



Analysis

The (limited) political influence of ecological economics: A case study on Dutch environmental policies

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ABSTRACT

Although the ecological economics (EE) discourse attempts to influence environmental policy, empirical studies have concluded that its success in this endeavour has been limited thus far. In the Netherlands, however, two EE-related policy concepts, Environmental Utilisation Space and Ecological Footprint, were strongly present in environmental policy during certain periods in time, but subsequently disappeared from the environmental agenda. The central question of this article is how these ups and downs of the EE concepts can be understood: which factors determine their rise on and fall from the policy agenda over time? To answer this question, this article offers a conceptual model informed by the approaches in political science on framing, agenda-setting and knowledge utilisation. We conclude that the interplay of concept-specific characteristics, the formation of coalitions around the concept and contextual variables explain the rise and fall of the aforementioned concepts. A match between the dominant policy frame and the core elements of the concept provides the opportunity for the two concepts to be pushed on the agenda. We observe the alternation of 'constraining' frames, which allows for EE concepts to survive, and 'reconciling' frames, which block agenda entrance for EE concepts. Furthermore, the alternation of these frames seems to correlate with economic and public environmental attention cycles in the Netherlands.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s a neo-liberal political discourse has heavily influenced public policy. Inspired by neo-classical economic thought, this discourse simultaneously promotes a shrinking role of the state and increasing its efficiency through harmonizing free markets. This discourse has also influenced environmental policy (Barry, 1999). The literature presents overwhelming evidence that several Western European countries as well as the EU have been marrying goals on a sustained economic growth and environmental protection by pursuing a moderate ecological modernist agenda and speaking a win-win language (Baker, 2007; Hajer, 1995; Mol et al., 2009; Weale, 1992). Hajer (1995) suggests that the structuring effect of this hegemonic discourse makes it difficult for other discourses that identify capitalism's expansionist character as the main driver behind environmental degradation to have an impact on policy. Considering this, what is then the influence of counter-discourses?

In this journal and elsewhere it has been argued that ecological economics (EE) as a transdisciplinary scientific discourse challenges the dominant neo-classical economic paradigm, from which it fundamentally differs (e.g. Costanza et al., 1997; Røpke, 2005; Van den Bergh,

2001). Furthermore, EE does not contend to be merely a field of scholarly inquiry, but aims to impact public policy and to influence social change toward sustainability (Hezri and Dovers, 2006; Proops, 1989). As Costanza et al. state, EE "should not be divorced from the policy and management process, but rather be integrated with it" (1991, p. 7). Thus far, however, EE's policy impact seems rather limited. Farley et al. (2007) argue that EE has failed to reach the US political agenda, and they appeal for lessons to be learned from the political sciences as a means of extending EE insights into the policy paradigm.

This article, however, argues that EE has impacted the environmental policy in the Netherlands, in general, and the processes of problem formulation and agenda-setting, in particular. In some time periods a sudden enthusiasm can be observed for specific EE policy concepts in strategic national Dutch environmental policy documents, such as the policy concept Environmental Utilisation Space (EUS) and the latter Ecological Footprint (EF). Over time, however, policy attention for EUS and EF waned and both concepts disappeared as credible policy alternatives. This raises the question of to what extent and under which circumstances can policy concepts from non-hegemonic discourses actually influence policy.

This article attempts to explain the rise and fall of EE originated concepts on the Dutch policy agenda, which, in general, has been heavily informed by a neo-liberal discourse over the last decades. What variables determine the receptivity of EUS and EF? To solve this puzzle, we elaborated on a framework of concepts from the political sciences

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literature on agenda-setting, on policy frames and on knowledge utilisation.

This article proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual framework, Section 3 accounts for the methodology, and Section 4 discusses the theoretical backgrounds of the policy concepts concerned. Section 5 sketches how Dutch environmental policy discourses have evolved. The discourses form the background and context of the agenda-setting processes around EUS and EF that are discussed in Section 6. Section 7 concludes and poses questions for future research.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Framing

There is a large body of literature on the transfer of scientific knowledge, in particular, the transfer of scientific concepts into the policy realm. In general, scholars agree that scientific data, concepts and theories are combined with extra-scientific ideas, ideals and other elements into policy concepts that may attract the attention of policymakers. As Hall (1993, p. 290) observes, policy processes are as much structured by ideas, causal stories and beliefs, as they are structured by institutions. From the overwhelming bulk of literature and approaches, this article uses the ‘framing’ approach. “Framing is a way of selecting, organising, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading and acting. A frame is a perspective from which an amorphous, ill-defined, problematic situation can be made sense of and acted on” (Rein and Schön, 1993, p. 146). A frame is a more or less coherent constellation of facts, beliefs, worldviews, values and preferred actions. Frames function as normative-prescriptive schemata that select information and ideas while ignoring or excluding others. This applies to either scientific or extra-scientific information, data and ideas. Therefore, scientific elements become part of a larger ‘frame’, including normative elements. Partly unintended, these elements may also become part of an advocacy (Sabatier, 1993; Weiss, 1998).

Kingdon's (1995) model of multiple streams (MS) offers answers to how attention is rationed and how the selection of information is biased. Both actions stem from a unique mix of knowledge, timing and luck. Unlike rational choice theory, MS does not necessarily suggest a sequential order in defining and selecting problems and in generating alternative strategies to solve these problems. Rather, “alternatives must be advocated for a long period before a short run opportunity presents itself on the agenda” (Kingdon, 1995, p. 215). Kingdon distinguishes three streams: the political, policy and problem stream, each stream develops relatively independently from the other. All three streams witness a discursive struggle of naming and framing, with frames and policy concepts that survive and others that do not. When the three streams converge, a policy window opens. This opening provides policy entrepreneurs opportunities to push their policy concept onto the agenda.

Frames are not internally homogenous. Albeit in slightly different terms, scholars point out that frames, or ‘discursive systems’ as some call them, have ‘layers’ (Fischer, 2003; Hall, 1993; Sabatier, 1993). Although these discursive approaches differ on details, they largely converge on their main ideas. Therefore, with Wiering and Arts (2006), building on Therborn (1980), we restrict to the distinction between ontological, normative-strategic and instrumental layers within a discourse. The *ontological layer* of a discursive frame comprises basic beliefs on ‘what is’ (the problem), and on what policy makers should strive for (the ultimate goals). In our case, these beliefs are fundamental notions on the character of environmental problems, their relation with economy, technology etc., and the governability of these issues by governmental policies. The *normative-strategic layer* reflects statements on the general governance strategy and the problem solving approach, including the fair share of responsibilities of state, market and civil society. The *instrumental layer* contains information on more concrete policy

programmes and their instruments for specific environmental sub-domains. While these three layers are interrelated into a more or less coherent whole, the ontological elements are likely to be relatively stable, while the instrumental aspects tend to be more flexible.

2.2. Agenda-setting as ‘Dependent Variable’

The rise and fall of certain policy concepts in the environmental policy domain has been conceived as agenda-setting. Kingdon (1995, pp. 3–4) defines the agenda as the list of problems that members of the policy community are paying serious attention to at a certain moment in time. In addition to the list of problems, government officials and those closely related to them also seriously consider a shortlist of alternatives for political action. In this article, we regard agenda-setting to be successful when a policy concept has reached a prominent spot in a Dutch strategic national environmental policy document. Those strategic documents, white papers, policy plans and the like, outline environmental policies for the years ahead, are agreed upon by various ministers and departments, and therefore adequately reflect and represent the issues and strategies that the national government is seriously considering.

2.3. Context, Agency and Issue Characteristics as ‘Independent Variables’

Our approach considers three categories of independent variables: context, agency and issue characteristics. By doing so, we theoretically draw on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory and on what is called the ‘discursive’ or ‘argumentative turn’ in policy analysis (e.g. Fischer and Forester, 1993). These variables play an important role in comparable empirical studies, either on the environmental domain, in general, (see Driessen and Glasbergen, 2002; Hajer, 1995; Keijzers, 2000; Van Tatenhove and Leroy, 2000; WRR, 2003) or on specific sub-domains thereof (e.g. Eberg, 1997, on waste management; Souren, 2006, on soil pollution; Tuinstra, 2006, on air pollution; Turnhout et al., 2007 and; Van der Zouwen, 2006, on nature conservation).

While ‘frames’ seem to pay attention to the ideational aspects of policy making, these framing processes, of course, occur in a ‘nested context’ (Rein and Schön, 1993, p. 154): issues arise in a broader political and economic setting. As Downs (1972) showed, the issue-attention-cycle for environmental problems is affected by the shifting national mood, by a changing economic situation, by focusing events, etc. As some aspects of this nested context change over time, policymakers may learn that the concepts that they previously relied upon are no longer valid or adequate. Therefore, a ‘real’ or perceived shift in the context may lead to the gradual reframing of the policy terrain.

2.4. Agencies as Active Entrepreneurs

Even though partly constrained by the abovementioned contextual variables, agencies, especially policy actors, engage in a continuous communicative interaction throughout which they reconsider and restructure their frames and arguments. Rein and Schön call this ‘frame reflection’. ‘Reframing’ is a permanent quest and challenge, especially in situations of conflicting frames. Hannigan (2006) has recently highlighted the strategic role of frames in assembling, presenting and contesting environmental policy claims. In terms of Kingdon's policy stream, experts, bureaucrats, advisors and academics are constantly recombining scientific insights and extra-scientific ideas into new policy concepts. In brief, agencies invest time and energy to familiarize other policy actors with and to make them receptive to their policy concepts. This action is a sort of ‘softening up’ that can take years. When a ‘window of opportunity’ opens, agencies struggle to push their favourite policy concept forward.

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