overall consensus on the problem (that the agricultural agreement was supposed to solve?)
- Were there parties split because of conflicting constituencies or conflicting interests?
- Was there a strong lobby present among the parties involved? If so: how did this lobby exert influence?
- Which role do the media and citizens play in the nitrogen crisis and agricultural agreement?
- Were there changes in Dutch politics during the development of the agricultural agreement that impacted the process?
- Were there changes in personnel among the parties involved that may have affected relations in Dutch agricultural policy?
- How did factors such as technical feasibility, shared values, cost-effectiveness and public support influence the decision-making process?
- Was there a consensus on the possible solutions put forward in the agriculture agreement? If not: what are certain issues that were unmentionable for certain parties?
- Can you point to certain individuals who had a positive influence on the nitrogen crisis and the agricultural agreement?
- Has there been a moment where there were clear opportunities for policy change, or when have these moments been?
- Looking at the draft agreement, can certain winners and losers be identified given the interests of these parties and how they started the negotiations?
- Looking back, are there any unexpected or surprising aspects of the political process in the agriculture agreement? And what lessons learned from this process could be valuable for future policy-making in similar contexts?
- Is there a future for a new agricultural agreement? If so: what should be different in the process? If no: why not?
- Are there things that have not yet been addressed that you think should still be addressed or said, or would you like to say anything further?

9.3 Coding scheme

Theoretical Concept	Variable	Indicators
Political stream	Party ideology	Party platforms and manifestos Speeches and public statements Legislative Behavior Coalition and alliance formations
	Balance of interest	Lobbying activity Stakeholder meetings and hearings Media coverage Policy outcomes
	National mood	National elections Regional elections Protest actions Public opinion polls
Policy stream	Technical feasibility	Expert assessments Similar policies Pilot projects
	Value acceptability	Cultural values Historical precedent Stakeholder viewpoints
	Resource adequacy	Budget available Stakeholder commitment Perceived cost-benefits
Problem stream	Focusing events	Crises Legal rulings Protests
	Feedback	Stakeholder reports Policy evaluations
	Indicators	Environmental reports Agricultural statistics
	Load	Policy agenda Institutional resources
Policy entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurial qualities	Knowledge and expertise Political experience
	Conducted strategies	Problem framing Window-shopping Negotiation techniques
	Resources	Access to decision makers. Established name
Policy window	Predictability	Political stream Problem stream Policy stream Policy entrepreneur
Policy outcome	Details of the policy proposal	Definition of the problem Policy design

