

Summary

Land consolidation from a local perspective

Land consolidation (ruilverkaveling) was an instrument that was used during the better part of the twentieth century to modernise Dutch agriculture. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, circumstances in the rural part of the Netherlands were dreadful. Farmers had numerous plots of land, often lying scattered far apart. In addition, the hydrological situation and infrastructure left a lot to be desired. Land consolidation was designed to improve this situation and consequently help farmers produce their goods more efficiently. It goes without saying that land consolidation, as a tool aimed at improving or modernising agriculture, also changed over the years. This was caused by changing economic, social and political circumstances, as well as by developments in agriculture and by technical innovations.

This research project investigates the changing implementation and acceptance of land consolidation from a local perspective. In order to achieve this, the history of this planning tool has been divided into three periods. The first period, which stretches from 1890 to 1924, is characterised by an informal approach to land consolidation, largely due to the absence of a law and regulations. Only three land consolidation schemes were carried out during this period. During the second period, from 1924 to 1950, a law was introduced, but due to harsh financial consequences and difficult economic circumstances only a limited number of projects were executed. Between 1950 and 1985, the third and final period, land consolidation really took off; investment rose sharply and the area in execution skyrocketed.

To be able to come to a full understanding of the changes in the implementation and acceptance of land consolidation, this research has been divided into two sections. The first section focuses on structural changes in Dutch rural areas on a national level (chapter 2) and changes in land consolidation legislation (chapter 3). These two chapters together form the national context. The second section aims to answer the main research question for each of the three periods (chapters 4, 5 and 6). Each chapter starts with a description and an analysis of a single land consolidation scheme. These serve as reference points for the second part of these chapters, an analysis of change and developments at an aggregate level. In addition, comparisons to other individual schemes are made continuously.

Before the Second World War, Dutch agriculture and especially that on sandy soils, was characterised by a dominance of small farm holders. Between 1910 and 1930, over 80% of the farms on the sandy part of the Netherlands were smaller than 10 hectare. The existence of this large group was made possible by a series of innovations that allowed small farmers and their families to make a modest living. For example, fertiliser and new crops allowed production and productivity to rise and co-operation enabled them to profit from economies of scale. All this was encouraged by the national government. Farmers were believed to have a positive influence on Dutch morality at the time. During the economic crisis in the thirties however, the export market disappeared, and many farms experienced financial trouble. Increasing intervention by the national government helped to alleviate this situation, but a true solution only came when the war started and agricultural products became scarce. By the 1950s, prizes started to rise at increasing rates and the income level in the agricultural sector could not keep up with this. The problem was that too many people were trying to make a living as a farmer. Policy became more and more aimed at reducing the number of farms and farmers, because increasing farm size and reducing the people that made a living in the agricultural sector was seen as the solution.

At the same time that farming intensified, the rural parts of the country were increasingly used for 'new' functions. As early as the twenties and thirties conservationists expressed their worries about the changing countryside. Not much later, from the late 1940s on, industries were looking for cheaper locations, commuters bought their houses in rural towns and villages, and tourism and recreation also made a claim on the space. The traditional configuration of the countryside had changed. While once agriculture was the only important interest, this changed dramatically during the twentieth century.

The history of land consolidation is set against this context. At first, land consolidation was aimed at improving the conditions for every farmer. As time progressed and small farms were hardly able to earn any income at all, as happened during the economic crisis of the 1930s, this slowly changed. Land consolidation was more and more aimed at improving rural, but still agricultural, economies. This meant that no longer all farmers would benefit from the plans. Old farmers without successors were encouraged to stop working. Their land would be put towards the enlargement of other farms. As soon as the new players arrived in rural areas, the aim of the *Land Consolidation Act* - which was solely to improve circumstances for agriculture - turned out to be problematic. Other functions and interests could not benefit from the act. Creativity, improvisation and reinterpretation of the existing legislation had to be used to match agricultural, conservationist,

industrial and all other interests. As the importance of agriculture lessened, a new act with a broader, more integral planning aim was adopted: the *Land Reconstruction Act* (Landinrichtingswet).

All these trends and developments found their most concrete form in the rural areas themselves. It is for this reason that this study aims to view land consolidation from a local perspective. In the first period, when there was still no land consolidation legislation, it was very hard to complete any schemes, mostly due to the fact that all landowners had to give their permission. Only three schemes were carried out between 1890 and 1924. However, during this period, the main aim of the projects was not yet to improve circumstances in the field, but to propagate land consolidation. Practical examples of the advantages of the tool had to convince landowners all across the Netherlands. It seems that this goal was achieved. Debate on the subject intensified over the decade and a half these 'experiments' were executed and in 1924 the first *Land Consolidation Act* was implemented.

The economic difficulties between 1924 and 1950 could have easily put a definite halt to land consolidation. Farmers were reluctant to invest and hardly any schemes made it to the phase of execution. After the crisis of 1929, unemployment outside agriculture rose sharply, and those on the dole were forced to work on all sorts of government projects: settling new *polders*, resettling marginal lands and working in land consolidation. The Ministry for Social Affairs paid for the costs of the wages. Due to this financial construction, execution costs were diminished significantly. This development caused a significant rise in applications for land consolidation projects. This is proof that financial costs were of paramount importance to the farmers.

During World War II (1940-1945), land consolidation came to a complete hold. In 1945 no schemes were applied or voted for. However, work that had started before 1940 needed to be finished and damages caused by the war needed to be repaired. These two factors combined caused an unprecedented rise in applications. Land consolidation was seen as the right tool for rebuilding the Dutch countryside. The Land Consolidation Act of 1938 however, didn't seem to be fit for the job. Experiments with new acts (*herverkavelingswetten*) in Zeeland with a more integral approach offered better results. The problem, far too many small farms with scattered plots of land, could only be solved by scale enlargement. This meant that a group of 118 farmers would have to move elsewhere. The land they left behind was put towards the enlargement of other farms. This was an important shift in land consolidation. No longer was the tool aimed at helping all the farmers. The goal now, was to improve the agricultural production structure. As no

longer all farmers were ensured of a future in agriculture, opposition to land consolidation increased.

At the same time the Dutch countryside changed. As 'new' functions arrived, land consolidation started to change. Slowly but surely these other functions secured their place in the plans. This caused a lot of friction. Farmers were opposed to the idea that the *Land Consolidation Act* was used for other than agricultural purposes, while representatives of the 'new' functions could not understand why their interests were served by a purely agricultural law. As the interpretation of the *Land Consolidation Act* was increasingly stretched, it got more and more criticism from every actor in the countryside. From about 1970 on, the area in execution decreased, as did investment in the instrument. In 1985 the *Land Reconstruction Act* replaced the *Land Consolidation Act*.

These dynamics in the implementation and execution of land consolidation can be explained in terms of *acceptance* of the instrument. Because land owners and users had to vote for each scheme, it was important that they accepted the terms and conditions under which a plan was executed. When the history of land consolidation is researched from a local perspective, it seems that every change is the consequence of a change in acceptance or an attempt to change this acceptance. Those in favour or opposition of land consolidation would try to influence public opinion and the government would change the Act in order to achieve their goal: increasing the use of land consolidation in order to modernise agriculture.

When a closer look is given to the nature of acceptance in each of the three research periods, it can be individually characterised. In the first period (1890-1924) people wouldn't accept land consolidation unless they were well informed and trusted a strong government. After all, before around 1900 the national Dutch government was still very reluctant to get involved in Dutch social and economic life. During the second period (1924-1950) acceptance was mainly a financial matter. The difficult economic circumstances during the crisis and uncertain future prospects during the war made people unwilling to invest a lot of money in land consolidation. Financial matters were also important during the third period (1950-1985), but a new category also influenced acceptance: people no longer blindly accepted the goal of land consolidation. As new functions were introduced, land consolidation was continuously criticised by virtually all functions in the countryside. Farmers did not agree with the increasing importance of the 'new' players in the land consolidation schemes, while representatives of these functions did not accept the purely agricultural goal of the *Land Consolidation Act*.

This research has shown that Dutch agriculture and its space, the countryside, have been in constant motion. Social and economic change,

national government and local groups have influenced each other continuously. Land consolidation has been a fit phenomenon to study this process, due to the fact that acceptance has always been needed.

