



QUESTIONING THE IDEAL OF POLICY INTEGRATION

The influence of environmental assessments on achieving policy integration
through the development of municipal Environmental Visions in the
Netherlands



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Preface

In front of you lies my thesis that concludes the master's programme Spatial Planning at Utrecht University.

This thesis is aimed at students and scholars who are interested in the role of environmental assessments as a tool for enabling policy integration. It is also interesting and potentially useful for urban planners, consultants, and government officials who are going to work or are already working on environmental assessments and Environmental Visions in the Netherlands.

I want to thank my thesis supervisor Rachel Macrorie and my internship supervisor Jasper van Bruchem for their support and feedback during the writing process of my thesis. I would also like to thank the respondents from Arcadis, KuiperCompagnons, BVR, and the municipality of Lisse and Doetinchem for helping me with my research. And finally, I am very grateful for all the feedback, tips, and continuous support from my family, friends, and fellow students during the writing process of this thesis.

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Summary

Planners and policy-makers around the world are implementing an integrated approach to tackle contemporary cross-cutting urban challenges. The Dutch are doing this as well by drastically changing their planning and environmental policy system with the new integrated Environment and Planning Act (EPA). The EPA obligates all levels of government to develop an Environmental Vision which includes and integrates all spatial and environmental objectives and ambitions for the upcoming 20-30 years. The Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA) obligates all governments to conduct an environmental assessment (EA) on these visions. However, there has been recent debate on the role and effect of EA as a tool for enabling policy integration. Therefore, this study means to research to what extent EA (applied as part of integrated policy-making processes) helps Dutch municipalities to agree an Environmental Vision.

This research focused on two case studies in the Netherlands: the municipality of Lisse and the municipality of Doetinchem. Through document analyses and interviews, this research has found that EA processes can have an effect on the development process of Environmental Visions. EA provides in-depth research, helps with formulating clear ambitions, maintains a clear planning process and structure, and offers independent advice and unbiased expertise. However, the research also showed that EA lacks in legal power, highly depends on the quality of the financial and informational inputs, and differs in effectiveness based on its entry point in the process.

This research showed that EA helps to agree a municipal Environmental Vision and thus helps to enable integrated policy-making in the Netherlands. However, its effect depends on the political and financial context and its perceived purpose in the overall process of policy integration.

Keywords: integrated planning, environmental policy integration, Environment and Planning Act, environmental assessment, Environmental Vision

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List of abbreviations

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Definition</i>
EA	Environmental assessment
EIA	Environmental impact assessment
EPA	Environment and Planning Act
NCEA	Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment
SEA	Strategic environmental assessment

1. Introduction

Humanity is facing a lot of contemporary urban challenges. Global issues such as climate change and a decrease in biodiversity need to be addressed in order to maintain a liveable planet. Meanwhile dozens of societal issues make life difficult for millions of people all around the world. Affordable housing and access to care and infrastructure are necessary aspects of modern society. Providing these services and addressing these challenges is not specified to a single sectors or level of government. Instead, they are cross-cutting issues that transcend our established policy fields and national borders (Holden, 2012). Addressing these challenges is therefore highly complex and requires many people from different sectors and governments to work together (Stead & Meijers, 2004).

During the 1990s theories on collaboration and communication in planning became more mainstream (Harris, 2002). Meanwhile, the calls for sustainable development started to increase due to the increasingly negative studies about our climate (IPCC, 1992). As a result, there has been an increasing interest in addressing these cross-sectoral and international challenges in a coordinated and cooperative way. The method for tackling these challenges is known as integrated planning and policy-making (Stead & Meijers, 2009). The main goal of this comprehensive integrated approach is to improve policy integration both horizontally, across different policy domains, and vertically, between policy actors and scales of governance. This approach and its core mechanisms have already been put to practice in dozens of countries with differing results (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). One of these countries is the Netherlands.

The Netherlands is known for the influential and proactive role of local and national governments in planning practices and environmental management (Heuvelhof & Nauta, 1997; Hajer & Zonneveld, 2000). However, the Dutch planning system is going to change fundamentally in the upcoming years because of the new *Omgevingswet* – the Environment and Planning Act (EPA) (Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, 2017a). The EPA is going to replace dozens of acts regarding spatial planning and environmental affairs (Korthals Altes, 2016). By doing so, the EPA means to improve collaboration and participation and address contemporary cross-cutting challenges in a better, more efficient, and integrated way. It intends to not just be a change of law, but a change of system (Gabry, 2016, pp. 1-4). The EPA obligates the national, provincial, and municipal governments to create so-called *Omgevingsvisies*, which translates to Environmental Visions. These visions need to include all ambitions and plans for spatial planning and environmental management for the next 20-30 years. The EPA therefore proposes an integrated approach that brings together all levels of government and civil society with greater control and steering by national government. The EPA means to serve as a tool for tackling with the major (inter)national challenges we face. It claims to provide less yet more comprehensive regulations that should lead to better and quicker decision-making (Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, 2017a). This is all to maintain and increase the spatial and environmental qualities of the Netherlands. This includes themes such as health, safety, and the natural environment (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2019). To achieve those goals the EPA promotes cooperation between stakeholders and active participation from citizens.

The increasing interest in integrated policy-making in literature and its growing popularity in planning practices has also led to an abundance of critique on this integrated approach (Cairns & Krzywoszynska, 2016; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2007; Holden, 2012; Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Van Rijswick, Edelenbos, Hellegers, Kok & Kuks, 2014). These critiques oftentimes pinpoint the increased complexity, seemingly endless discussions, and lack of practicality from integrated planning and policy-making (Van Rijswick et al., 2014). Meanwhile, others argue that this new drive for policy integration is part of a neoliberal agenda to modernise government (Holden, 2012). They perceive it as a normative concept to address policy failure, increase efficiency, and fight fragmentation (Slocombe, 2003). On top of that, it is not

always clear whether the outcomes have been improved because of this approach (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). Some go as far as saying that this integrated approach can be perceived as naïve and unnecessarily complex (Cairns & Krzywoszynska, 2016). They believe that it focuses too much on a constant need for consensus and sometimes fails to recognise politics (Richardson, 2005). As a result, it can make dealing with our contemporary challenges more complex.

Even though these critiques are apparent, the EPA and its integrated approach will still be implemented in the Netherlands in July of 2022, although the date of implementation has already been postponed three times before (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2021). A fourth postponement is not unlikely and seemingly fits some of the critique on integrated policy-making (Van Rijswijk et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the development of Environmental Visions remains one of the most important tasks for all levels of government. This development process is not only very important; it is also highly complex and extensive (Gabry, 2016). Developing an Environmental Vision consists of a thorough analysis of the region and its policies on spatial and environmental topics. Corresponding to that analysis is an extensive participation process with citizens and stakeholders to gather information and discuss their ideas and ambitions. The outcomes of these processes form the basis for the Environmental Vision and its future ambitions. Since these Environmental Visions formulate a framework for spatial developments and environmental subjects, it is obligatory for the responsible government to conduct an environmental assessment (Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment, 2018). The Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA) assess two types of environmental assessments (EA): environmental impact assessments (EIA) and strategic environmental assessments (SEA). The environmental assessments for Environmental Visions in the Netherlands are considered as SEA (NCEA, 2018). However, as will become clear throughout this research, the EA studies for Environmental Visions are very different from 'traditional' SEA studies. Therefore, the environmental assessments for Environmental Visions will be referred to as 'EA', for lack of a specific EA category for Environmental Visions.

The role and effectiveness of EA in integrated planning and policy-making has been researched abundantly in recent studies (Cashmore, Gwilliam, Morgan, Cobb & Bond, 2004; Loomis & Dzedzic, 2018; Richardson, 2005; Rozema & Bond, 2015; Van Buuren & Nooteboom, 2009). However, there is a lack of recent literature on EA in the Dutch planning system. The EA helps Environmental Visions with integrating all the viewpoints and information into a clear overview and draw up concrete ambitions (Gabry, 2016, pp. 252-291). This relation between EA and Environmental Visions has been minimally researched (Association of Netherlands Municipalities, 2019; Groen & Maronier, 2018). The increasing importance of integrated environmental policy-making combined with the changing planning context in the Netherlands and new role for EA requires further study. On top of that, the critiques on integrated policy-making take on an assertive role in recent academic literature (Runhaar, Driessen & Soer, 2009). This research means to study whether these critiques are applicable to the changing Dutch planning system as well through the new EPA and Environmental Visions.

Given these research gaps and recent developments in integrated planning and environmental policy-making in the Netherlands, this research means to conduct a critical appraisal of the promise of integrated policy-making and its implementation in the Dutch planning context through the development of Environmental Visions. This thesis research means to study this through case studies of development processes of municipal Environmental Visions and corresponding EA studies in the Netherlands. Therefore, this research poses the following main research question:

- *To what extent does EA (applied as part of integrated policy-making processes) help Dutch municipalities to agree an Environmental Vision?*

2. Literature review

This literature review provides an academic basis and sets a theoretical framework for this research. It provides an overview of academic studies and theories on relevant concepts and topics that help to answer the questions posed in this research. This literature review discusses three key areas in recent academic literature: (1) the transition from sectoral to integrated planning and policy-making in the context of contemporary cross-cutting urban challenges, (2) the complexities of deliberative decision-making and consensus building, and (3) the role of EA as an instrument for policy integration.

2.1 From sectoral to integrated urban policy-making

This section presents a theoretical background on how integrated policy-making came to be. It first sets out a planning context by discussing contemporary urban challenges and introducing the Dutch planning system. Thereafter, definitions and drivers of integrated policy-making are discussed and compared. Finally, different conceptualisations, strategies, opportunities, and limitations of implementing integrated policy-making are explained.

2.1.1 Contemporary cross-cutting challenges and the Dutch planning system

For most of the 20th century, sectoral planning and policy-making were the main methods for developing strategies, plans and policies. Decisions were made by politicians and planners for specific themes or topics without too much communication and collaboration with people from other sectors or (policy) domains. However, during the last few decades this sectoral way of work became subject of criticism (Meijers & Stead, 2004). Contemporary urban and environmental challenges started to become more complex and cross-cutting. These so-called ‘wicked problems’ were too complex to solve through sectoral planning and policy-making. There was a call for a more integrated way of working and decision-making (Stead & Meijers, 2004). Global issues such as climate change, decreasing biodiversity and transition towards sustainable energy transcend established policy domains, levels of government, and country borders. Different sectors, governments, and organisations are therefore coerced to work together (Holden, 2012). This led to an increasing interest in integrated planning and (environmental) policy integration, both in theory and practice, to study the possibilities and limitations of these integrative methods. This interest was particularly present in Europe and led to the (re)shaping of many planning systems and tools (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). However, the Dutch had been front-runners on integrated approaches to planning and decision-making and continued to do so as well.

“God created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands.”

The Dutch planning system is known all around the world, resulting in a nearly mythical status (Priemus, 2002). Nearly half of the country lies below sea level, housing approximately 4 million people. The geographical circumstances of the Netherlands and social characteristics of the population have influenced Dutch planners to come up with a unique planning system (Faludi, 2005). Why the Dutch planning system is so unique and what has led to the international reputation of the Dutch planning system can be summarised in the following aspects (Hajer and Zonneveld, 2000):

1. The Dutch system is unusual in its institutional comprehensiveness. Planning theorists are intrigued by the complicated organisational format in which cross-governmental and inner-governmental coordination is the main tool for developing and implementing spatial policies. This complex system is necessary, because the Dutch are forced to cooperate within their limited land space.
2. There is a vast number of planning professionals. Planning agencies operate in an intricate system through all levels of government. On top of that, dozens of spatial consultancy firms work in the spatial planning field, often with or for the government. This high density of spatial experts and knowledge leads to well-founded plans and better-informed decision-making.
3. The Dutch planning has historical roots that date back to the early 1900s. Starting with the municipalities, spatial planning quickly became a new field of work for governments. The main reason for this influential role of the government can be found in the contemporary growth of the welfare state in the Netherlands. This made the national and local governments responsible for public welfare which also includes housing and environmental management.
4. There is a great level of institutional creativity. All three levels of government have a continuous output of planning documents consisting of formal and informal plans and visions. These documents often share ideas and objectives, illustrating the practical implementation of the cross-governmental cooperation in the Netherlands.

Following the abundant years of governmental guidance and comprehensiveness came a shift during the 1990s. After decades of social and Christian democratic national governments, the 1990s marked the start of the increasing influence of liberalism in Dutch politics (Zonneveld & Evers, 2014). The influence of liberal parties was noticeable in spatial planning and environmental policy-making as well. Most noticeably were the increasing decentralisation and inherent retreat from spatial planning by the national government. These changes have had various effects on the Dutch spatial planning system. First, the planning system has become less comprehensive and does not focus on integrated planning as much as it did before (Gerrits, Rauws & De Roo, 2012). The lack of a strong national government has resulted in less comprehensive and integrated planning practices (Zonneveld & Evers, 2014). Secondly, lower levels of government have been given more tasks for which they are not (yet) equipped (Gerrits et al., 2012). Since these governments have to look after themselves more, the binding factor of the national government has started to fade out. This has resulted in less cooperation and coordination between different levels of government. Thirdly and finally, the geographical scope has become much narrower due to the increasing focus on economic competitiveness and growing importance of municipalities to deal with spatial challenges and environmental issues (Zonneveld & Evers, 2014). Dutch spatial planning has therefore transitioned into a more facilitating system in which societal changes are supported instead of initiated.

Despite these changes it seems that the national government has noticed that the state of the planning system is no longer fit to deal with the contemporary urban and environmental challenges and that a rather drastic change is necessary to turn it around.

The Environment and Planning Act

In 2022 the Dutch planning system is about to transform. As a response to contemporary urban and environmental challenges, the national government has issued a new act: The Environment and Planning Act (EPA). This new act means to address current cross-cutting issues in an integrated way. It

means to become the embodiment of a modern view on integrated planning and environmental policy-making (Korthals Altes, 2016). The act will address nearly all aspects of current spatial planning and environmental management. To do so, the EPA is going to replace more than two dozen of laws that deal with spatial and environmental affairs (Table 1). It will therefore not just replace a law, but reshape the entire Dutch planning system (Gabry, 2016, pp. 1-4). It is claimed that this replacement should lead to less excessive bureaucratic regulations and delays and improve the speed and quality of spatial decision-making and environmental policy-making.

Table 1 Acts fully integrated into the Omgevingswet (Korthals Altes, 2016)

Table 1. Acts integrated into the Omgevingswet.

Acts fully integrated into the Omgevingswet	
Spatial Planning Act	<i>Wet ruimtelijke ordening</i>
Act on General Provisions in Environmental Law	<i>Wet algemene bepalingen omgevingsrecht</i>
Extractions Act	<i>Ontgrondingenwet</i>
Plan Act Traffic and Transport	<i>Planwet Verkeer en Vervoer</i>
Infrastructure Trajectory Act	<i>Tracéwet</i>
Expedition Act on Road Broadening	<i>Spoedwet wegverbreding</i>
Restrictions on Property Act	<i>Belemmeringenwet Privaatrecht</i>
Crisis and Recovery Act	<i>Crisis- en herstelwet</i>
Soil Protection Act	<i>Wet bodembescherming</i>
Noise Nuisance Act	<i>Wet geluidhinder</i>
Interim Act City-and-environment Approach	<i>Interimwet stad-en-milieubenadering</i>
Odour Nuisance and Livestock Breeding Act	<i>Wet geurhinder en veehouderij</i>
Act on Health and Safety of Bathing Establishments and Swimming Facilities	<i>Wet hygiëne en veiligheid badinrichtingen en zwemgelegenheden</i>
Selection of acts partly integrated into the Omgevingswet	
Environmental Management Act	<i>Wet milieubeheer</i>
Water Act	<i>Waterwet</i>
Nature Protection Act	<i>Natuurbeschermingswet</i>
Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act	<i>Monumentenwet</i>
Mining Act	<i>Mijnbouwwet</i>
Housing Act	<i>Woningwet</i>

The EPA obligates all levels of government to create their own Environmental Vision (*Omgevingsvisie*). This vision needs to describe all spatial and environmental ambitions for the next 20-30 years. The act provides more possibilities for public participation and demands planning processes to be more open to public input. With this new act the Netherlands means to become a global frontrunner in spatial planning and environmental policy-making once more while addressing contemporary cross-cutting challenges and returning to their original spatial planning roots (Gabry, 2016, pp. 1-4). It appears that the EPA marks a return to the more comprehensive and governmentally controlled spatial planning system from before the 1990s while integrating current societal and planning trends such as improved public participation. Dealing with current cross-cutting environmental challenges and social issues requires decentralised decision-making to operate in the shadow of hierarchical and top-down policy-making (Gupta et al., 2016). This changed perspective could mean a comeback for the acclaimed Dutch planning system.

2.1.2 Definitions and drivers of integrated policy-making

Now that the Dutch national government promises to implement an integrated planning and policy-making system, it is important to reconsider what that actually entails, both in theory and practice. Many scholars and planning theorists have discussed their views and developed conceptualizations of (environmental) policy integration, but to this day there is still no clear universally accepted definition (Runhaar, Driessen & Uittenbroek, 2014). In fact, the term ‘policy integration’ in itself is relatively new. It resembles and is often referred to terms such as *policy coherence*, *holistic government*, and *cross-cutting policy-making*. Since the term is rather ambiguous, it is very difficult to give a comprehensive

and universal definition. However, there are general remarks and definitions that can be stated in this literature review. To do so, the differences between integrated and sectoral policy-making are also discussed.

Sectoral policy-making has been the main approach by governments all around the world to develop strategies or plans and implement policies. This sectoral approach provides actors with a certain amount of freedom to pursue self-interests (Blom-Hansen, 1999). These might be to achieve sectoral policy goals or gain more local autonomy. This approach thus shapes actors to pursue the interests of their (vertical) level of government or (horizontal) sector and policy domain. In order to constrain the pursuing of the self-interest by all actors, an intergovernmental policy network is put in place. This network is meant to keep actors constrained to their sector so that they do not unnecessarily affect others in a negative way. This approach was praised by many since it allowed local governments and different sectors to go about their business to try to achieve their objectives (Blom-Hansen, 1999). However, addressing contemporary urban and environmental challenges required a new approach to planning and policy-making.

In order to tackle and address new challenges the sectoral approach had to change. As a response, there was an increasing interest in integrated planning and policy integration during the 1990s (Meijers & Stead, 2004). The concept of policy integration is not new. In fact, several European countries had already included elements of integrated policy-making in their planning systems before its increased popularity (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). Since then, there have been continuous calls for better integration between different policy sectors and levels of government in spatial planning and other disciplines (Stead & Meijers, 2009). The concept of policy integration entails the management of issues that transcend the horizontal or vertical boundaries of our currently established policy fields (Cairns & Krzywoszynska, 2016; Holden, 2012; Runhaar et al., 2014). These issues do not correspond to a single specified department or level of government but instead concern multiple. Therefore, horizontal (cross-departmental or cross-sectoral) and vertical (cross-governmental) policy integration are necessary in order to deal with these boundary-crossing issues.

Integrated planning and environmental policy integration implement a holistic approach to dealing with contemporary challenges (Holden, 2012). Several drivers and accelerators for the increased levels of holism in planning and policy-making have been discerned in recent literature. First, the institutionalised approach to policy-making for specific sectors has resulted in a lack of environmental awareness and consideration of environmental impacts. Because of this, sectoral policies can have objectives that conflict with certain environmental goals (Runhaar et al., 2014). Therefore, there is a call for 'mainstreaming' sustainability and climate adaptation instead of developing a new separate policy field. This is known as climate policy integration (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). This integrated policy-making could help with limiting unexpected and unwanted environmental impacts and consequences from sectoral policies. Secondly, policy integration has the potential of realising mutually beneficial and more effective policies than traditional sectoral policies (Stead & Meijers, 2004; 2009). Implementing an integrated approach would mean more cooperative and coordinated decision-making which would lead to more interdependent and less duplicate policy-making. Finally, decision-making is becoming more complex due to contemporary societal trends (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). Whereas some countries deal with an increased centralisation of decision-making, others are faced with fragmented and decentralised decision-making. Factors such as globalisation, the emergence of the information society, the increasing emphasis on public participation, and the more influential role of NGO's have made decision-making processes more extensive and complex (Runhaar et al., 2014). While the involvement of these stakeholders compels policy integration, their differences in objectives, beliefs, and ambitions also complicate the process of achieving just that.

2.1.3 Implementing integrated policy-making

While the theory and objectives of integrated planning and policy-making are praised by many, its implementation in practice is another story (Runhaar et al., 2014). Sectoral policy-making has been used in practice for so many decades because it provides a clear playing field and practical processes in which different sectors work primarily separate from each other to make decisions and policies that are relevant to their sector or policy domain. Integrated policy-making implements a different approach to increase sustainability and environmental awareness whilst improving policy effectiveness and interdependence (Runhaar et al., 2014). However, this approach is highly complex to implement and does not always provide the preferred outcomes in practice. Therefore, it is regularly subject of criticism in academic literature (Cairns & Krzywoszynska, 2016; Christensen & Lægheid, 2007; Holden, 2012; Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Kistenkas, Smits & Kamphorst, 2020; Macrorie & Marvin, 2019; Van Rijswick et al., 2014).

Changing a sectoral policy system to become more integrated is an extensive and highly complex process in and of itself. It requires the knowledge, experience, and above all the willingness of many stakeholders from different sectors or policy domains to cooperate (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). Many scholars have conceptualised this process of achieving policy integration. A well-known example of this is the hierarchical approach by Stead and Meijers (2004, 2009). In this approach they address policy integration in three different levels that build on each other. These different levels of policy integration are *policy cooperation*, *policy coordination*, and *policy integration*. An essential aspect of achieving policy integration is for all stakeholders to work together closely and cooperatively. This comes with a complex political system which is an often underplayed aspect of policy integration (Cairns & Krzywoszynska, 2016; Christensen & Lægheid, 2007). Policy integration is all about achieving consensus and coming up with decisions that address mutual issues. However, the encounter between different sectors, disciplines or domains often leads to dissent and conflicts (Richardson, 2005; Van Rijswick et al., 2014). This is an inevitable and necessary part of the process to policy integration that should not be underestimated as much as it currently is. A more in-depth analysis of the conceptualisation by Stead and Meijers is provided in section 2.4.

Relating to the implications of political systems are the sectors or domains that get (deliberately) overlooked or neglected due to conflicting objectives with others (Macrorie & Marvin, 2019; Kistenkas et al., 2020). The process of policy integration requires stakeholders from different disciplines and sectors to work together to create consensus on decisions and policies. However, research has shown that financial importance and political weight drastically influence these processes and can lead to more negative outcomes for less influential sectors (Kistenkas et al., 2020; Richardson, 2005). This is also something that plays an important role for the EPA. Even though, it presents itself as an important tool for sustainable development and protecting the environment, there are no clear legal signs that it puts sustainability on a higher pedestal than other aspects (Korthals Altes, 2016). The innate difficulty of integrating a system is that different aspects are placed next to each other. Whenever two or more conflict, it is oftentimes difficult (if not impossible) to come up with a mutually beneficial outcome. Since sustainability rarely generates (profitable) outcomes immediately, it is often easier to choose others over it (Kistenkas et al., 2020). Because of the aforementioned complexities and possible negative outcomes of integrated policy-making, there are relatively few cases of this approach in practice, and even less 'best practices' that can be shared with others (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). Moreover, the few cases that did succeed in implementing integrated policy-making are very difficult to apply in other systems because they are so adjusted and dependent on their local context. Since there are so few successful cases of policy integration in practice, there is also a lack of research and recommendations on how to share and adjust best practice with others (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). There is however a unique case that is interesting to study for the Dutch planning context.

An integrated approach to sustainability in practice: New Zealand and the RMA

New Zealand made the decision of placing sustainability on the highest (legal) pedestal approximately three decades ago (Resource Management Review Panel, 2020a). New Zealand is the first country in the world to incorporate sustainability into one domestic legislative act on environmental law: the Resource Management Act (RMA). This all-encompassing *umbrella legislation* replaced over fifty environmental legislative acts, so that all environmental norms came together under this single normative and enforceable principle of sustainability. The act is implemented in a hierarchical way, placing the RMA at the 'top of the pyramid'. This means that all environmental decisions have to be made in accordance with the RMA (Kistenkas et al., 2020). After three decades of being used in practice, many are content with the effect the RMA has had on achieving sustainable development in New Zealand. However, the government found it important to conduct a review of the RMA. This governmental review provided interesting insights into the benefits and drawbacks of implementing an integrated approach to sustainability. Three main points from the review will be addressed because they are applicable to the Dutch planning system as well and are therefore relevant to this research (Kistenkas et al., 2020; Resource Management Review Panel, 2020a; 2020b).

First, the review advocates a reform of the RMA system. It proposes splitting the RMA up into three new acts: a separate spatial planning act, an environmental act, and a climate change adaptation act. This would mean a return to a sectoral system. The main arguments for this return are the current lack of recognition of the benefits of urban development and the weak monitoring and enforcement of environmental protection. The review states that the sectoral approach is more capable of promoting sustainable development than the RMA.

Secondly, the review criticises the lack of adequate national direction and slow planning and policy-making. The current (decentralised) system in New Zealand provides local governments with a larger and more influential role in policy-making. However, these governments do not operate on the required scale to address environmental issues. It results in uncoordinated actions and a lack of direction in planning. Therefore, the review advocates for the return of adequate national direction in sustainable developments and environmental policy-making.

Thirdly, the review suggests maintaining the key principle of the RMA which is to place sustainability at the top of the pyramid. While the review criticises a lot of elements of the RMA system, the central placement and legal strength it provides to sustainability and environmental protection is praised. Since sustainability and natural conservation oftentimes do not provide immediate (financial) benefits, it is necessary to give it extra legislative resistance to unwanted developments. Therefore, the review supports the placement of sustainability at the top of the pyramid.

The case of New Zealand and the RMA has provided valuable lessons about implementing a national environmental policy integration system. For the Netherlands it is important to consider the aforementioned points. Similar to the RMA, (1) the EPA adheres to an integrated approach to sustainable planning and environmental policy-making as well. Also, (2) the EPA promises the return of national direction and influence, the current Dutch system is however still highly decentralised and requires drastic adjustments to achieve that. Finally, (3) while promoting sustainable development is seemingly the main objective of the EPA, it provides no clear legislative power to sustainability and environmental protection like the RMA does (Kistenkas et al., 2020). Although it is still uncertain as to how the EPA will play out once it gets implemented, it is interesting to speculate. The outcomes of the RMA are of course no guarantee for the effects of the EPA in the Netherlands. These countries are not only 11.000 miles apart, but their social and political contexts are very different as well. We will have to wait until 2022 (at least) to see whether the EPA will lead to similar outcomes as the RMA or if it has

different effects. The government of New Zealand has already acted on the review and provided the outlines of three new acts, seemingly adopting the proposed new sectoral policy system (Ministry for the Environment, 2020).

Research gap and sub-question

The previous section has set out an overview of the different definitions of policy integration and the complexities of implementing an integrated approach in practice. The EPA has adopted this integrated approach. Because of that, all Dutch levels of government have to develop their Environmental Vision and set out comprehensive cross-sectoral ambitions (Gabry, 2016, pp. 252-291). Despite the extensive literature on policy integration in theory and practice, there is a lack of research on the practical implementation of an integrated approach to planning and policy-making in practice (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). This is especially the case for the Netherlands in relation to the new EPA. Because of that, little is known about the practicalities of drawing up Environmental Visions and formulating cross-sectoral ambitions to address contemporary urban and environmental challenges. This study means to address that research gap. Therefore, the first sub-question of this study is: *How are cross-sectoral environmental ambitions set for and by the municipality?*

2.2 Collaborative planning: deliberative decision-making and consensus-building

During the first decades of planning practices and theories, planners were considered as righteous experts and scientists whose decisions were unquestioned. However, during the 1970s a shift occurred in the global planning context (Laurian, 2009). Planners were no longer considered as all-knowing beings. Instead, their decisions and practices started to be questioned and criticised by others. To regain the fallen trust of the public, planners were necessitated to make their decision-making processes more deliberative (Davies & Burgess, 2004). Deliberative processes provide a platform for different stakeholders to be represented in planning practices and decision-making. These processes must be transparent, open to all (to a certain extent), and include some form of public participation to be truly deliberative. These deliberative processes are important for consensus-building among decision-makers and stakeholders.

The increasing usage of deliberative approaches in planning coincides with the increasing studies on so-called communicative or collaborative planning. One of the most famous authors to discuss communicative planning is British urban planner and theorist Patsy Healey. Her works have made a great impact on global planning theories ever since her first article on communicative planning back in 1992 (Harris, 2002). The aforementioned paradigm shift has famously been conceptualised as the 'communicative turn in planning theory' by Healey (1992; 1996). This communicative turn describes how planning activities have become more communicative and collaborative. Planners could no longer 'only' create plans and strategies; they had to cooperate with other stakeholders, policy-makers, and citizens to achieve consensus instead. This has led to new communicative approaches towards spatial strategy formations (Healey, 1996). These approaches emphasize the importance of involving (representatives of) different policy domains, organisations, and social groups in planning processes and decision-making.

This new view on planning also relates the aforementioned approach to dealing with contemporary challenges through policy integration. Achieving true policy integration necessitates well-organised cooperation and coordination among policy-makers, stakeholders, and citizens. Different sectors and levels of government need to work together in order to achieve consensus on final decisions (Stead &

Meijers, 2004; 2009). The theories and practice of collaborative planning and deliberative decision-making are therefore intrinsic parts of these processes. In order to attain policy integration and consensus it is important to have an open and transparent process in which different parties can participate. However, this can be difficult to execute and might lead to extensive or laborious processes, especially when dealing with complex or controversial topics or issues (Holden, 2012).

Implementing a deliberative approach to decision-making takes a lot of time and effort because it requires actors from different levels of government, (policy) sectors, and organisations to come together, cooperate, and try to reach consensus. Deliberation should contribute to competent policy-making. It does so by reducing the bounded rationality of the different stakeholders (Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007). Bounded rationality entails the limited rationality people have when making decisions. This bounded rationality is oftentimes the result of a lack of information and knowledge. By informing people about others' viewpoints and preferences and reviewing your own objectives, you become more aware of possible contradictions and agreements. This helps to increase mutual respect and recognition while acknowledging each other's differences (Van den Hove, 2000). This is very important for stakeholders from different levels of government, policy domains, or organisations to have better discussions on a similar knowledge level. As a result, this should lead to more holistic thinking and collective and long-term decision-making.

2.2.1 The polder model

The communicative turn and transition towards collaborative planning have also taken place in the Netherlands (Woltjer, 2002). However, it would not be the Dutch planning system if it did not include some unique twist. The Dutch have been using deliberative approaches for centuries. During the Middle Ages, the Dutch ongoing battle with water gained a new dimension. Catholic churches stopped with the protection and caretaking of the Dutch polders. Therefore, local citizens were forced to coordinate efforts in maintaining the polders by themselves. By forming specialised 'polder boards' the citizens were able to discuss and make agreements about the polders. What followed was a well-organised system with clear financial regulations (Schreuder, 2001). This drive for cooperation and focus on consensus-building is now famously known as the polder model or *polderen*.

The following centuries the polder model expanded in applicability and usage. After its transition into socioeconomics, *polderen* became applicable in environmentalism and planning as well (Schreuder, 2001). The polder model, communicative planning and deliberative processes in environmental planning are very similar and relate to each other. All three approaches promote the benefits and claim the usefulness of having open, cooperative processes in order to achieve consensus among its stakeholders. These stakeholders could be farmers who want to protect their land from overflowing, students who want to protect the environment from new spatial developments, or policy workers who want to achieve their policy goals. The goal of the polder model and collaborative planning is to have stakeholders cooperate and communicate with each other in order to achieve the best possible outcome for all people involved (Woltjer, 2002).

Despite the great success story of the polder model in the Netherlands, it is not universally loved. Critics emphasise the laborious processes as a result of the seemingly endless *polderen* (Schreuder, 2001). For complex cross-cutting issues, such as climate adaptation or the energy transition, it can be very difficult to achieve consensus on a plan or strategy. However, a decision needs to be made for these issues before it is too late. *Polderen* helps to involve stakeholders, share ideas, and try to come up with a good solution, but it can make the decision-making too extensive and transcend into a sort of viscous state (Zonneveld & Evers, 2014). With the increasing influence of public participation and

call for more policy integration and cooperation, the decisiveness of policy-makers and other decision-makers might start to lack even more, thus making the planning processes less effective and comprehensive.

The key elements and characteristics of the polder model and collaborative planning still affect planning practices and decision-making in the Netherlands. Communication and participation are essential elements of the current and future planning system (Schreuder, 2001; Zonneveld & Evers, 2014). The EPA is going to emphasize that even more, because it obligates extensive public participation processes and more cooperative processes between different levels of government and policy domains for the development of the new Environmental Visions (Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, 2017b). These visions tackle cross-cutting challenges and therefore require policy-makers and stakeholders from different sectors to cooperate with each other to create consensus on final decisions for the Environmental Visions. With this transition it seems like the polder model is about to reclaim its influential role in Dutch planning and decision-making. Everybody should probably start to work on their skills in *polderen*.

Research gap and sub-questions

The previous section has discussed how deliberative decision-making and consensus-building have shaped current planning and policy-making systems (Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007). This has directly affected the development process of environmental plans and policies in the Netherlands, such as the Environmental Visions (Zonneveld & Evers, 2014). These processes require different policy-makers and stakeholders to cooperate and build consensus on ambitions and plans. However, these policy-makers and stakeholders have different objectives and ambitions because they represent different policy domains or organisations. These differences could lead to tensions and conflicts (Van den Hove, 2000). EA is presented as a tool that could address these tensions and conflicts by making them visible for the different stakeholders. It is however unclear how this occurs in practice and what tensions, or conflicts are most prominent. Therefore, this research poses the following sub-question: *What tensions or conflicts does the EA process make visible?*

2.3 Environmental assessment and policy integration

This section discusses the use and role of EA in contemporary planning practices and integrated policy-making. First, the origin and use of EA is explained from a global and Dutch perspective. Thereafter, the role of EA in policy integration and the new Dutch planning system is discussed. This provides a theoretical basis for the empirical research in which the role of EA is further studied.

2.3.1 Origin and current use of EA

The origin of EA can be found in the 1960s. During this period, technical-rational approaches for decision-making increased in popularity. Technical rationalism means that decisions should be made based on technical evaluations and clear evidence (Jay, Jones, Slinn & Wood, 2007). For spatial planning, the environmental impact assessment (EIA) became the mainstream tool for addressing this need for a technical basis for decision-making. The goal of EIA was, and still is, to assess the impact of a planned activity on the environment (Glasson et al., 2013). In practice this means that planners or consultants assess the impact of developments on the environment in a systematic, holistic, and multidisciplinary way. This multi-disciplinarity was revolutionary, because it obligated planners and

officials to look beyond the established sectoral view on planning and the environment (Glasson et al., 2013). EIA provides clear environmental information that is of good quality and timely available so that it can be used by the planners and officials who are responsible for the final decision-making.

The main reason for the influential role of EIA was its legislative support. The ever-growing global environmental awareness and activism made dozens of countries to start creating laws for addressing these topics, starting in the US with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). The objective of this act was to promote efforts to prevent and tackle current or future damage to the environment. The NEPA is often referred to as the first spark to environmental awareness in politics. This is mostly due to its influential role in the famous United Nations Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972 (Jay et al., 2007). This conference led to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and can be considered as the start of global environmental awareness in global politics and plan-making. These events encouraged dozens of countries to create more ambitious environmental laws in which EA practices were widely included (Glasson et al., 2013).

Since its creation in the 1960s EIA has undergone many changes and led to the creation of many other types of environmental assessments with different characteristics and purposes (Glasson et al., 2013). The most famous type, apart from EIA, is the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). SEA became more popular in the 1990s and early 2000s and continued to grow in popularity and expand in usability. EIA and SEA share many characteristics, but their main difference lies in scale and duration. EIA is primarily used on a project basis while SEA operates on a strategic level by assessing policies, plans and programmes (PPP). SEA practices have become mainstream internationally due to the increasing (international) cooperation on spatial planning and environmental strategies. The SEA approach is used for the EA processes of Environmental Visions in the Netherlands. However, this type of EA differs from traditional SEA studies because Environmental Visions lack in clear spatial plans and developments which make it very difficult to assess environmental impacts (Gabry, 2016, pp. 252-291).

Despite the call and need for more proactive and strategic assessment approaches, the philosophy of SEA largely resembles that of traditional EIA. According to Lobos and Partidario (2014) the theory behind SEA is ahead of its practice. Environmental assessment procedures still primarily follow the traditional approach of searching for clear impacts from (possible) developments. The only difference for SEA seems to be that it is focused on long-term strategies and plans. However, SEA should and could be much more than that (Lobos & Partidario, 2014). SEA was created as a tool for dealing with the more complex long-term strategic plans and policies that deal with contemporary large-scale and cross-cutting issues. In practice, it has not been able to provide that sort of service (Sheate & Partidário, 2010). SEA should not only try to weigh probable environmental effects against each other to enable decision-makers in their decision-making process. Instead, it should help create open dialogue between public and private stakeholders and the decision-makers (Richardson, 2005). Lobos and Partidario (2014, p.45) plead that SEA should be used “as a catalyst in organizational learning processes, generating positive long-term cultural effects and visions of the world within organizations and sectors that apply SEA, strengthening the capacity of environmental management and planning”. These SEA practices have the possibility to go beyond the traditional informative role of EA. To what extent EA studies have already achieved that in the Netherlands through the Environmental Visions will be studied in the empirical research.

The Netherlands and environmental assessments

Since it was first introduced in the Netherlands in the 1970s, EIA has been part of all sorts of planning processes. Due to the increasing environmental awareness, many developments and plans were obligated to get an environmental assessment in order to be greenlit (Van Buuren & Nootboom, 2009). In 1988 the European Union introduced a system of environmental assessments of projects. All member states were obligated to implement the usage of some form of EA in their planning system. The Netherlands had already worked on an EA system of their own (Hoevenaars, 2013; Runhaar, Van Laerhoven, Driessen & Arts, 2013). EIA (*projectMER* in Dutch) had already been widely used and the following years SEA (*planMER*) increased in popularity and use as well. SEA became obligatory in 2006 for plans that form the framework for future decisions which were subject to EIA or require an appropriate assessment based on the Dutch Nature Conservation Act (Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment, n.d.).

The vital piece of the Dutch EA system was the introduction of the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA). This new commission was established in 1987 as an independent advisory body of experts by decree. The NCEA advises governments on the quality of environmental information in EIA or SEA reports. It is obligatory for the NCEA to advise authorities for complex EIA reports and all SEA reports on plans and programmes (Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment, 2011). For projects with limited environmental repercussions a simplified EIA process has been developed which does not require NCEA screening.

The drastic changes in the Dutch planning system due to the introduction of the new EPA also affects the NCEA and Dutch EA practices. Since the new Environmental Visions are classified as long-term strategies all levels of government are obligated to conduct an EA for their vision (Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment, 2018).

2.3.2 EA in sustainable planning and environmental policy integration

Environmental assessments have played an important role in (environmental) decision-making. Their role and influence in (integrated) policy-making has also been the subject of many recent academic research and literature (Bond, Morrison-Saunders & Howitt, 2013a; Cashmore et al., 2004; Cashmore, Richardson, Hilding-Ryedvik & Emmelin, 2010; Richardson, 2005; Rozema & Bond, 2015; Van Buuren & Nootboom, 2009). There has been ongoing debate and critique on the effect of EA on sustainable development and environmental policy integration. Many praise it due to the cross-sectoral and long-term view on planning, while others view it as impractical, expensive, and most importantly ineffective (Rozema & Bond, 2015). It is highly complex to truly understand and assess the role of EA because its impact is both multidimensional and plural. This means that it cannot be contained into a singular unit of measurement. It is therefore practically impossible to develop a comprehensive and functional system that grades or gives points to environmental assessments based on performance (Bond, Morrison-Saunders & Stoeglehner, 2013b; Loomis & Dziedzic, 2018).

Critics of EA as a tool for sustainable development and environmental policy-making mainly pinpoint two aspects: the underplaying of the importance of politics in EA processes and the lack of substantive impacts to the environment and sustainability as a result of EA (Cashmore et al., 2010; Richardson, 2005). First, the politics of EA. Many scholars have argued that EA is not only a component of political systems but that EA itself is also highly politicised and influenced by politics (Cashmore et al., 2010). Although EA is meant to be apolitical and operate without being influenced by complex political systems or circumstances, this does not seem to work out in practice. EA attempts to find an optimal

playing field between rational scientific and communicative processes, but research has shown that politics can have a negative effect on this. EA processes might even get 'distorted' which could lead to below average processes and outcomes (Richardson, 2005). Underplaying the importance of politics is therefore a critical error in EA theory and practice. Secondly, the substantive impacts of EA. Due to the multidimensional and plural effects of EA, it is highly complex to assess the impact it has made on achieving sustainable development or promote environmental policy-making (Bond et al., 2013a; Cashmore et al., 2004; Loomis & Dziedzic, 2018). Critics state that EA lacks in substantive impacts because they believe that EA processes should provide a political setting in which value differences and conflicts can be made visible and addressed accordingly (Richardson, 2005). Through public participation, mediation and conflict management final decisions can be made and consensus should be reached with the stakeholders. Unfortunately, EA processes often do not provide these clear outcomes and rarely lead to concrete decisions or policies (Rozema & Bond, 2015).

Other literature acknowledges these apparent downsides to EA as a tool for sustainable development and environmental policy-making, but they also address other sides to this story and attenuate some of the critiques (Bond et al., 2013; Cashmore et al., 2004; Richardson, 2005; Rozema & Bond, 2015). Those who advocate for the benefits of EA primarily discredit the critiques by stating that they had a wrong perspective and unreasonable expectations of EA in the first place (Richardson, 2005). EA is not created to be an easy tool for integrated environmental policy-making. Instead, it is meant to serve as a supportive tool for decision-making through a better understanding of environmental impacts and conflicting beliefs (Rozema & Bond, 2015). Therefore, it is very important to approach EA from a strict environmental perspective and deal with conflicting perspectives appropriately. This perspective also discourages the drive for decision-making and policy integration. Instead, EA should serve as "an arena of deliberation between different opinions, values, and interests, but where no attempt at mediation or settlement should be made— this is left to the politicians whose deliberations are informed by the outputs of EA" (Richardson, 2005, p. 349).

Despite the contradicting beliefs on the effectiveness of EA and its role in sustainable development and integrated environmental policy-making, both sides agree that EA can serve as a useful tool and platform for empowering stakeholders and bringing together different opinions and interests (Cashmore et al., 2004). Whether the outcomes of EA processes are actually impactful continues to remain a subject of discussion.

Research gap and sub-question

The previous section has addressed the benefits and critiques of EA as a practical tool in environmental policy integration. It has illustrated the different roles and potential effects EA can have to enable integrated policy-making and consensus-building (Richardson, 2005; Rozema & Bond, 2015). This has shown that EA can have an effect on integrated policy-making as a supportive tool, but that it is also highly political and can be implemented improperly in practice (Cashmore et al., 2010). There is however a lack of research on how EA helps to attain policy integration in the Netherlands, especially in the context of the EPA and the Environmental Visions. Moreover, it is unclear what factors determine the effectiveness of EA on these Environmental Visions and their integrated approach. Based on these research gaps, this research poses the following two sub-questions: *To what extent does the EA process help to attain policy integration and build consensus and what critical factors determine how an EA can help to agree a municipality's Environmental Vision?*

2.4 Conceptual framework

Based on the previous review of literature, this research means to assess and to a certain extent push the conceptualisations and theories on integrated planning and (environmental) policy integration. To do so, this research implements the well-known conceptual framework by Dominic Stead and Evert Meijers (Meijers & Stead, 2004; Stead & Meijers, 2009). This framework is a conceptualisation of integrated policy-making and provides a comprehensive overview of relevant concepts. It can serve as a guideline and point of reference throughout research (Tobi, Scheepers, & Boeije, 2016).

According to Meijers and Stead (2004, p.1) policy integration “concerns the management of cross-cutting issues in policy-making that transcend the boundaries of established policy fields, which often do not correspond to the institutional responsibilities of individual departments”. To address these cross-cutting issues, we need to adjust our current planning systems by integrating planning and policy-making across different policy domains (horizontal integration) and multiple levels of government (vertical integration).

Meijers and Stead (2004) developed a conceptual framework that illustrates their theory on integrated policy-making. They view policy integration in a hierarchy of terms. This hierarchy consists of *policy cooperation*, *policy coordination*, and *policy integration* (Figure 1). This framework views cooperation as the first step towards policy integration. Cooperation implies collaboration between different levels of government and (policy) sectors through programmes, shared resources and information. It builds on the idea of collaborative advantage, which states that collaboration instead of competition leads to better outcomes for all parties involved. This cooperation aims at achieving separate (sectoral) objectives by collaborating with others. Coordination comprehends the required communication and sharing of information in order to make sure that different organisations, sectors and levels of government work together in an effective way. It should lead to a reduction in redundant work and gaps in services. Coordination aims at avoiding policy conflicts while achieving both individual and interdependent goals. Finally, policy integration is established at the top of the conceptual framework. Cooperation and coordination are part of policy integration but do not form the entire process. Policy integration requires more interaction, accessibility and compatibility from stakeholders. This should lead to more interdependence and joint working while trying to create synergies and formulate joint decisions and policies. However, this needs more institutional arrangements and requires stakeholders to give up more autonomy. It is also more demanding of resources, time, space, and actors.

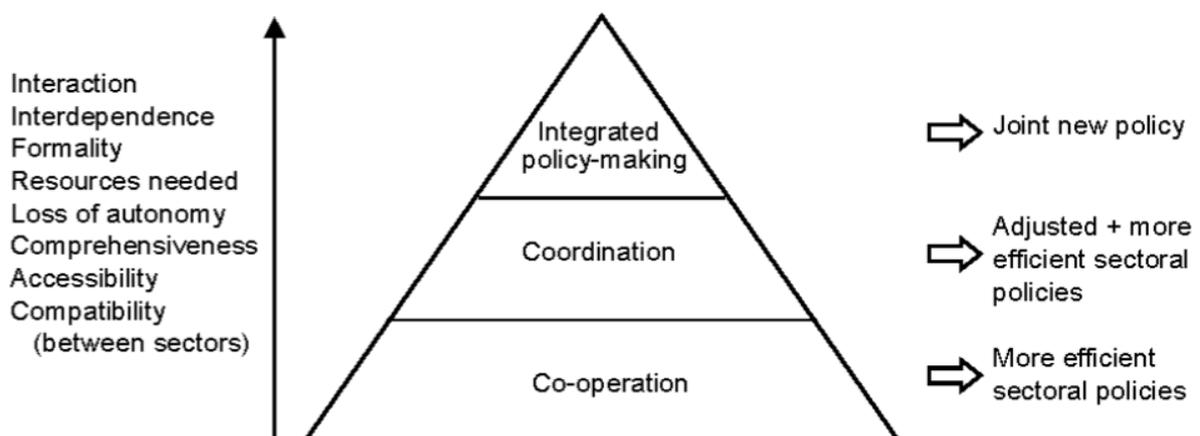


Figure 1 The framework by Stead & Meijers (2004) illustrating hierarchy of policy integration (integrated policy-making), coordination and cooperation

Despite the comprehensiveness of this framework, this research means to critically assess it and potentially add to it as well. As aforementioned in the literature review, defining policy integration in theory is very difficult and implementing it in practice is even more complex. Therefore, this research means to use three themes as a guide to push this framework further.

First, the difficulty of reaching consensus and the implications of politics. The framework addresses the complexities of consensus-building in order to reach the phases of cooperation and coordination. However, it currently underplays the importance of politics. As the literature review pointed out, politics are highly influential in policy integration (Cairns & Krzywoszynska, 2016; Richardson, 2005; Van Rijswick et al., 2014). Political systems can help with achieving policy integration, but they might also distort this process. Since different levels of government and sectors have to work together, their interests are presumably going to conflict. How these political tensions and conflicting objectives might affect the practice of reaching policy integration is therefore important to study. Therefore, this research means to address the role and implications of politics in relation to this framework.

Secondly, the lack of linearity in policy integration. The framework is shaped like a pyramid with integrated policy-making at the top. This conceptualisation innately suggests a type of linear or hierarchical order in achieving this final stage of policy integration. The literature review has shown that these processes are rarely as linear and well-structured as the framework might presume (Holden, 2012). It is a highly interactive and back-and-forth process with many different stakeholders, diverse objectives, and personal agendas. The framework illustrates this process as having closed off phases or (pyramid) steps, whereas this is not the case in practice. By studying two cases of integrated policy-making in practice and analysing their processes, this research means to provide more information on the (lack of) linearity and hierarchy in implementing this integrated approach to policy-making.

Thirdly, the role of cross-cutting EA processes. A new and additional dimension this research means to add to the framework is that of the EA. As was discussed in the literature review, EA can be used as a tool to help achieve policy integration and more sustainable development (Cashmore et al., 2004; Rozema & Bond, 2015). EA is therefore (in theory) able to cut across this hierarchical illustration of policy integration. In fact, it could add a new sustainable cross-cutting element to the framework. Therefore, this research means to study how this cross-cutting role of EA plays out in practice and what that adds to process to achieve policy integration.

2.5 Problem statement and research questions

Society is facing dozens of cross-cutting contemporary urban challenges. To solve these, a change of paradigm took place towards more cooperative and collaborative decision-making processes (Healey, 1992; 1996). These processes must include different types of stakeholders, multiple levels of governance, and different groups of citizens contrary to the former top-down decision-making by governments. This has led to the transition towards integrated planning and environmental policy integration (Stead & Meijers, 2004).

The Dutch planning system means to adopt this integrated view with the EPA. As part of this new act, all levels of government in the Netherlands (national, provincial, and municipal) have to produce Environmental Visions (Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, 2017a). A key instrument in the development and agreement on these visions across different sectors and stakeholders is the EA (Gabry, 2016, pp. 252-291). Despite the importance of this EA, there is a lack of research on it, and it remains inadequately specified how this approach is implemented in practice.

Therefore, this approach needs a critical appraisal. This research means to study the relation between the development process of municipal Environmental Visions and EA studies. Since this research is conducted within limited time with limited resources, only the municipal level of government will be studied in this research. The choice for focusing specifically on the municipal level was made because I was able to get unique insights in the development process of municipal Environmental Visions and EA studies. During the writing process of this thesis research, I was working as an intern at the consultancy firm Arcadis and I had the opportunity to work on an EA study for an Environmental Vision. Because of this, I able to get a first-hand experience with the development process of a municipal Environmental Vision and the corresponding EA study.

The main objective of this research is to study how the EA helps with agreeing municipal Environmental Visions and enable integrated policy-making in the Netherlands. This research poses the following research question:

- **To what extent does EA (applied as part of integrated policy-making processes) help Dutch municipalities to agree an Environmental Vision?**

In order to give a well-argued and more complete answer to the main research question, four sub-questions have been formulated:

1. **How are cross-sectoral environmental ambitions set for and by the municipality?**
2. **What tensions or conflicts does the EA process make visible?**
3. **To what extent does the EA process help to attain policy integration and build consensus?**
4. **What critical factors determine how an EA can help to agree a municipality's Environmental Vision?**

The first sub-question focuses on understanding how municipalities explore and define their environmental ambitions. The Environmental Vision must include clear and specific ambitions for the municipality for the next 20-30 years. Instead of having different visions and plans for every sector or domain, this vision and its ambitions have to be comprehensive and all-encompassing (Gabry, 2016, pp. 1-4). This poses the challenge of having to draw up cross-sectoral ambitions that incorporate the objectives and plans of all policy domains and policy workers. Since the development process of the Environmental Vision has to be collaborative, citizens, consultants and private stakeholders have a say in drawing up these ambitions as well. Therefore, this research means to study the complex process in which these ambitions are set for and by the municipality.

The second sub-question aims at finding out what tensions or conflicts the EA process might make visible. The objective of the EA is to study the possible environmental effects of proposed ambitions and plans. This also illustrate possible tensions or conflicts between different sectors or policy domains and the feasibility of certain ambitions or plans. The different sectors and practitioners all have their own objectives that could potentially conflict with each other. It is therefore interesting to study what conflicts might arise from the EA during the development process of the Environmental Vision.

The third sub-question addresses the topics of policy integration and consensus-building. The development of Environmental Visions is very complex, because it involves different sectors, parties, and stakeholders. The corresponding EA process means to help to achieve consensus on the Environmental Vision and thereby improve policy integration. However, it is unclear to what extent the role of the EA is actually effective and if achieving true consensus is feasible. This research means to study how the EA process helps to build this consensus and what its limitations are regarding policy integration and consensus-building.

Finally, the fourth sub-question focuses on researching what factors determine how the EA can help in agreeing an Environmental Vision. The development process of an Environmental Vision can be very extensive and include many complexities and potential conflicts. Therefore, the EA must assist with agreeing the Environmental Vision. However, it is not clear how the EA actually does this and what factors determine the effect of the EA on this process. Therefore, this research will study how EA influences the development process of Environmental Visions and what critical factors determine the potential success or failure of EA in this process.

2.6 Relevance

Many consultants, planners and government officials are involved in the development of EA studies and Environmental Visions. However, little research has been done on the role and influence of the EA process in the development of Environmental Visions (Association of Netherlands Municipalities, 2019; Groen & Maronier, 2018). Therefore, this topic is interesting to study from an academic and societal viewpoint.

2.6.1 Academic relevance

The increasing drive towards integrated planning and environmental policy-making has also been studied abundantly in recent academic literature (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Meijers & Stead, 2009; Runhaar et al., 2014). Many scholars have shed their light on this complex phenomenon in contemporary planning systems. This has resulted in a variety of different frameworks that try to visualise these concepts. Some view a certain hierarchy on the road towards policy integration (Meijers & Stead, 2004), whereas others consider it as another form or sum of coordination and collaboration in environmental planning and policy-making (Holden, 2012).

Despite all this research and different frameworks, there is still no clear and universal answer to the basic yet critical question of “what strategies for environmental policy integration work, where and why?” (Runhaar et al., 2014, p. 234). This research means to address that research gap by critically appraising EA as an instrument for policy integration. The Dutch planning system provides a highly unique and interesting context due to its planning characteristics (Zonneveld & Evers, 2014). The new EPA and Environmental Visions intend to improve horizontal and vertical integration which will change the dynamics in Dutch policy-making in a unique way (Korthals Altes, 2016). This research focuses on municipal Environmental Visions and EA studies. These primarily deal with horizontal integration across different policy domains and sectors, but also require vertical integration through public participation processes and the adoption of provincial and national objectives. This research provides more systematic empirical research and further conceptual development to assess the achieved levels of integration and addressed conflicts by the EA in the development process of Environmental Visions. By doing so, this research means to push the existing theoretical understanding of integrated planning and urban policy integration as was established in the previously discussed conceptual framework of this study.

2.6.2 Societal relevance

Our views on contemporary planning systems have undergone many changes during the past decades. They are considered as mechanisms to improve (environmental) policy integration and increase collaborative planning practices to tackle our current urban challenges (Stead & Meijers, 2009). The Dutch mean to address this transition through the new EPA. This act proposes an integrated view on

the environment and planning which obligates planners and government officials to look and operate beyond the established sectoral domains and methods (Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, 2017a; 2017b). On top of that, the public and other stakeholders get a more active and influential role in planning processes through participation processes. These new integrated planning methods and collaborative processes should lead to better plans and policy integration with more public support. However, these methods and processes are also highly complex. Therefore, the EA is meant to serve as a tool to help attain this policy integration through the new Environmental Visions (NCEA, 2018). It is important that policy integration is done 'well' and that the different policy domains and stakeholders are heard during this process since the Environmental Visions are going to be the most important tools for conducting spatial developments, managing our environment, and achieving our sustainability goals for the next decades (Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, 2017a; 2017b).

Despite the great importance and influence of this changing planning system and its methods, little is known about the development process and role of EA. It is assumed to help improve policy integration and serve as a platform for discussing complex themes from the Environmental Visions, but it is unclear how this actually works in practice (Association of Netherlands Municipalities, 2019; Groen & Maronier, 2018). Therefore, this research means to study the development process of municipal Environmental Visions and the corresponding EA studies in order to find out how they influence each other. This can provide valuable insights into the practicalities of these processes and the possible (dis)advantages of EA for enabling policy integration. The results can be useful for policy workers and consultants who work on Environmental Visions and for consultants who conduct EA studies.

3. Methodology

This chapter focuses on the methodology of this research. First, the selected case studies are discussed by explaining the reasons for choosing them and providing general information about these municipalities. Thereafter, the implemented research methods for the empirical research are explained. Finally, relevant ethical aspects and implications for this thesis research are discussed.

3.1 Case study selection: Lisse and Doetinchem

The development of Environmental Visions has become obligatory for all municipalities in the Netherlands due to the EPA. During the writing process of this thesis, I was also working as a graduate intern at the consultancy firm Arcadis. As an intern I was given the opportunity to work on the EA study for the Environmental Vision of the municipality of Lisse. This provided me with the unique opportunity of being part of an EA process whilst I was also researching the complexities of this process.

In order to provide more diverse results and give a more complete answer to the research questions, a second case study was selected. This case study focuses on the EA for the development of the Environmental Vision of the municipality of Doetinchem. This EA was developed by Arcadis as well. Multiple employees of Arcadis stated that this EA process was rather unique and complex and therefore interesting to study in addition to the case of Lisse.

3.1.1 Lisse

The municipality of Lisse is located in the province of South-Holland near the city of Leiden. It is a relatively small municipality with approximately 22.000 inhabitants. Lisse is known for its extensive bulb fields and world-famous flower gardens at the Keukenhof. The municipality has an intensive partnership with its neighbouring municipalities Hillegom and Teylingen (KuiperCompagnons & Municipality of Lisse, 2020a). Together they form the municipal partnership *HLTsamen* with *HLT* being an abbreviation for the three towns, and *samen* meaning 'together'. In 2019 the municipality of Lisse contracted the Dutch consultancy firm KuiperCompagnons to assist them in writing their Environmental Vision. After an extensive public participation process, the first (draft) documents in the development process of the vision, were published and provided to Arcadis for their EA study (KuiperCompagnons & Municipality of Lisse, 2020b). The EA for Lisse was conducted while the municipality and KuiperCompagnons were still developing the Environmental Vision. This led to an interactive and back-and-forth process in which the development of the EA and Environmental Vision were interwoven with each other.

For the empirical research multiple people who have been involved in this process were interviewed. The respondents have diverse roles and work at different organisations. The respondents include junior, intermediate and senior consultants from Arcadis who were responsible for developing the EA as well as representatives of HLTsamen and KuiperCompagnons who were responsible for developing the Environmental Vision for Lisse.

3.1.2 Doetinchem

Doetinchem is an averagely sized municipality in the province of Gelderland. With approximately 57.000 inhabitants, Doetinchem is the largest city in the Achterhoek, a region in the eastern part of Gelderland near the German border. This historic city is surrounded by extensive rural areas and farm lands. In 2017, the municipality of Doetinchem started their extensive process of developing an

Environmental Vision by analysing and combining dozens of policy documents. In 2019, the definitive Course document was published which marked the start of the development process of both the Environmental Vision and EA study (Municipality of Doetinchem, 2019). What makes the case of Doetinchem highly different from Lisse is that the municipality hired multiple consultancy agencies to develop visions for all the different sub-areas in the municipality. These sub-area visions were subsequently combined to develop the complete Environmental Vision for the entire municipality.

For the empirical research multiple people who have been involved in this process were interviewed. The respondents include intermediate and senior consultants from Arcadis who were responsible for developing the EA as well as representatives of the municipality of Doetinchem and the consultancy firm BVR who were responsible for developing the sub area visions and Environmental Vision for Doetinchem.

3.2 Document analysis

The first part of the empirical research consists of a document analysis. In order to better understand the EA process for the Environmental Visions, it is important to study relevant documents. This provides valuable information about the local planning contexts, and it shows what data and information was used during the development process of the EA studies and Environmental Visions. A document analysis is a useful and informative addition to qualitative research when it is combined with new empirical research through interviews or surveys for example. A document analysis helps to create a framework which can be used to better understand the research topic and structure the new empirical research and results (Bowen, 2009). For this research, the document analysis helps to understand how the planners organised and executed the different development phases of the Environmental Vision and EA study.

The following documents are included in the document analysis:

- The documents used for developing the EA studies and Environmental Visions. This includes the Course document and Building blocks document for Lisse and the Policy in a row document, the Growth Book, the Course document and sub-areas visions for Doetinchem.
- The Note of Scope and Level of Detail for the EA studies and the (draft) EA studies by Arcadis for the Environmental Visions for the municipality of Lisse and Doetinchem.
- The (draft) Environmental Visions and/or Environmental Agendas for the municipality of Lisse and Doetinchem.

3.3 Interviews

Several people were interviewed in order to better understand the development process of the Environmental Vision and EA. The respondents have been involved in the development process of EA studies or Environmental Visions. They have different roles and represent different organisations as well. By including these different viewpoints, a more complete overview of the EA and Environmental Vision process can be created. This provides insights from multiple perspectives on the process which will lead to more representative results and a better research overall (Mason, 2018; Van Meijl, Koster, Boeije, & Bolt, 2016). The following respondents have been interviewed for the empirical research:

- Junior, intermediate and senior consultants from Arcadis who have worked on or provided advice for the EA study for the municipality of Lisse or Doetinchem.

- Representatives from the municipality of Lisse and Doetinchem who have worked on or managed the process of the Environmental Visions for their municipality.
- Consultants from KuiperCompagnons and BVR who have worked on or provided advice for the Environmental Vision for the municipality of Lisse or Doetinchem.
- A consultant from KuiperCompagnons who has worked on multiple Environmental Visions and works as an independent expert for the NCEA.

Table 2 Overview of the respondents of the interviews

Respondent	Job description	Role(s) in case studies
A1	Intermediate consultant at Arcadis	Project leader for the EA for Lisse and writer for the EA for Doetinchem
A2	Junior consultant at Arcadis	Assistant project leader and writer for the EA for Lisse
A3	Senior consultant at Arcadis	Project leader for the EA for Doetinchem
K1	Program director and process manager at KuiperCompagnons as well as an independent expert for the NCEA	No active role in the case studies
K2	Program manager at KuiperCompagnons	Project lead for the Environmental Vision of Lisse
L1	Project leader at HLTsamen and councillor at the municipality of Lisse	Project leader for the Environmental Vision of Lisse
L2	Project leader at HLTsamen	Project leader for the Environmental Vision of Lisse
B1	Urban designer at BVR	Designer for two sub-area visions and the Environmental Vision of Doetinchem
D1	Strategic advisor at the municipality of Doetinchem	Stand-in project leader for the Environmental Vision of Doetinchem
D2	Project leader at the municipality of Doetinchem	Project leader for the Environmental Vision of Doetinchem

The interviews have been conducted in a semi-structured way. During a semi-structured interview, the interviewer follows a list of topics and main questions that serve as a guideline throughout the interview. However, it is possible to diverge from these questions based on the responses of the interviewee. This allows for a more conversational interview during which the interviewer can come up with new questions on the spot. Semi-structured interviews provide the interviewer with some structure and key questions to discuss. This can be helpful in case the interview does not go smooth or if the respondent diverts too much from relevant topics, but it does not contain the interview to a limited selection of topics and questions. Semi-structured interviews could provide brand new insights, topics, or viewpoints the researcher did not come up with beforehand (Philips & Johns, 2012).

The interviews are structured based on different topics and themes that were drawn up from the literature review and conceptual framework. The interviews tackle (1) the role of the respondents in the development process of the EA and Environmental Vision, (2) the importance of and methods for policy integration in this process, (3) the complexities of defining and assessing ambitions, and finally (4) personal opinions of the respondents on the process. The complete topic-list and interview questions are included in Appendix 4: Interview transcripts Appendix 3: Interview topic lists and questions.

The interviews have all been recorded and transcribed afterwards. Thereafter, the transcripts have been qualitatively analysed through NVIVO 12. This is a qualitative data analysis software that helps to create an overview of the results through qualitative or mixed research methods. For interviews it can help with analysing transcripts and coding relevant results. As a result, an overview of different themes can be formulated that help to structure the results of the interviews. This is based on the principles of Grounded Theory. The goal of Grounded Theory is to base analyses on the outcomes of new empirical research as much as possible, instead of relying only on already established information and theories (Scheepers, Te Grotenhuis & Van Groenestijn, 2016). Therefore, the focus lies on presenting new themes and findings from the interviews. The results of this thematic approach help to create a comprehensive overview of all the results from the empirical research. This can be used for answering the research questions of this study.

3.4 Research ethics

To guarantee a well-informed consent from the respondents of the interviews, an invitation letter and informed consent form have been drawn up. The letter explains the objectives of this research so that the respondents know why certain questions and topics are being discussed during the interviews. The consent form addresses relevant ethical and privacy regulations to inform the respondents about how the results of the interviews are being used and stored for this research. The respondents were (digitally) asked to give their consent to participate in this research and agree to the regulations. They were also given the opportunity to review a summary of their interview and adjust or leave out certain parts if they felt uncomfortable with sharing these. The complete invitation letter and informed consent form can be found in Appendix 1: Invitation letter for interviews and Appendix 2: Informed consent form for interviews.

Disclaimer: internship and COVID-19

During the writing process of this thesis research, I was also working as a graduate intern at the consultancy firm Arcadis. Thanks to my colleagues and contacts at Arcadis I was able to get in touch with a lot of people who could help me with my research. Consultants from Arcadis were also involved in the case studies of the empirical research. I would like to emphasize my impartiality of Arcadis during the writing process of this thesis and its empirical research. No results were shared with or influenced by co-workers or other contacts at Arcadis. This has also been explicitly mentioned to the respondents of the interviews.

Another prominent contextual aspect of this research was the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic and corresponding regulations were not as severe for this research as for many other fields of work, but it did influence it to some extent. First, most of the interviews for the empirical research have been conducted online. Although it is unlikely, the results could be influenced by this due to the lack of a 'real' face-to-face conversation. Secondly, the studied Environmental Visions and EA processes have all been affected by the pandemic as well. The writing and participation processes of the visions and assessments have mostly been online. Certain aspects of these processes could have been different without the pandemic and would have therefore led to different development processes as well. Whether this would have led to significantly different results for this research is uncertain, but seems unlikely.

4. Results

This chapter provides an overview of the collected data and results from the empirical research. The first section discusses the document analysis and provides a phased overview of the development process of the Environmental Vision and EA for the municipality of Lisse and Doetinchem. The second section presents the results of the interviews in a thematic way.

4.1 Document analysis

This section discusses the document analysis for the development process of the EA and Environmental Vision of Lisse and Doetinchem. It gives a clear overview of what sort of documents are developed and built upon during the EA and Environmental Vision processes. By placing this in the overall planning context and drive for policy integration this provides valuable information for understanding these processes.

4.1.1 Lisse

The development process of the Environmental Vision of Lisse started in 2019. The municipality of Lisse decided to develop their Environmental Vision with the consultancy firm KuiperCompagnons. The development process of the Environmental Vision can be divided into three phases. The first phase consists of gathering and analysing information about the municipality. The second phase focuses on decision-making and setting a course. During the third and final phase the consultants and municipality start writing the Environmental Vision. Each phase 'ends' with the publication of a (set of) documents. All documents were made publicly available so that local stakeholders and citizens could participate and provide feedback (Municipality of Lisse, n.d.). The following paragraphs provide an overview of the different phases accompanied by the analyses of corresponding documents.

Gathering and analysing information

The first phase of the Environmental Vision process starts with an extensive study of the municipality. The objective was to find out what sort of municipality Lisse is by studying its spatial and social characteristics, local context, and environment. To do so, the consultants from KuiperCompagnons analysed dozens of (policy) documents and organised participation sessions for citizens and local stakeholders. The outcome of this process was the *Bouwstenennotitie concept: Omgevingsvisie gemeente Lisse* (Building blocks document concept: Environmental Vision municipality of Lisse). This Building blocks document provides an overview of the strengths of Lisse, it sets out points of concern for the future, and draws up a map of the different sub-areas (KuiperCompagnons & Municipality of Lisse, 2020a). The first two sections present a thematic overview of the strengths and weaknesses of Lisse while also providing possible ways of strengthening and tackling these aspects. The third section implements a different structure and describes the characteristics of Lisse through the different sub-areas, e.g., the city centre, business parks and bulb fields (Figure 2). This document provides valuable information for understanding the municipality and its strong and weak characteristics. This forms the basis for the next phase.

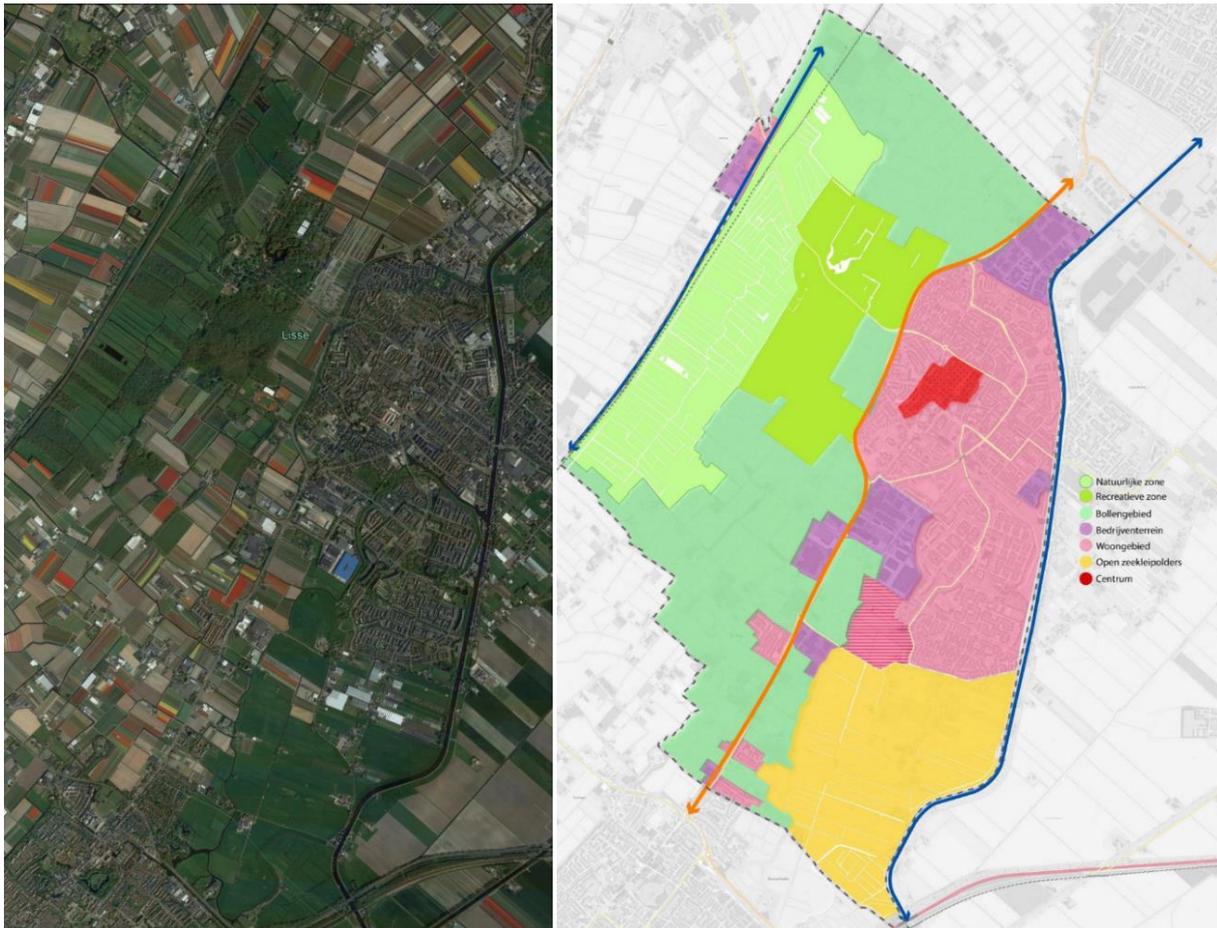


Figure 2 Aerial photo of the municipality of Lisse (l) and a map of the sub-areas in Lisse (r) (KuiperCompagnons & Municipality of Lisse, 2020b)

Decision-making and setting a course

The second phase focuses on decision-making and setting a course for the municipality. Here the informative outcomes from the first phase are implemented to formulate ambitions and set out a course for the municipality. This resulted in the publication of the *Concept Koers: Omgevingsvisie gemeente Lisse – Florerend centrum van de Bollenstreek* (Concept Course: Environmental Visions municipality of Lisse – Flourishing centre of the Bulb Region). While the Building blocks document mainly provided information about the municipality's characteristics, the Course document focuses on the future course of Lisse (KuiperCompagnons & Municipality of Lisse, 2020b). The document is split into two parts and includes extensive lists of ambitions for the municipality. The first part gives a thematic overview of all ambitions for the municipality. These themes are rather extensive and deal with diverse topics, ranging from sustainable energy and housing to biodiversity and local businesses. To make these themes more concise, a set of 7 to 11 ambitions have been drawn up for each theme. The second part of the Course document brings back the division of sub-areas from the Building blocks document and provides a more in-depth description of the different sub-areas and their characteristics. Thereafter, the previously described ambitions are specifically addressed per sub-area and how they might affect them.

During the development of the Course document the municipality and consultants shared their draft version of the course and ambitions with the public so that they could provide feedback and share

their own ambitions and ideas. Their feedback and new ideas were then processed to draw up the definitive Course document. This Course document was the first clear integrated overview of the ambitions and objectives for the future of the municipality. Together with the Building block document they formed the basis for the next phase.

Writing the Environmental Vision

The third phase consists of writing the Environmental Vision. It also marked the start of the EA process. During this phase the consultants of KuiperCompagnons and the municipality of Lisse focused on writing the first (draft) version of the Environmental Vision. In the meantime, Arcadis joined the process and started their EA study. Here the two processes started to intertwine and influence each other. Even though the Course document may appear as a definitive municipal course with clear objectives, a lot had to be made clearer and more specific. Many decisions and ambitions were not yet final. Since the Environmental Vision is such an important and influential document, a lot of people wanted to have a say in it. The EA plays an important role in this.

Before the EA process started, Arcadis published their *Notitie Reikwijdte en Detailniveau* (Note of Scope and Level of Detail). This note explains what the purpose of their EA is, what their assessment will look like, and what different phases and deadlines their EA process will follow (Arcadis, 2021). The EA by Arcadis implements a different thematic approach than the documents by KuiperCompagnons and the municipality of Lisse (Van Bruchem, 2021). The EA separates 7 main themes and 18 sub-themes. These are similar to the ones from the Course document but not exactly the same. For each sub-theme a single all-encompassing ambition had been drawn-up. Each (sub-)theme has a section devoted to study the current situation and future developments and trends. The EA incorporates information from the Building blocks and Course document, but it also uses other (policy) documents from Lisse and publicly available (scientific) information. Furthermore, a conservative and innovative alternative had been drawn-up for every sub-theme. These alternatives are supported by plans and other ways of achieving that scenario. This illustrates diverse pathways of how the municipality might be able to achieve their ambitions. Thereafter, the previously described current situation, autonomous developments and conservative and innovative alternatives are assessed based on the extent to which they (might) achieve the ambitions per sub-theme. The EA uses a traffic light colour scheme with red, orange, and green to give a comprehensive overview of its assessments.

In addition to the previous assessment, the EA also includes a section in which the different ambitions are 'crashed' into each other to analyse whether they might conflict with or support each other. In these 'crash tests' all themes are put in a crosstab to assess whether their corresponding ambitions crash or match with each other. This leads to an assessment of  or , meaning they either support or conflict with each other. Some are left empty which means that they do not affect each other or have no significant negative or positive impact. This gives extra information about conflicting ambitions that should be tackled and matching ambitions that could be utilized.

The conclusive chapter of the EA is called Leading choices and recommendations. This chapter includes a thematic overview of the most important decisions and choices the municipality still has to make for their Environmental Vision. In order to help the municipality, the chapter also includes some recommendations for how they could address these choices and make well-informed and integrated decisions. To conclude, an extra section with additional advice has been devoted to the topic of public green. Public green was considered as one of the most complex topics in Lisse and therefore required additional assessment and advice. This section illustrates the potential benefits and drawbacks of

maintaining and expanding the amount of public green in the municipality. This shows how these EA studies are developed per Environmental Vision and adapt to the needs of the municipality. This additional assessment of public green was accompanied by an in-depth thematic session between the consultants and a public green expert from Arcadis and the representatives of Lisse.

To conclude, the draft version of the Environmental Vision of Lisse consists of multiple parts (KuiperCompagnons & Municipality of Lisse, 2021). After introducing the EPA, the qualities and characteristics of the municipality are discussed, similar to the Building blocks and Course document. Thereafter, the future challenges are described and how they could affect Lisse. The next chapter consists of the plans and ambitions, but it does not yet clearly describe how they mean to achieve them. These ambitions and plans are later specified and further discussed per sub-area. Many correspond to the ambitions and objectives that were already drawn up in the Course document. It concludes with a map of the entire municipality with the separate sub-areas illustrating and describing the main ambitions per sub-area (Figure 3). The Environmental Vision does not yet include a chapter on how they mean to implement and execute the plans ambitions. This first draft of the Environmental Vision does not provide a lot of new ambitions and plans when compared to the Course document. This draft version is not complete either. There are for example no clear objectives for their sustainable energy transition. However, it is interesting to see that the Environmental Vision appears to have adopted many of the innovative alternatives from the EA study. This shows that the EA did already influence the Environmental Vision during the development process.

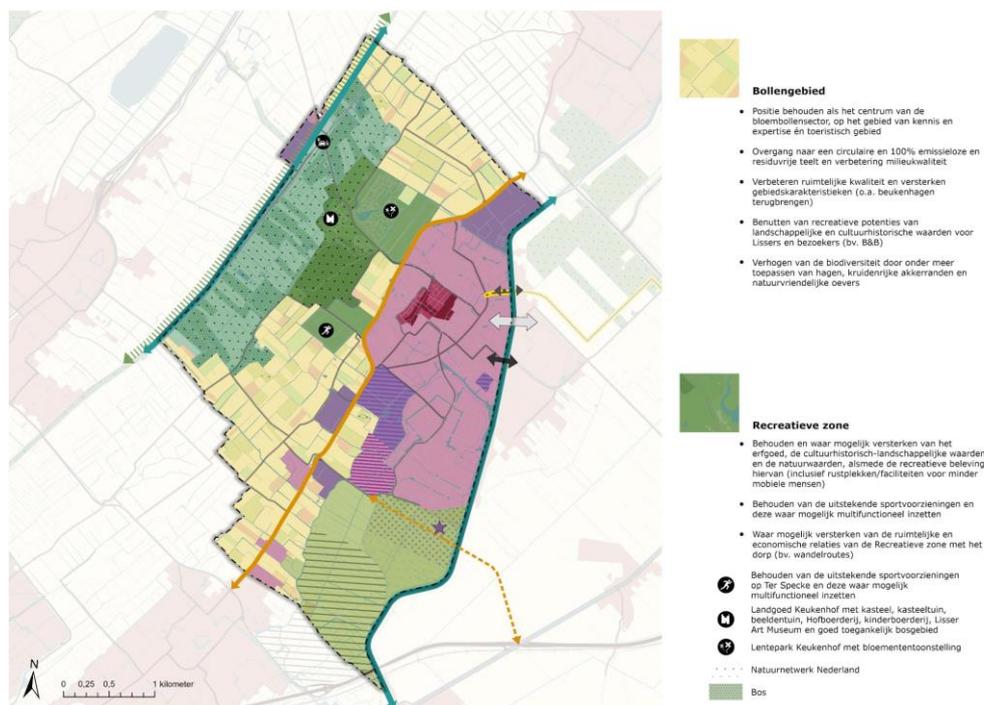


Figure 3 The Environmental Vision map of Lisse with the sub-areas and a description of two sub-areas with their ambitions and plans (KuiperCompagnons & Municipality of Lisse, 2021)

4.1.2 Doetinchem

The development process of the Environmental Vision of Doetinchem started in 2017. The municipality decided to start relatively early with their process towards policy integration compared to other municipalities. The municipality organised their own unique process with different phases and many intermediate documents. In their process they involved and worked with many organisations and

diverse groups of citizens, stakeholders, and consultants. The process was very nonlinear and did not result in the same outcomes as Lisse. The Environmental Vision process for Doetinchem can be divided into four phases: (1) gathering and analysing information about the municipality, (2) setting out a course, (3) implementing the local scale, and (4) writing the Environmental Vision. These phases correspond to the ones from Lisse, the difference being the extra phase in which Doetinchem implement the local scale. Similar to Lisse, each phase focuses on the development of a document or vision and all documents were made publicly available for citizen participation. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the different phases of the development process and a short analysis of the corresponding documents.

Gathering and analysing information

The process started with gathering information about the municipality and analysing documents. The first document to come out of this phase was *Beleid op een rij* (Policy in a row) (Wing & Municipality of Doetinchem, 2018). 31 policy documents had been analysed and combined to draw up eight policy clusters, each having several sub-themes (Figure 4). All plans, policies and objectives from the policy documents were brought together to find out whether they were in agreement or conflict on the sub-themes. This resulted in an extensive table with an overview of all sub-themes with the corresponding policy documents and to what extent the documents agreed or disagreed on relevant objectives and plans. The Policy in a row document can be considered as the first attempt from the municipality to integrated policy-making. By analysing the different policy documents and trying to pinpoint mutual and conflicting goals, the municipality was able to illustrate the possibilities of policy integration while pointing out its complexities. It showed for which themes the municipality already had universal objectives and for which they had to adjust and coordinate their objectives to reach consensus on common goals (Wing, n.d.).

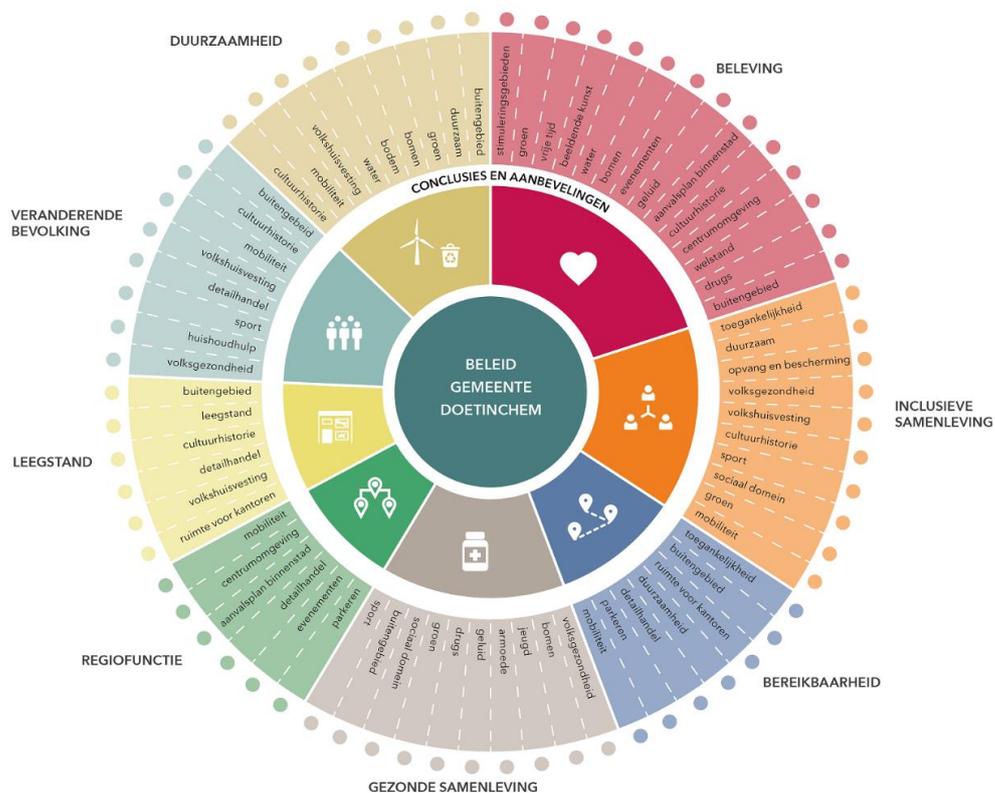


Figure 4 An overview of the policy clusters and sub-themes from Policy in a row (Wing & Municipality of Doetinchem, 2018)

Soon after Policy in a row, the municipality of Doetinchem published their *GroeiBoek Implementatie Omgevingswet* (Growth Book Implementation Environment and Planning Act) (Municipality of Doetinchem, 2018). This Growth Book provides an overview of the steps and activities that had already been undertaken to implement the EPA, and it sets out what the upcoming processes should look like. In short, it starts by explaining what the municipality had already done to prepare for the EPA and how their roles and functions will change due to the new integrated approach to policy-making. Thereafter, they summarise the results from Policy in a row. What follows is an extensive yet practical guide that is aimed at local stakeholders and citizens. It explains what will change due to the EPA, what the (legal) impact of the Environmental Vision will be, and how future participation processes and information provisions will be organised. Although the Growth Book is rather lengthy and tedious at times, it tackles practically everything you need to know about the implementation of the EPA, the role of the Environmental Vision, and the effect it all might have on citizens. It illustrates that the municipality is trying very hard to implement an integrated approach to policy-making while keeping their citizens up-to-date and involved. Whether citizens are eager to read a 200-page document remains questionable.

Setting out a course

The second phase of the process focused on drawing up ambitions and setting out a course for the municipality. To do so, the municipality created their *Koersdocument: Omgevingswet* (Course document Environment and Planning Act). Similar to the one from Lisse, this Course document provides an overview of the main ambitions and objectives of the municipality for the upcoming years. These ambitions tackle societal, environmental, and spatial themes and challenges. The municipality sets out its ambitions and links them to the integrated approach they mean to implement in policy-making and development processes with the Environmental Vision. Much like the EPA, the Course documents describes how the municipality intends to make decision-making processes easier and better while maintaining a clear and transparent approach to the public and stakeholders.

The following chapter discusses trends and future developments for the municipality. It describes how these different trends and developments affect the environment and what the municipality can do to address them. Thereafter, the Course document discusses the future contents of the Environmental Vision. This chapter is structured by means of the policy clusters from the Policy in a row document. It sets out the different objectives from the municipality and challenges they have to deal with. The chapter also points out the interfaces between different policy clusters and sub-themes, illustrating the drive from the municipality to policy integration.

Finally, the Course document describes the next steps of the process and how the municipality means to develop the Environmental Vision. It explains the important role of public participation and discusses the different tools the municipality means to implement, e.g., scenario-building and public work sessions. Thereafter, it looks ahead at the next phase: developing sub-area visions.

Implementing the local scale

Instead of transitioning from the Course document to the Environmental Vision, the municipality of Doetinchem decided to undertake an intermediate step by focusing on the local scale. Based on different criteria and spatial characteristics, the municipality had been divided into eleven sub-areas (Figure 5). The municipality worked with six different consultancy firms to develop a vision for each

sub-area (Municipality of Doetinchem, 2021a). To maintain a clear structure and planning during this process, the process managers from all sub-area vision got together in so-called 'Knitting Needle Sessions'. These sessions were meant to make sure that the visions did not divert too much from each other so that they could later be combined and processed into the municipal Environmental Vision. However, by taking a look at the different sub-area visions it immediately stands out that these visions are not only different in design and structure but also in contents.

An obligatory part of the development process of these sub-area visions was the inclusion of some form of citizen and stakeholder participation. Outputs of the participation process were adopted in all visions, although some seem to include them more prominently than others. What stands out is that the visions try to incorporate as many themes and topics as possible from the Course document. Unfortunately, not all sub-areas were able to address these themes clearly. For example, the energy transition was extensively discussed in some visions by clearly setting out the issue and promoting possible ways of tackling it, whereas others devoted only a few paragraphs to explain the issue and barely discuss solutions.

By bringing the Environmental Vision to a sub-area level, the development process of the vision appears to have involved more people than a municipal Environmental Vision might have. Translating large-scale challenges and abstract ambitions to a (sometimes literal) street level makes people feel more involved and inclined to participate. The participation process has therefore delivered a lot of outputs. However, the step of processing the sub-area visions back to the municipal Environmental Vision and municipal ambitions appears to complicate the process. The lack of universal methods, structure, and outputs in the sub-area visions make the implementation of the results in the Environmental Vision complex. The drive for proactive public participation processes and local application of large-scale objectives appears to have complicated the drive for policy integration.

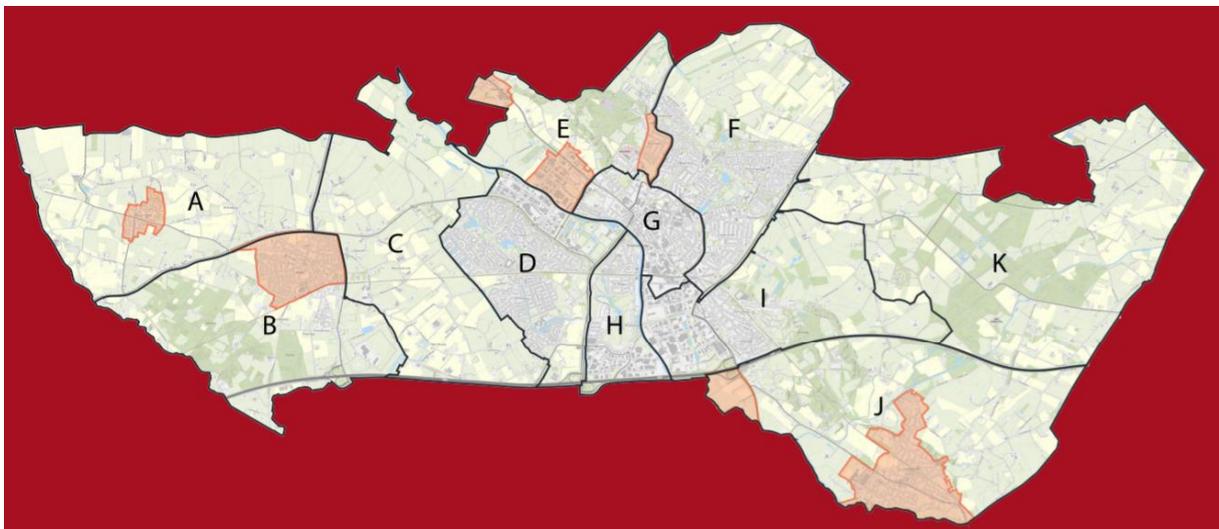


Figure 5 A map of the municipality of Doetinchem with the division into eleven sub-areas (Municipality of Doetinchem, 2019)

Writing the Environmental Vision

The fourth phase focused on collecting all the outputs from the previous phases and integrating them into the municipal Environmental Vision. However, this final phase did not go according to plan. At the time of writing this thesis there is no (draft) Environmental Vision and neither does it seem like we will get one soon. Therefore, it is important to look back to what happened.

In order to process the results from the sub-area visions, the municipality decided to develop three integrated municipal maps. These maps included an overview of plans and measures the sub-area visions had come up with. The division between the three maps was made on the probability that these plans and measures would be fulfilled. The 'Green – Let's do this' map showed plans that had a lot of support and are likely to be executed. The 'Orange – Make choices' map included developments and plans that were promising but did not have a lot of support or were potentially conflicting with other plans. Finally, the 'Red – Discussion necessary' map illustrated ambitions and objectives that did not have fitting policies or plans and were unrealistic at the time. These maps showed that the sub-area visions shared similar objectives and agreed on plans for some themes such as public green and cultural heritage. However, it also showed that certain themes were barely discussed, and few clear plans were developed for them. Examples of these themes are housing, sustainable energy and agriculture. Therefore, the municipality had to start developing their municipal ambitions and plans to tackle these themes even though the sub-area visions barely discussed them and thus insinuated that they were unable or unwilling to tackle them in their sub-area.

During the development of the sub-area visions, the EA process started as well. Together with an independent consultant Arcadis published the Note of Scope and Level of Detail for their EA study (Fikken, 2020). Here they described what the goal of their EA was, what their EA process would look like, and how they intended to assess the municipal plans and ambitions. Since the municipality was still finishing up the sub-area visions and just started with their Environmental Vision, Arcadis' consultants had to draw up the municipal ambitions themselves by combining the Course document with the outputs of the sub-area visions and assess them. The EA for Doetinchem is similar to the one from Lisse (Van Bruchem & Sloot, 2020). It starts with an assessment of the current situation, future developments and trends. Thereafter, they assess to what extent the municipality will achieve their ambitions based on clearly set out plans and policies to address different issues. Instead of implementing alternatives, like in Lisse, the EA assesses the ambitions and objectives from the municipality with the three municipal maps. For example, when there are many clear plans with a lot of support that help achieve an ambition, they receive a positive assessment. The other way around, when the potential measures are primarily present in the red map, the ambitions will receive a negative assessment. Through this assessment, the EA provided an overview of the themes and topics the municipality needed to address if they want to achieve their objectives and ambitions.

Here the process of Doetinchem took a turn. This section should have discussed the (draft) Environmental Vision were it not that there is no Environmental Vision to discuss at the time of writing this thesis. The development process of the vision has been put on hold indefinitely. Instead, the municipality has decided to develop a so-called Environmental Agenda which is set to be published at the end of 2021 (Municipality of Doetinchem, n.d.). On their website the municipality of Doetinchem stated that they decided to take this intermediate step because they observed "diverse dilemmas within different themes that also include challenges on a larger scale than just the municipality" (Municipality of Doetinchem, 2020, para. 5). Although they do not explicitly state these dilemmas and themes, it is a probable guess that they refer to the lack of clear ambitions and fitting plans for complex topics like sustainable energy and housing that were addressed in the municipal maps and EA.

The municipality explains that the Environmental Agenda is meant to provide an overview of the subjects and themes for which they need more information to make final decisions and set out their course (Municipality of Doetinchem, 2021b). Once they have all the information they need and can set out a course, they intend to develop their first draft of the complete Environmental Vision. However, it is unlikely that we will be seeing this soon due to the upcoming municipal elections in March of 2022.

4.2 Interviews

This section presents the results of the interviews from the empirical research. These results are structured on different themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the interviews. They help to better understand the development process of Environmental Visions and EA studies and help to answer the research questions of this study.

4.2.1 Developing an Environmental Vision

This first part focuses on the development process of Environmental Visions. The results of the interviews describe how this development takes place, what issues and discussions might emerge, and what the role of participation is during this process.

Phases of development

First, the different phases of developing an Environmental Vision. Developing an Environmental Vision is an extensive and complex process. The Environmental Visions have to replace dozens of policies. Therefore, policy integration is one of the most important aspects of the entire process. However, this is no easy task. In order to organise and structure this complex process, many municipalities, including the ones studied in this research, hire external consultancy firms to help them with their Environmental Vision. The municipality of Lisse involved the consultancy firm KuiperCompagnons. KuiperCompagnons has developed and continues to develop dozens of municipal Environmental Visions. Respondents K1 and K2 stated that they usually distinguish three phases in their development process:

“The first [phase] focuses on collecting and analysing currently available information. The second phase consists of decision-making and setting a course. This also includes pointing out current uncertainties and discussing these with the council. In the third phase we start writing the Environmental Vision. And we try to include participation in all three phases whenever possible.”

Respondent K1 (online interview, 15 June 2021)

For collecting and analysing information, KuiperCompagnons use all sorts of policy documents and studies from the municipality. They combine this information and try to get a clear picture of the characteristics, strengths, weaknesses, and ambitions of the municipality. With the municipality they also distinguished sub-areas in the municipality based on their unique characteristics. For Doetinchem, a similar phase took place. However, here the municipality took on a more proactive role:

“We [the municipality of Doetinchem] hired multiple consultancy firms to develop the sub-area visions. But before that we have had a long process of analysing and summarising the different policy documents of the municipality. This led to what we called ‘Policy in a row’.”

Respondent D1 (online interview, 25 June 2021)

This ‘Policy in a row’ document was one of the main sources of information for the consultancy firms. This information had to be used for the development of the sub-area visions and municipal Environmental Vision. Contrary to Lisse, the municipality of Doetinchem hired not one, but multiple consultancy firms to assist them in their process of developing the Environmental Vision. The municipality had been divided into eleven sub-areas based on different criteria and characteristics. Seven consultancy firms were responsible for developing the sub-area visions. The consultancy firms worked separately on their sub-area visions and organised their own participation and development processes. The idea behind this approach was that each sub-area could receive a more appropriate

and fitting participation and development process. The municipality believed that citizens and local stakeholders would then feel more involved and participate more often.

After the first phase of policy document analyses and information gathering, the consultancy firms drew up ambitions and set a course for the municipality and sub-areas. Drawing up these ambitions was a back-and-forth process between citizens, policy workers, and consultants. These were primarily based on the established course from the Course document, and were later adjusted on the outputs of (public) work sessions and meetings. Based on these outcomes, lists of ambitions were created for the municipality and sub-areas. The consultancy firms discussed these ambitions with policy workers and councillors. If the municipality disagreed with them, they adjusted the ambitions.

The next phase of developing the Environmental Vision consists of writing it. The gathered information, and course with ambitions had been checked and approved by the municipality. They had the opportunity to go through them and provide feedback on them. Thereafter, the consultancy firms started to write the visions. The draft versions would then be presented to the municipality. Any comments or feedback could then be provided, so that the consultancy firms would be able to adjust the visions again.

Dealing with political discussions

These phases would 'normally' conclude the development of an Environmental Vision. However, the two cases of this research did not follow the 'standard' process. This is not unique per se, "because most of the processes don't go according to plan" (Respondent K2, online interview, 16 June 2021).

The first version of the Environmental Vision of Lisse does not include definitive plans and decisions for the sustainable energy transition, expansion of the business parks, and development of a new road. During the process, the municipality had been unable to make clear and definitive policy decisions regarding these topics. This development process is highly complex and political. Whenever politicians take a stand or make final decisions, they will most likely be criticised for it. Because of this, many prefer to postpone this final decision-making and instead maintain a relatively vague set of ambitions or objectives. Therefore, these topics will be addressed in another version of the Environmental Vision.

The development process in Doetinchem took a completely different route. After the development of the sub-area visions, the next phase was supposed to consist of translating the sub-area visions into the municipal Environmental Vision. However, this did not go as planned. According to respondent A3 "... due to our [Arcadis'] critical views and comments they have started to reconsider their initial approach with the sub-area visions. They are currently still working on that" (online interview, 24 June 2021). These critiques were primarily aimed at the apparent disconnect between the high ambitions and lack of clear plans or developments to achieve those ambitions. Another consultant from Arcadis who has worked on the EA study for Doetinchem explained the following:

"This January 2021 the concept version of the Environmental Vision should have been published which would give us the opportunity to finalise our EA, but then a lot of political discussions started to develop surrounding housing. Now they have postponed the publication of the Environmental Vision, and therefore also the EA, to autumn of 2021."

Respondent A1 (personal interview, 10 June 2021)

The strategic advisor for Doetinchem confirmed that the EA helped to stir up political discussions to an extent that the municipality of Doetinchem decided to take an intermediate step and develop a different document on their way to the Environmental Vision:

“This is the Environmental Agenda. This agenda includes lists of topics, themes and questions that we need to address, but it does not yet set out a course. This also has to do with the legal impact of Environmental Visions while the Agenda can be viewed as a continuous draft.”

Respondent D1 (online interview, 25 June 2021)

This ‘legal impact’ has to do with the upcoming municipal elections in the Netherlands of March 2022. Councillors and policy workers who were working on the Environmental Vision believed that they should not develop a definitive Environmental Vision because the elections could result in a completely new political climate in Doetinchem. Due to the enormous political weight of the Environmental Vision, it could become an important element of political agendas and discussions during the elections as well. Therefore, they agreed to postpone the development and create an Environmental Agenda instead.

Looking back even further to the beginning of these processes, it was not even sure if the EA studies were going to be conducted at all. Respondents from the municipality of Lisse and Doetinchem stated that their financial situation is not as good as it used to be. Since EA studies could cost tens of thousands of euros, the municipalities were not sure if they wanted to initiate one. Respondent K1 mentions that although it is obligated to conduct an EA study for strategic documents such as the Environmental Visions, municipalities can avert them by keeping their ambitions and objectives very abstract or vague (online interview, 15 June 2021). As a result, they do not set a legal framework for environmental decision-making and therefore it is nearly impossible to assess the environmental impacts. Eventually, both municipalities chose to do so. For Lisse, respondent L1 was happy that she took a course at the NCEA about the functions and importance of EA studies:

“They [the aldermen] were really scared that the EA would limit them drastically in their course and plans. It was quite difficult for us to explain the importance of it to them, because we weren't experts on it either. And on top of that, it costs quite a lot of money. (...) So, the aldermen were sceptical, and I was happy I took the course so that I could tell them about the importance of it.”

Respondent L1 (online interview, 6 July 2021)

This shows that a lot of people at the municipality were not aware of the role and effects of an EA in their Environmental Vision process. They apparently feared that it could interfere with their decision-making and limit their ambitions drastically. After extra information and explanation from the project managers from Lisse and consultants from Arcadis, the council understood the role and importance of EA studies and how it could help them in their development process.

Dealing with complex themes and topics

Apart from political discussion, certain themes and topics can be highly complex to deal with as well in the development of Environmental Visions. The respondents stated that for Lisse the energy transition, public green and bulb fields were considered to be to most complex themes to deal with. The complexity with the energy transition was largely due to the fact that windmills and solar fields would ‘damage’ their unique bulb field landscape. Citizens and politicians fear that they might scare off tourists who come to visit Lisse for their extensive bulb fields. Meanwhile, the municipality of Doetinchem struggled with tackling agriculture and housing. The housing issue was largely the result of the conflicting need for space with the local agricultural sector. Doetinchem was and, to a certain extent, remains a rural municipality. The expansion of new housing in the rural areas could negatively affect the rural landscape of the municipality and damage local businesses and farms.

For Doetinchem one aspect in general made the process more difficult: dealing with large-scale themes. The development of the sub-area visions meant that large-scale themes and issues had to be addressed on a very small and local scale. This caused a lot of discussion and complex situations. As a result, some of these topics were barely or not at all included in the sub-area visions. However, the municipal Environmental Vision still has to address these themes and present suitable ambitions and plans for them. Respondent B1 (online interview, 17 June 2021) summarised this difficult situation very vividly: “And now we have to look for locations to tackle these issues even though all these sub-areas basically stated: not in my backyard! But unfortunately, we will have to address these themes in someone's backyard.”

The most prominent issue for both municipalities however, and for the Netherlands in general, is the presumed lack of space, extensive ambitions, and conflicting objectives. There is a limited amount of space in the Netherlands, but there are a lot of issues and themes to address. Dealing with topics such as sustainable energy, housing and climate adaptation requires a lot of space. It is up to the governments to make clear decisions for the limited amount of space in their area. Respondent A1 addressed this issue:

“This [lack of space] actually affects the entire Netherlands. A study showed that we would need 20% extra land if we want to develop all our plans from the National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment.”

Respondent A1 (personal interview, 10 June 2021)

Here the respondent refers to a study from the Wageningen University which illustrated that the Netherlands would need an additional 10% (not 20%) of land in order to develop all plans for housing, sustainable energy, and agriculture that had been set out by the national government (NOS, 2020).

Participation

Interwoven in all the different phases and complexities of developing an Environmental Vision lies a crucial role for participation. Even though participation processes are not completely new in Dutch planning and policy-making, the EPA emphasizes their importance more clearly: “In complex and high-impact projects, a wide-ranging exploration and early participation of the public and stakeholders, resulting in a broadly supported preferred direction and coordinated execution, are of major importance” (Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, 2017b, p. 62). Since Environmental Visions are high-impact documents, participation is an important aspect of the development process as well.

Each phase of the development process of Environmental Visions includes some form of participation. KuiperCompagnons organised so-called ‘Weeks of the Environmental Vision’ in which citizens and local stakeholders could participate and discuss plans and share ideas with the municipality. Both Lisse and Doetinchem included participation as a way of gathering information and better understanding the characteristics, issues and ambitions of the municipality. Citizens and other stakeholders could talk to consultants and municipal representatives to share their ideas about the current situation of the municipality and what they would like to change in the future. Public participation primarily took place in public evenings and the streets. In Lisse the municipality drove a coffee cart through the town to talk to local citizens about their ideas and ask them for feedback on certain plans. For Doetinchem the municipality had developed a set of guidelines and examples for the participation process, but the sub areas were all able to organise their own participation process. This led to very diverse and unique forms of participation:

“We developed a sort of book with guidelines and possible methods for participation and every sub area chose whatever they seemed fitting. Some chose to organise large public evenings while others organised more in-depth interviews. Another one even organised a ‘bicycle safari’ during which they discovered the rural areas and visited locals.”

Respondent D2 (online interview, 8 July 2021)

When the ambitions and courses were set, new rounds of participation would be organised in which people could provide feedback on these ambitions and give their own ideas on what ambitions they would like to include. Due to the higher level of abstractness of these municipal ambitions, citizens were not always keen to participate. According to respondent K2 “it's quite difficult to enthuse people for such an abstract project like the Environmental Vision. Which is a shame because it sets the course for the entire municipality” (online interview, 16 June 2021). It appears that despite the great importance and impact of Environmental Visions, it can be difficult to involve citizens since these visions focus on long-term and strategic policies. The municipality of Lisse also organised an extra week of participation in which they discussed specific plans and developments. Once again, they took the coffee cart to the street, this time accompanied by large signs with statements about possible plans and developments. Since these statements were clearer and more specific than most municipal ambitions, the municipality noticed that citizens were also more eager to participate:

“A good example of this is the so-called ‘food square’ in the middle of the city centre. There's a road that goes directly through it, but during the pandemic it has been made car-free so that only pedestrians and cyclists could use it. But now we've found out that a lot of people want to keep it that way.”

Respondent L1 (online interview, 6 July 2021)

The difficulty of these participation processes is involving a representative group of people. Traditional participation in spatial planning consists of public evening and work sessions. However, the downside of these sessions is that they “primarily attract middle-aged white men” (Respondent K1, online interview, 15 June 2021). Therefore, consultancy firms and governments try to diversify the processes by developing online tools, organising events, or involving school programmes. This helps to generate a more representative audience.

Another method for participation that was found in both case studies is the involvement of local stakeholders through core groups. These core groups consist of key figures and stakeholders from within the municipalities. The stakeholders were invited due to their important role for specific topics that were discussed in the Environmental Vision. Examples of these stakeholders were representatives of local schools and water boards. Similar to the public participation processes, these stakeholders were given the opportunity to give feedback on plans and ambitions, and also share their ideas on what topics and objectives they would like to see included in the Environmental Vision.

The global corona pandemic heavily influenced the participation processes. A lot of public meetings and work sessions could no longer be organised, and many events had to be postponed or cancelled. Therefore, different online alternatives had to be developed. These alternatives provide some benefits, such as their increased accessibility, but it was considered as a downgrade in the overall quality of the participation.

4.2.2 Assessing ambitions

This second part discusses the results regarding the environmental assessment processes. It presents the methods used for the assessments and the difficulties the consultants face during this assessment.

Methods for assessing

Much like the first phase of an Environmental Vision, the development of an EA study starts with studying and analysing the municipality. Through a list of general themes such as climate adaptation, housing and mobility, the current and future situation of the municipality is studied and assessed. Also, policy workers are interviewed to gather more information about the municipality. All of this is then combined into the so-called 'Picture of the environment' with an extensive literature review and assessment of the current and future performance.

This 'Picture of the environment' forms the basis for the next part: formulating and assessing ambitions. The municipality develops course documents that serve as the first draft for the Environmental Vision. Arcadis was able to study these documents and draw up their own sets of ambitions that fit into the thematic framework that had been developed. This framework is specifically developed for each municipality based on the structure of themes and lay-out of the course document or draft versions of the Environmental Visions. These ambitions are then discussed with the municipality by interviewing policy workers about whether they believe these ambitions encompass the true objectives and goals of the municipality. The difficulty of this aspect is that the consultants are not 100% certain that the ambitions they are going to assess are in fact approved by the entire municipality. Arcadis was able to tackle this uncertainty for the case of Lisse because they had the opportunity to send their list of drawn up ambitions to the council so that they could collectively take a look at it and provide feedback. Based on this list, Arcadis could proceed their assessment process. This did not happen in Doetinchem. Here the consultants were only able to discuss the ambitions with policy workers during the interviews. These policy workers all have their own ideas and beliefs and therefore it was very difficult to figure out what the definitive ambitions of the municipality were.

Doetinchem also had another aspect that made the development process more complex. The respondents mentioned that it was very difficult to integrate all the sub-area visions with each other:

“We noticed on forehand while we were writing the business proposal that all these sub-area visions had different dynamics and approaches. So, we knew that there would be no universal structure to follow. We did bring these visions together and analysed them, but it was a long and hard job.”

Respondent A3 (online interview, 24 June 2021)

Due to the extensiveness of the visions and diverse approaches and courses, it was very difficult for the consultants to draw up clear ambitions for the municipality of Doetinchem. On top of that, the municipality itself had not yet come up with definite municipal ambitions of their own. They were still working on integrating and translating all the outputs of the sub-areas into the first draft version of the Environmental Vision. Therefore, Arcadis' consultants were obligated to start developing these ambitions by themselves because otherwise they would not have anything to assess. This adds another layer to the already extensive and diverse role of consultants during the development process of EA studies and Environmental Visions. It is a back-and-forth process in which consultants and experts are seemingly expected to help with many different aspects of the overall process.

Since the municipality of Doetinchem had not yet come up with their own ambitions, there was no way for Arcadis to confirm that their ambitions were in fact the 'correct' ones. For Lisse, this went more smoothly because the council was more actively involved. Despite these difficulties, the respondents from Arcadis believe that the process of drawing up clear ambitions is also part of the job:

"That [dealing with unclear ambitions] was rather difficult. But that's also what the EA is for. Pinpointing these discrepancies to the municipality can be really helpful and hopefully will lead to clearer and united ambitions and plans."

Respondent A2 (personal interview, 16 June 2021)

When the ambitions are eventually drawn up and approved, the next step of developing alternatives can begin. Arcadis' consultants distinguish conservative and innovative alternatives to show the municipality to what extent their plans could go to achieve their ambitions. These alternatives are then shared with the municipality so that they can give feedback. When the alternatives are approved, the consultants assess these alternatives based on the extent that they help to achieve the ambitions. Through a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods the alternatives receive a red, orange or green score. These methods are rather ambiguous and rely heavily on expert judgement, experience and rational thinking. Since the Environmental Vision and its ambitions are abstract, long-term, and strategic it is very difficult to provide clear and quantitative assessments. Therefore, the EA studies for Environmental Visions are not as quantitative and data-driven as one might expect from a 'regular' EA.

In addition to the assessment of the current situation, future developments and alternatives, the EA studies also include a section of so-called 'crash tests'. These tests go as follow:

"What we do is writing down all the ambitions in a big crosstab and assess whether these ambitions fit within the municipality due to their demand for space. We assess if these ambitions conflict with each other or if they could interlink."

Respondent A2 (personal interview, 16 June 2021)

This additional assessment provides the municipality with more information regarding the possible conflicts or linkages between different themes and ambitions. For example, the ambition of generating more sustainable energy conflicts with housing, because they require large amounts of space. On the contrary, new public green can have a positive link with climate adaptation due to the increase in water buffer. In addition to these crash tests, the EA includes a conclusive chapter with decisions that the municipality need to make if they mean to achieve their ambitions, prevent any conflicting objectives, and make use of the mutual benefits between certain ambitions. These 'Leading decisions' are the final output and conclusion of the EA study and provides a basis for further development and decision-making for the Environmental Vision.

Difficulties of assessing

The assessment process can be long and difficult. The respondents have mentioned a couple of difficulties and complexities they have faced during the development of the EA studies for Lisse and Doetinchem.

First, the lack of clear ambitions. This aspect has two sides to it, because the consultants mentioned they preferred to work with clear ambitions that have been drawn up by the municipality, but they also state that drawing up ambitions is part of their job. The respondents from Arcadis stated that the

main difficulty of drawing up these ambitions is not formulating them, but confirming that these are in fact the 'correct' ambitions:

"That was quite difficult because we had to formulate groups of ambitions and themes and we had to contact people from the municipality that were representatives of these topics. But it wasn't always clear to the municipality and to us which policy workers represented our selection of different aspects. That was quite a search."

Respondent A2 (personal interview, 16 June 2021)

If this process does not go well, the municipality might end up with unclear, vague, or unfitting ambitions that are difficult to assess. The use of vague ambitions would mean that the EA becomes vague as well which would decrease the quality and value of the study. Consequently, the municipality could have no idea that their ambitions might be unrealistic or conflict with each other. It is therefore in the interest of both the municipality and the consultants that the municipality creates more unity to collectively 'confirm' their ambitions. Therefore, it is also important that the consultants have good contacts at the municipality so that they can help to draw up clear ambitions:

"The quality of the EA really depends on the input. Clearer and more specific information will lead to a better and clearer EA study. Vague ambitions will lead to a vague and more abstract EA as well. This also makes it easier to ignore it."

Respondent A1 (personal interview, 10 June 2021)

This also relates to the second topic which is the lack of cohesion between ambitions. This mainly relates to the case of Doetinchem but was also felt in Lisse. For both cases it was evident that there was still no clear communication and coordination within the municipality and between the different policy domains. When the consultants conducted interviews with the policy workers it turned out that some of them were not even involved in the development of the Environmental Vision and that they were unaware of some of the ambitions and plans that had been discussed (Respondent A2, personal interview, 16 June 2021). On top of that, a lot of policy workers have ambitions and plans of their own and it is difficult for the consultants to assess whether these are accepted by the entire municipality. Therefore, sessions with multiple policy workers and councillors were organised to collectively discuss the ambitions and alternatives. For Lisse, this turned out fine since the council took on the job to confirm the complete list of ambitions. However, for Doetinchem there seemed to be a lack of clear coordination and cohesion in the process which made Arcadis' consultants unsure about whether the ambitions they were assessing were 'correct' (Respondent A1, personal interview, 10 June 2021).

For Doetinchem, the use of sub-area vision made the development of the EA study very complex. The consultants had to analyse eleven sub-area visions for information and draw up municipal ambitions. The difficulty of this process was that the sub-area visions oftentimes did not discuss all relevant themes for the municipality. Some were deemed as irrelevant for the sub-area while others were simply not included, because they were too complex and led to discussions and public backlash:

"Large-scale themes and issues were more complex to tackle. These oftentimes did not end up in the sub-area visions, but we have to address them in the municipal Environmental Vision."

Respondent B1 (online interview, 17 June 2021)

This relates to the third topic of having to deal with complex topics and themes. An Environmental Vision has to tackle all sorts of themes that relate to the environment and spatial planning. Therefore, it has to discuss complex or controversial topics. During the EA process, the consultants mean to

pinpoint these topics and help the municipality to draw up clear ambitions and propose possible alternatives for how they might achieve them. However, these ambitions are complex and regularly conflict with each other. Due to the complexity of these themes, the consultants put extra work into tackling them. For Lisse, the consultants organised an extra thematic work session to discuss the topic of public green more in-depth with the municipality and public green experts. For Doetinchem, Arcadis' consultants operated in a similar way by bringing in experts on sustainability.

However, this sort of extra work is not without limit. This relates to the fourth and final topic: financial limitations. EA studies in the Netherlands are conducted by independent organisation and consultancy firms. Because of this, a business proposal is discussed and confirmed on forehand. This proposal includes the job description and a confined budget. Due to this limited budget the consultancy firm is obligated to conduct their assessment within that budget. Because of this, they are unable to take on many other tasks or extra work by themselves:

“It is unfortunate that we are a private consultancy company. We can't go over our budget and therefore there is limited space for extra sessions such as these. We have a clear job to develop an EA and we can't do a lot of extra work.”

Respondent A1 (personal interview, 10 June 2021)

However, if the communication and cooperation between the consultants and client is amicable, exceptions can be made. Either the consultants discuss their need for more funding due to extra work or they might do something extra as a token of goodwill from their side. This can be beneficial for both sides. Extra work can improve the quality of the EA, which is good publicity for the consultants, and it helps the municipality with a better and more extensive assessment.

However, the financial limitations can also negatively affect the municipality due to their governmental funding. Since these EA studies can cost tens of thousands of euros, some might not feel so eager to initiate an EA process at all. Even though Environmental Visions are obligated to have an EA conducted they can choose to ignore this:

“The law tells us that visions and plans that set frames for EA practices are EA-obligated. The majority of Environmental Visions fit into this frame, unless they are very vague. However, if the municipality decides to not have an EA study conducted, there is no way for others to go to court and address this issue.”

Respondent K1 (online interview, 15 June 2021)

Because of this lack of legal repercussions, municipalities could refuse to initiate an EA study, or they can start and pay for a very limited study. In the words of respondent A3 (online interview, 24 June 2021): “It seemed like they believed it to be important, but they didn't want to spend much money on it.”

4.2.3 Cooperation and communication

Good and regular cooperation and communication within and between organisations are essential to maintain a well-functioning and structured development process of Environmental Visions and EA studies. Therefore, this part presents the results regarding the methods for and complexities of cooperation and communication during the Environmental Vision and EA process.

Interviews

One of the first steps the consultants from Arcadis undertake during their EA process is to organise interviews with municipal policy workers. Together with the municipal project manager they develop a list of policy workers for each theme from the EA study. These interviews are planned after a first analysis of the course document and other relevant policy documents that had been provided to the consultants:

"The goal of the interviews was to establish our first contacts with the policy workers who knew of and worked on the Environmental Vision. We also wanted to get a clear overview of the different themes and topics so that we got to know what issues were prominent and which documents we could use for our assessment. This should give us clear directions to work with."

Respondent A2 (personal interview, 16 June 2021)

These interviews were both a way of meeting the policy workers for each theme and a kick-start for the development process of the EA. The goals of the interviews were to gather first-hand information, receive an overview of documents and topics to focus on, and discuss the ambitions and objectives of the municipality. These interviews were not always successful though. The lists of policy workers were often incomplete or even partly incorrect. Additionally, some of the themes did not have a dedicated policy worker to talk to, which meant that the consultants had to organise multiple interviews with policy workers who had some experience with similar topics. Some of the policy workers turned out to be not actively involved in the development of the Environmental Vision, making it very difficult to discuss specific ambitions with them. The consultants would ask the policy workers whether they agreed with the ambitions that had been set out for their policy domain and if they would want to adjust them. However, when they were not directly involved in the development process of the Environmental Vision, they had a hard time providing additional information on how these ambitions had been drawn up and why they might want to change it. Despite these flaws, the interviews were considered as an easy-going start to get to know the municipality and policy workers while discussing the current situation, local issues and objectives.

Sessions

To maintain a well-structured process and keep all parties informed about the progress of the EA study and Environmental Vision, the municipalities and consultancy firms organised regular sessions. The municipality of Lisse and Doetinchem held regular sessions with their aldermen to discuss the progress of the Environmental Vision. Before the process started the municipal process managers joined these sessions to explain the objectives and functionality of the EA study as well. During the development process they update the aldermen about the progress and financial situation of the Environmental Vision. For Lisse, Arcadis' consultants were allowed to join a couple of these sessions to discuss some of the outcomes of their EA study and inform the aldermen about their progress. The consultancy firms also organised sessions with the municipal process managers to discuss their finances and planning.

To focus more on the actual contents of the Environmental Vision and EA study, the respondents stated that there had been three types of sessions during these processes in Lisse and Doetinchem: Mirror Sessions, Knitting Needle Sessions, and thematic work sessions. First, the Mirror Sessions are organised by Arcadis to discuss the EA study with the municipality. These sessions focus on sharing and discussing the intermediate or final outcomes of the EA with policy workers and other municipal

representatives. This includes discussing ambitions, alternatives, crash tests, assessments etc. The municipality has the opportunity to give their feedback and share their thoughts on it as well.

“The goal of these sessions was to receive feedback from the municipality and figure out whether they agreed with our list of ambitions and crash tests and if we might have missed important information and certain ambitions.”

Respondent A2 (personal interview, 16 June 2021)

Secondly, the municipality of Doetinchem organised the so-called Knitting Needle Sessions. These sessions were organised during the development of the sub area visions. According to respondent B1 “during these sessions we [the consultancy firms] gave each other updates on what we were doing, whether we had any issues and how we might be able to help each other” (online interview, 17 June 2021). Since the development and participation processes of the sub area visions were all organised separately, these sessions were meant to inform the process managers from the other sub-areas and municipality about their progress. Respondent D2 (online interview, 8 July 2021) also stated that they discussed “topics that transcend their sub areas”. This provided the municipality of Doetinchem with information about what topics had not been discussed or studied in some sub areas: “Some of the sub areas (...) talked to the water board, while others didn’t and they could easily share their information in these sessions” (Respondent D2, online interview, 8 July 2021). Arcadis joined a couple of these sessions as well during which the consultancy firms were asked to present their sub areas visions and answer any questions the consultants from Arcadis had. Since Arcadis had to study and integrate all sub-area visions into their EA study, these sessions were meant to provide them with a clear overview of what issues were present and what topics were relevant for specific sub areas.

Finally, some of the themes turned out to be more complex for the municipality to tackle. Due to this complexity and corresponding lack of clear plans, it was more difficult for the consultants to assess them. Therefore, Arcadis organised thematic work sessions during which these complex themes were discussed more in-depth. During these sessions Arcadis worked together with the municipality and consultancy firms to make their ambitions clearer and more achievable:

“We also held an extra session that focused specifically on public green areas, because it is the most complex topic in Lisse. This brainstorm session included people from the municipality and KuiperCompagnons as well. (...) we felt like we needed to have an extra interactive session with different people to tackle and emphasize this topic.”

Respondent A1 (personal interview, 10 June 2021)

This extra thematic session provided the municipality and consultants with more information and extra expert advice on the importance of green areas. It also showed how they could create more green space within the municipality, e.g., by combining functions with sports or social events. As a result, they were able to adjust their ambitions and reconsider some of their plans more appropriately.

Regular contact and feedback

Apart from all the interviews, Mirror sessions and thematic sessions, possibly the most important and effective way of communicating and cooperating is through maintaining regular contact and providing feedback. This is not restricted to sessions with multiple stakeholders or actors. Instead, the focus lies on amicable and easy-going contact through email, phone etc. One of the benefits of maintaining regular contact is that unforeseen issues can be prevented or dealt with more easily. Good and regular

contact between the municipality and consultancy firms improves the overall quality of the process, because everyone becomes more aware of what the others are working on and struggling with. Because of this, small issues are more easily tackled which improves the speed and lack of delay during the entire process. This applies especially to the case of Lisse, with respondent A1 stating that he “found this project to go really smooth. There were little to no unforeseen issues that negatively affected the process. Our good contacts with the municipality really helped with that” (personal interview, 10 June 2021). Respondent L2 mentioned that the municipality of Lisse has had a similar positive experience from the process (online interview, 16 July 2021):

“Frequent contact and monthly meetings with Arcadis to discuss our progress were very useful. Otherwise, small incidents and discussions could cause a lot of commotion. And also, clear agreements and deadlines were handy. We noticed that at the start already. We had quite an ambitious planning with strict deadlines and Arcadis gave us a clear overview of how and when they would be able to make that planning and what they wanted from us as well.”

4.2.4 Influence of the environmental assessment

The goal of EA is to positively affect the plans or documents they assess. The influence of EA for Environmental Visions appears to be more ambiguous than ‘regular’ EA studies. Therefore, this part discusses the results regarding the influence of EA on the development of Environmental Visions.

Provide in-depth research

The first influential aspect of EA for Environmental Visions is that they provide in-depth research on relevant themes and topics. In order to formulate a clear and comprehensive assessment, the EA include extensive (scientific) literature reviews and (policy) document analyses. On top of that, they oftentimes involve experts as well, especially to tackle complex themes. Arcadis called in the help of an expert on public green in Lisse and two experts on sustainability and climate adaptation in Doetinchem since those were some of the most difficult themes to assess. Their expertise and advice not only helped the consultants with their EA study, but it also provided a platform for the councillors to reconsider some of their initial plans and draw up more achievable ambitions. Other involved consultancy firms benefit from the research that goes into the EA studies as well:

“We gather a lot of information from the EA study, because the study goes into much greater detail on a lot of topics than we would. (...) It helps us to develop better arguments for certain decisions and motivate councils to make decisions.”

Respondent K2 (online interview, 16 June 2021)

The consultancy firms that are working on the Environmental Visions are mostly focusing on drawing up ambitions and organising participation processes. Therefore, they oftentimes do not have time to conduct additional in-depth research and execute extensive literature reviews. The input from the EA can therefore help other consultancy firms to come up with better arguments and defend their well-founded decisions more easily.

Help formulate clear ambitions

The main influence of EA for Environmental Visions can be allocated to the help they provide to formulate clearer ambitions. The majority of the respondents stated that the EA process has addressed the need for clearer ambitions and to some extent has also helped to draw up clearer ambitions. In order to give a comprehensive and meaningful assessment of the Environmental Visions, there need to be clear and specific ambitions. Therefore, respondents from Arcadis mentioned that it is also partly their job to help the municipality to formulate these clear ambitions and address discrepancies:

“That [assessing unclear ambitions] was rather difficult. But that's also what the EA is for. Pinpointing these discrepancies to the municipality can be really helpful and hopefully will lead to clearer and united ambitions and plans.”

Respondent A2 (personal interview, 16 June 2021)

Together with the policy workers and councillors the consultants try to formulate these ambitions in a way that they are assessable for the EA but also fit with the course of the municipality. By discussing this with the municipality in sessions or interviews and implementing their own expertise, the consultants from Arcadis try to draw up a list of clear ambitions that are acceptable and workable for all parties involved.

This drive for clear ambitions can have profound effects on the development process of the Environmental Vision and the people involved. These can be perceived as both positive and negative. The necessity of clear ambitions for the EA study obligates the municipality to draw up ambitions that are as specific as possible. Together with the consultants they must reconsider their ambitions and constantly ask themselves whether the drawn-up ambitions are really what they want. This process of constant realisation and reconsideration can cause quite a commotion and even conflicts. In the case of Doetinchem it altered the course of the entire process at one point:

“Arcadis published their concept version of the EA study and handed it to the council. This was a kind of catalyst that started a new process. (...) We started questioning and reconsidering the ambitions, because the EA had made them so clear and specific through their assessment. Then we took our intermediate step with the Environmental Agenda.”

Respondent D2 (online interview, 8 July 2021)

The EA study had pinpointed the necessity of clear ambitions in a way that initiated a process which would lead to the municipality of Doetinchem deciding to postpone the development of the Environmental Vision. Instead, the municipality started to develop an Environmental Agenda. Even though political discussions and conflicts had already started to stir up, the EA was considered as the ‘catalyst’ for this drastic change in the process. The focus on drawing up specific ambitions can also have negative effects on the overall objective of achieving policy integration:

“The integrated character of the process kind of slipped away. The need for clear figures, numbers and effects made it so that the policy workers were pushed back into their own policy domain. So, I missed the integrated framework.”

Respondent D2 (online interview, 8 July 2021)

According to this statement the EA process can also have an unintentional countereffect of leading to less policy integration. Having policy workers transcend from their domain to work together with others from different domains can be difficult to accomplish. ‘Pushing’ them back into their policy domain can therefore have negative effects on the overall process towards policy integration.

Independent advice

Finally, EA improves the overall quality and validity of Environmental Visions because they are conducted by independent consultancy firms. Independent consultants have no stakes in the development process of the Environmental Visions other than developing a high-quality EA study of their own. This independency combined with the expertise from consultants make the outcome of EA studies more impactful. Municipalities oftentimes work together with other consultancy firms to develop their Environmental Vision. This process can be very complex since difficult decisions have to be made regularly. The people that work on Environmental Visions are therefore very happy with the involvement of independent organisations and consultants:

“Having an independent party like Arcadis provide advice, information and tips really improves the process. It also helps when we have to make a difficult or even controversial decision to have a separate organisation support us with their research.”

Respondent K2 (online interview, 16 June 2021)

Impartial expertise and advice are essential in highly political processes such as the development of an Environmental Vision. Independent consultants can address complex topics by presenting information and sharing their expertise to help resolve discussions. For Doetinchem the EA also helped to stir up political discussions. According to respondent A3 “what happened is that due to our [Arcadis’] critical views and comments they have started to reconsider their initial approach with the sub-area visions” (online interview, 24 June 2021). Although the municipality might not have been happy with this effect, the EA did (partially) make it so that the municipality went back to the drawing board to reconsider their initial approach and come up with more fitting plans and ambitions.

Independency and impartiality are also important aspects for the NCEA. The assessment process of the NCEA emphasises the importance of impartial and independent experts. By operating through work groups of experts from different consultancy firms, the NCEA means to guarantee a high level of impartiality and expertise. The NCEA makes sure that the appointed experts for the assessment procedure are in no way linked to the case. The assessment by the NCEA of EA studies can therefore be considered as another example of the influence of having independent advice in these processes:

“Having an independent organisation look at these documents really adds value to it. This impartiality is really important, also for the public. The first thing I get asked whenever a new assessment starts, is whether I have any links to the municipality. This is all done to prevent any conflict of interest.”

Respondent K1 (online interview, 15 June 2021)

4.2.5 Improving the process

This final section discusses the main feedback the respondents suggested for adjusting and improving the development process of Environmental Visions, the assessment process of EA studies, and the assessing role of the NCEA.

Communication and coordination

The first aspects for improvement that were mentioned by the respondents addressed communication and coordination. Respondents from the consultancy firms and municipalities mentioned these aspects most often as points for improvement. This includes the communication within and between different organisations as well as the coordination in specific phases and the overall process.

First, the start of the EA during the development of the Environmental Visions was not as eagerly received as one might expect. According to respondent L1 (online interview, 6 July 2021) and L2 (online interview, 16 July 2021) the aldermen of Lisse were initially 'scared of the EA study'. They stated that the aldermen feared that it might limit their course and plans or that they would not be able to initiate any developments. What had led to this 'fear' was a lack of knowledge among the aldermen and councillors about the EA. After clear explanations from the project leaders and consultants from Arcadis they learned the true goals of the EA. These turned out to be far less scary and oppressive than they assumed. This also relates to the financial aspect of the EA. Since these EA processes could cost tens of thousands of euros many aldermen and councillors were reluctant to initiate one. Better and earlier communication could have resolved this issue easily.

Secondly, the lack of communication and coordination led to unforeseen issues and complexities during the development of the Environmental Vision and EA study. All respondents from Arcadis mentioned that they had noticed a lack of overview and communication within the municipalities. This mainly related to the policy workers. The municipalities had handed the consultants lists of policy workers they could interview for their EA. However, during these interviews the consultants oftentimes noticed that their interviewees did not have the required knowledge or expertise about relevant subjects or that they had not been involved in the development of the Environmental Vision at all. Respondent A2 (personal interview, 16 June 2021) stated that some of the policy workers "were unaware of some of the things that were going to be included in the vision." This made it very difficult for the consultants to gather information and help to draw up ambitions.

Thirdly, the lack of communication and coordination were especially felt in the case of Doetinchem. The development of the sub-area visions by multiple consultancy firms meant that good and strict coordination were necessary. However, due to personal circumstances and the corona pandemic this became more difficult to realise. Therefore, respondent A1 and A3 emphasize the importance of a central spokesperson and regular feedback in a process like this. The consultancy firms are primarily focused on the development of their own document. Therefore, this could lead to a lack of cohesion and coordination between the different processes. As a result, the consultants from Arcadis were kind of in the dark for their assessment of the ambitions:

"We had to draw up the ambitions by talking to dozens of municipal officers, but we never got a clear confirmation that these were the correct ambitions. So, we never really knew whether we were assessing the correct ambitions."

Respondent A1 (personal interview, 10 June 2021)

Sub-area visions

A specific topic that came up regularly during the interview regarding Doetinchem was the development of the sub-area visions. Here a clear division could be seen between those who worked on the EA study and those who worked on the Environmental Vision for Doetinchem. These sub-area visions were developed by different consultancy firms. They organised their own (participation) process and implemented their own format. The municipality had deliberately not developed a strict framework with guidelines for the process and outline of the visions. As a result, the consultants were given a lot of freedom which resulted in very different sub-area visions with their diverse formats and courses. The municipality and consultants were content with the outcomes since they were all specifically developed for the different sub-areas and thus represented the unique characteristics and local issues of the sub-areas. However, the consultants from Arcadis were not so enthusiastic about these very different visions. Respondent A3 said the following regarding the sub-area visions:

“I don't think it was a good idea by the municipality to outsource the eleven sub-area visions to multiple different consultancy firms and let them organise their own processes and develop their own visions. They should have developed a sort of framework for this. The consequence of this was that these plans were very different. (...) I think the sub-area division and freedom for the visions had good intend but didn't work out the way it should have. The outcome of this was at times incoherent while the Environmental Vision is all about policy integration.”

Respondent A3 (online interview, 24 June 2021)

According to respondent A3 these differences might even undermine the crucial aspect of policy integration in the development of the Environmental Vision. The development of the sub-area visions also made it more complex to discuss large-scale topics. According to respondent D1 it is also “difficult to translate these large-scale themes to the local level. Outweighing the large-scale benefits and local drawbacks is very complex” (online interview, 25 June 2021). This illustrates the complexities of implementing primarily vertical integration in practice.

Despite these critiques, there were positive reactions about the sub-area visions as well. Respondent D2 (online interview, 8 July 2021) stated that she would “search for the local scale again” if she had to start the process all over again. Having the local scale as such a prominent element in these processes especially benefited the participation process. The public and local stakeholders were more easily prepared and inclined to discuss local topics and issues rather than the large-scale themes and abstract municipal ambitions.

Participation and decisiveness

Participation is considered as one of the most important aspects in the development process of Environmental Visions. However, it is not flawless and it is therefore subject to criticism. Something that was brought up regularly during the interviews is the unrepresentative group of participants in these processes, as was evidently pinpointed by respondent K2 (online interview, 16 June 2021): “They [participation sessions] primarily attract middle-aged white men. Such a select group of people is obviously not a good representation of the public.” To tackle this unrepresentative audience, the municipality and other consultants have tried to involve a more diverse group of people by organising different ways of participating. However, these methods were not always as successful as they had hoped.

The unrepresentative participants can have profound effects on the development process due to the increasingly influential role of public participation. As a result, this select group of people could have a disproportionately great impact on the Environmental Vision through a participation process that should represent all residents. To resolve this issue, the municipality and council should take on a more proactive role, as was mentioned by respondent K2:

“Something that I find unfortunate is that some municipalities really lean on participation even though this participation oftentimes represents maybe 5-10% of the population while the council was chosen by the entire population.”

Respondent K2 (online interview, 16 June 2021)

This relates to another topic for discussion: the decisiveness by the municipality and politicians. Respondents from consultancy firms and municipalities pointed out that municipalities (including councillors and aldermen) sometimes lack decisiveness during the development of the Environmental Vision. Since the Environmental Vision is very extensive and focuses on such a long-term strategic level, policy-makers oftentimes find it difficult to make final decisions. According to respondent K2 (online interview, 16 June 2021) municipalities “would rather organise another round of participation”. However, as was discussed before, the participation is often unrepresentative and does not always provide sufficient results. In the sub-areas complex and large-scale topics were practically impossible to discuss with residents because of the small scale. These issues and their solutions oftentimes have little local benefits but great drawbacks (respondent B1, online interview, 17 June 2021). The lack of decisiveness from politicians was also worsened due to the upcoming municipal elections in 2022. Respondent A3 (online interview, 24 June 2021) thought municipalities “might not feel comfortable with finalizing these plans and visions. Maybe they believe that it's a task for the next council.”

NCEA's assessment

The final topic that was regularly mentioned for adjustments comprehends the NCEA and their assessment. Despite the positive comments on their impartiality and independent role, the NCEA is not without criticism. The changing spatial planning context in the Netherlands makes it so that the NCEA has to change as well. The EPA obligates governments to develop long-term and strategic Environmental Visions. Since these visions have to integrate dozens of policy documents from different policy domains and draw up all-encompassing ambitions, the Environmental Visions tend to get more abstract and lack specific developments. Traditional EA studies focus on (quantitatively) assessing the environmental impacts of spatial projects and plans. That is oftentimes not possible for the Environmental Visions since the included ambitions and plans regularly lack clear environmental impacts. Therefore, the EA studies focus on assessing the ambitions on the extent that they are achievable and appropriate. However, the assessment by the NCEA of these EA studies has not been adjusted a lot. Because of this, the NCEA oftentimes gives negative assessments of the EA studies for Environmental Visions (Respondent A3, online interview, 24 June 2021). Therefore, respondent A1, A3 and K1 plead for a change in the assessment procedure by the NCEA so that it fits better with the EA for Environmental Visions.

Respondent K1 also pointed out the financial complexities of the NCEA. A couple of years ago the municipalities, instead of the national government, had to start paying for the assessment by the NCEA. As a result, an EA process including the assessment by the NCEA could end up costing more than the development of the Environmental Vision itself. Therefore, many municipalities have decided to not initiate an EA process and exclude the NCEA as well. Since there are no clear legislative repercussions

for not conducting an EA study, municipalities are actually not obligated to do so (Respondent K1, online interview, 15 June 2021). Because of this many municipalities, especially those who are less wealthy, chose to save money on this. Therefore, respondent K1 also pleads for the national government to start paying for the NCEA's assessments again, so that more municipalities will start EA processes again.

5. Discussion

In this chapter the main outcomes of the empirical research are discussed further and expanded on by linking them to the studied literature. This discussion is set out to answer the four sub-questions of this research. These questions were drawn up to address research gaps and help to answer the main research question of this study. Thereafter, a section is dedicated to critically assess the three themes that have been set out to push the conceptual framework by Stead and Meijers.

5.1 Setting out cross-sectoral environmental ambitions

This first section tackles the complexities of setting out cross-sectoral environmental ambitions and focuses on answering the first sub-question: *How are cross-sectoral environmental ambitions set for and by the municipality?*

One of the main findings of this research turned out to be just how complex developing Environmental Visions and drawing up cross-cutting environmental ambitions can be in practice. Even though, the Dutch already have an extensive history of collaborative decision-making and communicative planning practices, this new (increased) level of policy integration and collaboration turned out to be even more complex than one might have assumed (Schreuder, 2001).

This research has studied how the cross-sectoral environmental ambitions for the Environmental Visions are drawn up. This process has proven to be very difficult. It requires policy-workers to implement an integrated approach to address a wide variety of environmental topics and spatial challenges. The municipality is not working on its own to come up with these ambitions. Policy-workers and councillors have to work closely together with other stakeholders, local organisations, and citizens. The municipality is assisted by consultants during the development and participation process of the Environmental Vision. Together they go through an extensive development process to come up with cross-cutting ambitions for the future of the municipality. To start off, the consultants present the municipality with extensive (policy) document analyses to provide an overview of relevant information and policies from the municipality. This information serves as a platform for further cooperation and discussion. The municipality oftentimes organises work sessions with its policy workers and councillors to discuss and integrate their different ambitions and objectives. The research has shown how difficult it can be to have dozens of policy-workers and councillors work together to try to reach consensus on ambitions. These people all represent different policy domains and different (personal) objectives. It is therefore a great struggle to integrate all these objectives into comprehensive ambitions.

In order to draw up the municipal ambitions, the consultants and municipal workers conducted multiple rounds of participation with the public and local stakeholders. These extensive participation processes have created both advocates and opponents. While many consider it an essential part of developing an all-encompassing and integrative Environmental Vision, others criticise the lack of representative response groups. Some relate their criticism on participation to the decreasing decisiveness of the (political) people in charge. Environmental Visions are highly important long-term strategic documents with a lot of political weight. Because of this, many decision-makers are hesitant to make final decisions. Some prefer to organise extra rounds of participation while others choose to postpone decision-making until after the next elections. This illustrates the complexities that the municipality and consultants have to deal with while drawing up the cross-sectoral environmental ambitions for the Environmental Vision.

5.2 Tensions and conflicts

This second section focuses on answering the second sub-question: *What tensions or conflicts does the EA process make visible?* The previous section has discussed how the environmental ambitions are set for and by municipalities. This process turned out to be very difficult. It is therefore important to study what tensions or conflicts make this process so difficult. Because of the cross-cutting role of EA it is also interesting to address what role EA plays in this.

The empirical research has shown that many decision-makers divert from making decisions regarding complex or controversial topics. In the case of Lisse these primarily related to sustainable energy and public green, while Doetinchem struggled with decision-making on housing and agriculture. The integrated approach to the development process of Environmental Visions necessitates decision-makers to consider and tackle all spatial and environmental topics and challenges. The difficulty of this integrated approach is that these topics are inherently compared and (politically or financially) weighed. It comes as no surprise that some of these topics and their corresponding objectives or ambitions conflict with each other (Richardson, 2005; Van Rijswijk et al., 2014). As a result, certain topics and objectives can therefore be (temporarily) neglected or (deliberately) overlooked (Macrorie & Marvin, 2019; Kistenkas et al., 2020). This turned out to be the case in Lisse and Doetinchem as well. The municipality of Lisse decided to postpone their definitive decision-making on sustainable energy while some of the sub-areas in Doetinchem deliberately disregarded certain complex themes in the development of their sub-area visions. The EA has tackled these complex topics by specifically addressing them in the EA study and discussing them regularly during the development process. The research has shown that the EA can serve as a platform for stakeholders and policy workers to openly discuss their ambitions, reconsider their feasibility, and address conflicting objectives with the help of independent consultants and advice from the EA. In the case of Lisse, the topic of public green was tackled more in-depth during a dedicated thematic session to pinpoint the complexities of this topic and address the need for clear ambitions and plans.

Behind all these tensions and conflicts on specific topics or themes lies an underlying aspect that drastically affects the overall process: politics. The EA is meant to operate as a tool to gain knowledge and serve as a platform for discussion (Rozema & Bond, 2015). The outputs of these EA processes are meant to inform and assist policy-makers with decision-making (Richardson, 2005). However, this research has pointed out that the development processes of Environmental Visions and EA studies are highly political (Cashmore et al., 2010). The development process and eventual adoption of the outputs from EA studies are very much influenced by politics. The initiation of an EA process is a political choice in itself. This research has addressed that there are ways in which governments can avert from conducting EA studies. This could be a financial or political choice since EA studies can cost tens of thousands of euros and also potentially provide 'unwanted' assessments of plans and ambitions from local stakeholders or politicians. The same goes for processing the results of EA. Since there are no legal repercussions for ignoring or not processing (parts of) the EA, policy-makers can choose to do so. This shows that the political tensions and conflicting objectives are not only made visible by the EA but also affect the EA process itself.

The integrated approach that the EPA and Environmental Vision mean to implement seemingly starts to lose itself in the political implications and inherent lack of decisiveness among decision-makers. The assumed apolitical EA turns out to be highly political as well and is regularly affected by political implications. The empirical research has therefore illustrated how influential politics can be in policy integration and integrated decision-making.

5.3 Attaining policy integration and building consensus

This third section discusses the difficulties of policy integration and consensus-building in practice and what role EA plays to help achieve these goals. This section means to answer the third sub-question: *To what extent does the EA process help to attain policy integration and build consensus?*

An important outcome of the empirical research was the realisation, or perhaps confirmation, of how complex consensus-building and integrated decision-making can be in practice. As was discussed in the literature review, implementing policy integration requires both horizontal and vertical integration (Holden, 2012). This approach is considered necessary to tackle current cross-cutting urban and environmental challenges. Therefore, this integrated approach was put to practice in the Netherlands through the EPA and Environmental Visions. To achieve policy integration stakeholders from different (horizontal) sectors and (vertical) levels of government were obligated to work together more closely. During the development process of the Environmental Visions, stakeholders had to communicate and cooperate with each other to draw up ambitions for the future of their municipality.

Implementing an integrated approach to policy-making in practice is very challenging (Runhaar et al., 2014). Dealing with political implications and building consensus among dozens of stakeholders in nonlinear processes make it highly complex and difficult to achieve (Cairns & Krzywoszyńska, 2016; Jordan & Lenschow, 2010). This research has therefore focused on EA as a tool that can help to achieve policy integration. The literature review has addressed different views of scholars on the role and effectiveness of EA in sustainable development and environmental policy-making. While some criticise EA's lack of substantive impact on policy-making and susceptibility to political implications, others praise its usefulness as an informative tool and platform for consensus-building and deliberative decision-making (Cashmore et al., 2004; Richardson, 2005; Rozema & Bond, 2015). The empirical research has addressed the role of EA as a cross-cutting tool for policy integration further.

The research has shown that the role of EA and its effects are very diverse. Four main functions of EA to help attain policy integration and build consensus have been presented as a result of the empirical research. First, EA provides in-depth research to support its assessment and inform other stakeholders. A prominent part of the analysed EA studies is the so-called 'Picture of the environment'. This includes extensive (literature) studies of the current situation and future trends of the municipality. This provides a clear and in-depth overview of the characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of the municipality. This study is used as a basis for the further assessment of the ambitions and plans from the municipality, but it also serves as a source of knowledge and platform for discussion with other stakeholders. Respondents from the empirical research addressed the lack of knowledge from other stakeholders in the process which makes it difficult to draw up reasonable ambitions and come up with good arguments during discussions. In order to have open and levelled discussions for policy-making, it is important that all stakeholders have access to the same information and knowledge. The EA has proven to be a useful tool for realising that.

Secondly, EA helps to formulate clear(er) ambitions for the Environmental Vision. The main objective of the EA study is to assess the municipal ambitions based on their feasibility, effectiveness, and potential conflicts with other ambitions (Gabry, 2016, pp. 252-291). Therefore, the ambitions have to be set out clearly. The EA is dependent on its input, so whenever the ambitions are vague, the assessment will become vaguer as well. To improve the quality of the EA, the responsible consultants will therefore assist in drawing up clear ambitions. However, the research has pointed out that this could lead to conflict. When ambitions become clearer, they are more likely to conflict with other ambitions and objectives. Therefore, municipalities oftentimes prefer to maintain vaguer ambitions which leave room for further specifications at a later time. The involvement of EA could potentially

speed up the process of specifying the ambitions. However, this might also lead to conflict and delay for the publication of the Environmental Vision, which occurred in Doetinchem.

Thirdly, EA provides structure and regular discussion in the process of policy integration (Rozema & Bond, 2015). To improve the quality of the EA, the consultants would regularly organise (group) sessions with the municipality, other consultants, and experts. These sessions provide a platform for feedback and discussion while maintaining a clear structure and planning in the development process of the EA and Environmental Vision. Therefore, EA also improves the structure of the overall process by planning regular sessions and keeping in contact with the different stakeholders. The development process of an EA and Environmental Vision can get disconnected and result in an unstructured and sometimes chaotic state when it is not properly managed. The clear structure and planning EA provides are therefore very valuable and important for the process.

Fourthly and finally, EA offers the previous three functions through independent advice and impartial expertise. The complexity of having to deal with all our contemporary cross-cutting urban challenges gets increased due to fact that we also have to consider personal ambitions and objectives. Drawing up a municipal Environmental Vision remains the task of a select group of policy workers, councillors, and aldermen. Although participation is an important aspect of the development process, the final say remains at the municipality. The people in office have their personal beliefs and ambitions as well, and they might want to include them in the final Environmental Vision. Therefore, the involvement of EA is an important method to nullify these political implications and personal aspirations based on its independent advice and unbiased expertise. This improves the rational basis of the final decisions and also presents a 'fairer' process and outcome to the public. The NCEA strengthens these aspects as well due to their independent and impartial status in Dutch planning. By assessing these EA studies, the NCEA adds another layer of impartiality and expertise in the EA processes for Environmental Visions.

5.4 Critical factors for the effectiveness of EA

This fourth section explicates the different factors that determine how EA can influence Environmental Visions. The following paragraphs answer the fourth and final sub-question: *What critical factors determine how an EA can help to agree a municipality's Environmental Vision?*

Achieving policy integration is complex in theory and practice. This complexity is present in every part of the process to achieve it. As was addressed in the literature review, in order to achieve policy integration, one has to incorporate elements of collaborative planning and deliberative decision-making (Davies & Burgess, 2004; Healey, 1992; 1996). The integrated approach to planning and policy-making necessitates stakeholders from different sectors and governments to share their knowledge and objectives while trying to collaborate and agree on decisions (Stead & Meijers 2004; 2009). The importance of good communication and cooperation has been addressed multiple times in the empirical research. The development of Environmental Visions and EA studies requires frequent, open and clear communication between stakeholders from both the same and different organisations. Policy workers, councillors and aldermen have to communicate and cooperate frequently with each other and external consultants in order to create Environmental Visions and draw up municipal ambitions. The extensive history of the polder model has provided the Dutch with a cultural advantage in participation, communication, and consensus-building (Schreuder, 2001; Zonneveld & Evers, 2014). However, as the research has pointed out, this communicative approach regularly does not work as well as it should be. Stakeholders from different organisations or even from within the municipality itself were oftentimes not actively involved or properly informed about the development process of the Environmental Vision or EA study and could therefore not participate and share their ideas or

ambitions. As a result, the development process got delayed or, in the case of Doetinchem, postponed for months with some of the other organisations not even knowing what was going to happen. This undermines the overall objective of cooperative policy integration from the EPA that promises that all levels of society should have a say in the development process of Environmental Visions.

This research has shown that implementing an integrated approach to policy-making might not be as linear as one might assume. Although the involvement of the EA helps to structure and involve stakeholders more actively, it is far from perfect. The respondents from the interviews did point out two aspects that could potentially improve the overall development process and bring more linearity in the integrative process. These adjustments are the earlier involvement of EA and the appointment of a designated contact person within the municipality. Involving the EA earlier in the process could elevate it from an 'assessing EA' into a 'designing EA'. This means that the EA and consultants take on a more proactive role in the overall process and assist with drawing up ambitions earlier on. This allows them to help to structure the process and prevent conflicting objectives more easily. However, the earlier involvement of the EA would not be as useful as it could be without the appointment of a designated contact person at the municipality. The (political) structure of municipalities is highly complex, and anyone who is not familiar or involved in it might get lost. Therefore, appointing a designated person for this role is vital. Maintaining a clear overview of the process, putting the appropriate people in contact with each other, and functioning as a sort of mediator comprehend the complex yet valuable tasks of this role in the development process of Environmental Visions towards policy integration.

The EA process tried to bring more structure to the process overall and involve different stakeholders and municipal workers more actively. By conducting interviews, organising group (Mirror) sessions, keeping each other up to date, and maintaining regular contact, the EA also serves as a tool for structuring the process of achieving policy integration with the Environmental Vision. However, this process is not perfected. The EA is heavily dependent on its inputs from the municipality and other experts. Whenever these inputs are inadequate, the EA goes down in quality as well. The case of Doetinchem illustrated the importance of these inputs well. The use of sub-area visions in Doetinchem was praised by local stakeholders and policy workers due to its active involvement of citizens and appropriate participation and development process per sub-area. However, the next phase of processing all these sub-area outputs to the whole municipality turned out to be impractical and decreased the overall integrative tendency of the process. The lack of universal objectives and methods in each sub-area vision made it difficult to process the outcomes in the municipal Environmental Vision and EA as well. The quality of an EA is thus dependent on its input. When ambitions are unclear, methods are disparate, or certain topics are partly or not at all included, the outputs of the EA become less meaningful and effective as well.

5.5 Pushing the conceptual framework

This fifth and final section focuses on critically assessing the conceptual framework by Stead and Meijers through the following three themes: (1) the difficulty of reaching consensus and the implication of politics, (2) the lack of linearity in policy integration, and (3) the role of cross-cutting EA processes. Based on the results of the empirical research and literature review, this section means to push this framework by addressing these themes and integrating them into the conceptual model.

First, the difficulty of reaching consensus and the implication of politics. The literature review and empirical research have discussed how difficult it can be to reach consensus on plans and policies (Runhaar et al., 2014). Political and public stakeholders all have different objectives and ambitions they

intend to adhere and achieve. Therefore, these people have to communicate, cooperate, and eventually create consensus on plans or policies. Dealing with these conflicting objectives while trying to implement an integrated approach is already highly complex, but politics bring in even more implications (Cashmore et al., 2010). Politics are an intrinsic aspect of integrated decision-making, and yet the framework by Stead and Meijers appears to underplay the importance of political implications. The research has shown that politics play an impactful role in policy integration. The case studies illustrated how politicians can choose to exclude certain topics or actors because they complicate their decision-making process. The research showed how some of the sub-areas visions in Doetinchem (partially) neglected complex themes during their development and participation process due to public backlash. Additionally, the respondents addressed how municipalities in general are known to avert from initiating EA processes because they could interfere with local plans and ambitions. Meanwhile, the research showed that policy-makers are seemingly starting to lack in decisiveness in integrated policy-making processes. Environmental Visions carry a lot of political weight and could potentially cause a negative public response which makes the people in charge hesitant to make final decisions. This illustrates how difficult it can be to reach consensus in integrated policy-making processes and how highly influential politics are during these processes.

Secondly, the lack of linearity in policy integration. This research has discussed how elements of the theories on communicative planning and deliberative decision-making are essential parts of policy integration (Davies & Burgess, 2004; Healey, 1996). The process of implementing an integrated approach to policy-making is therefore highly interactive, and it requires large groups of stakeholders and organisations with different ambitions and agendas to work together. Because of this, there is a lot of back-and-forth cooperation and communication between different stakeholders and process managers. The case studies have shown how the process of integrated policy-making by developing an Environmental Vision is very nonlinear and even chaotic at times. Working with a large group of policy workers, councillors, local organisations, and citizens requires strict process management, planning, and active involvement of all stakeholders. The case of Doetinchem has shown that good intentions to achieve policy integration by involving many different people and integrating many local ambitions can result in non-comprehensive processes and impractical outcomes. Therefore, it is important to realise that the process of integrated policy-making is nonlinear. It requires many different phases of communication and cooperation with intermediate steps and evaluation points. It is a back-and-forth process without a clear finishing line to mark the completed process of integrated policy-making.

Thirdly, the role of cross-cutting EA processes. This research has focused primarily on the role of EA as a tool to help achieve policy integration. The literature review and empirical research have shown that EA can be very helpful when it gets implemented in a suitable way (Richardson, 2005; Rozema & Bond, 2015). Although the political context and local characteristics differ per case, this research has pointed out that the inclusion of EA as a neutral platform for open discussion and integrated decision-making can be practical and useful. It helps to maintain a clear structure and planning and therefore maintains a steady role throughout the entire process of integrated policy-making. By doing so, it cuts across the hierarchy of policy cooperation, policy coordination, and policy integration by Stead and Meijers (2004). In fact, EA incorporates the element of sustainability into the framework. EA is meant to serve as a tool for promoting sustainable development. Since it can maintain its functionality throughout the process of policy integration it brings in a more prominent role for sustainability as well. EA adheres to the principles of sustainable development and policy-making and can therefore point the attention of the decision-makers to take sustainability into account more prominently in future plans and policies.

6. Conclusion

This research has focused on the role of EA as a cross-cutting tool and supportive process for enabling integrated policy-making. To study this topic and process, this research has presented case studies that combine EA with processes of achieving policy integration with new municipal Environmental Visions in the Netherlands. This research was initiated by posing the following main research question: *To what extent does EA (applied as part of integrated policy-making processes) help Dutch municipalities to agree an Environmental Vision?*

The literature review and empirical research have shown that implementing an integrated approach to policy-making and planning is very difficult, both in theory and practice (Christensen & Lægheid, 2007; Holden, 2012; Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Kistenka et al., 2020; Van Rijswick et al., 2014). The case studies have shown that this integrated approach requires stakeholders from different policy sectors and levels of government to communicate, cooperate, and build consensus on cross-cutting ambitions and policies. Consensus-building and decision-making for contemporary challenges have proven to be very difficult in practice. This was apparent during the development of the Environmental Vision. The intentions of the EPA to implement an integrated approach to tackle our cross-cutting environmental issues were well-argued but turned out to be very difficult in practice due to the complexities of local spatial challenges, political ambitions, and conflicting (personal) objectives.

The literature review discussed how EA is presented as a tool for enabling and assisting in the process of policy integration (Cashmore et al., 2004; Richardson, 2005; Rozema & Bond, 2015). The empirical research has studied this role of EA in policy integration through case studies of municipal Environmental Visions in the Netherlands. The research showed that EA enables policy integration through the Environmental Visions in four ways. First, EA provides in-depth research and additional information which oftentimes lacks at municipalities and other stakeholders. This helps policy-makers to provide better arguments for their ambitions and it promotes well-informed decision-making. Secondly, EA helps to formulate clear ambitions which is something policy-makers intend to avoid due to political tensions and implications. EA provides a neutral platform that helps with confining objectives, addressing conflicts, and formulating clear ambitions. Thirdly, EA maintains a clear planning and structure by organising regular sessions and open discussions. Since the development of Environmental Visions can be very nonlinear EA helps to keep a clear overview of the process by setting up deadlines and maintaining a clear schedule for all stakeholders to follow. Fourthly and finally, EA offers independent advice and unbiased expertise. Including consultants adds a lot of value to the overall process due to their impartial role in dealing with the local environmental challenges and political issues. This improves the quality of the process and final product and it creates a more reliable and trustworthy process for the public and other stakeholders.

Despite the positive role and effects of EA for enabling policy integration, several aspects are important to consider due to the (negative) influence they can have on the potential effects of EA. First, the research has shown that EA lacks in legal power which can be exploited by policy-makers. Even though EA is said to be obligatory for Environmental Visions, governments can divert from initiating an EA process or they can choose to (partially) ignore the outputs of the EA. Whether it is because they do not want to spend money on it or because they do not want it to interfere with their ambitions, governments can get away with neglecting EA studies. Secondly, EA is highly dependent on the amount and quality of its financial and informational inputs. It is essential that EA receives the input it needs to provide a suitable assessment process and study. Whenever the financial or informational input is lacking, the quality of the EA will go down as well. Thirdly and finally, EA differs in functionality and effectiveness based on its entry point in the overall process. Similar to the financial and informational input, the time you put into an EA is essential as well. By involving the EA early in the policy integration

process, the quality and effect of the EA will improve as well because it is able to become more than a traditional EA study.

To conclude and give a definitive answer to the main research question: EA can and does help Dutch municipalities to agree Environmental Visions. By doing so, it enables integrated policy-making in the Netherlands to tackle contemporary cross-cutting environmental challenges. It is however very dependent on the political and financial context and its perceived purpose in the overall process of integrated policy-making. It is important that consultants and local stakeholders make a well-informed decision on whether to implement a traditional assessing EA or the new designing EA. This will differ per case because of the local political context, financial situation, and entry point of EA in the overall process of policy integration.

6.1 Recommendations and limitations

This thesis has provided new information and research on the development process of Environmental Visions and EA studies in the Netherlands. It has discussed the role of EA as a tool for enabling policy integration and provided a clear overview of the factors that improve or impair the effectiveness of EA in policy integration process. Due to my internship at Arcadis during the writing process of this thesis, I was able to get a first-hand experience in the development process of an Environmental Vision and EA. This has provided interesting new insights into the role of EA in policy integration and its effects on the development of Environmental Visions. The following paragraphs provide recommendations for further research on the role of EA for enabling policy integration and its effect on the development of Environmental Visions. Thereafter, pragmatic recommendations are also discussed for the improvement of EA and Environmental Vision processes to achieve policy integration.

First, it is important to reflect on the writing and research process of this thesis and acknowledge that it has had its limitations. This entire research was executed independently within a time frame of approximately eight months. Therefore, a limited amount of cases have been studied and a select group of people have been interviewed. The cases and respondents have been selected to get widespread and diversified results. However, the number of cases and respondents remains limited. Therefore, this study promotes further research with a wider scope and more resources. Further research could study more diverse and larger municipalities that they have to deal with different challenges from the relatively small municipalities that have been studied in this research. It is also interesting to study EA processes from different consultancy firms. This research has only focused on EA processes from Arcadis because I was able to get insight information in these processes due to my internship at Arcadis. However, it is unlikely that all EA processes for Environmental Visions are similar to the ones from Arcadis that were studied in this research. Therefore, additional research on different consultancy firms could expand the scope and provide more diverse results. Finally, it is interesting to take a more in-depth look at EA processes that have different entry points and objectives in the development process of Environmental Visions. An interesting outcome from this research was the different effect that designing and assessing EA studies could have based on their entry points and predetermined objectives. Further research could provide valuable insights on the effectiveness of EA in policy-making and the importance of the entry point and predetermined objective of EA in the policy integration process.

Despite this study's limitations, it has provided new and interesting information on the role of EA in enabling policy integration through Environmental Visions. Based on the results of this research a few recommendations can therefore be drawn up to help improve the effects and outcomes of EA and Environmental Vision processes. First, the research has addressed the importance of communication

and collaboration between different stakeholders. One aspect that was specifically mentioned by respondents was the usefulness of a designated contact person at the municipality during the development process of Environmental Visions and EA studies. Their role as a central contact and mediator for all stakeholders and private consultants was deemed vital for the process. Therefore, this research promotes the appointment of such a designated contact person during these processes.

Secondly, many respondents have addressed the benefits of involving the EA soon(er) in the development process of Environmental Visions. Involving EA earlier means that it becomes more of a designing support tool instead of the 'standard' assessing tool after most of the decisions and plans had already been made. This research has shown that many municipalities choose to not include an EA early in the Environmental Vision process or to not include it at all due to political situations or financial limitations. However, this research has also shown that the early inclusion of EA in the development process of Environmental Visions can add a lot of value to the process and final product. Therefore, this research promotes the early inclusion of EA in the development of Environmental Visions to make use of the full potential of EA for Environmental Visions.

Thirdly and finally, the Dutch Environmental Visions comprehend decisions and ambitions that affect the environment and shape sustainable development for the upcoming decades. Therefore, the NCEA has made it obligatory for governments to conduct EA studies to assess these visions (Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment, 2018). Because these Environmental Visions operate on a large scale, the appropriate assessment method is through SEA. The objective of the SEA for Environmental Visions is to assess whether the ambitions by the government are feasible, conflicting or negatively affecting the environment (Gabry, 2016, pp. 270-277). Since the Environmental Visions comprehend plans and ambitions for all sectors relating to the environment and planning, the SEA studies must implement an integrated approach as well. These assessments must be cross-cutting and need to address dozens of different sectors and objectives (Gabry, 2016, pp.279-292). This research therefore promotes the development of a new category of (S)EA that is specifically designed for Environmental Visions. The new 'Environmental Vision Assessment', or EVA for short, implement a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to assess cross-cutting ambitions and help with enabling environmental policy integration through Environmental Visions. Respondents from the empirical research addressed the apparent disconnect from the NCEA and the new EA for Environmental Visions because these EA studies lack in traditional (quantitative) environmental impact assessments. This is not to be expected from these EVA studies and the NCEA should therefore adjust their expectations and assessment as well. As a result, this new type of EA could tackle this disconnect and improve the overall development and assessment process of EA for Environmental Visions.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Invitation letter for interviews

Student: Björn Thomas

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Phone: 06-12162179

Master's thesis research Spatial Planning at the Utrecht University

The influence of environmental assessment processes in the development of Environmental Visions

My name is Björn Thomas, and I am studying the master's programme of Spatial Planning at the Utrecht University. For my master's thesis I am researching environmental assessments (*milieueffectrapportages*) and the development of the new Environmental Visions (*Omgevingsvisies*) in the Netherlands.

The new Environment and Planning Act (*Omgevingswet*) is about to drastically change the planning system in the Netherlands. This act obligates every government to develop their own Environmental Vision. The development of these integrated policy documents is highly unique in the world of spatial planning and therefore very interesting from an academically and social viewpoint to study. Since these visions are long-term strategic documents, it is obligatory to have an environmental assessment conducted. During my internship at Arcadis I came in contact with the development of environmental assessments, and I was immediately interested in them. The academic relevance and my personal interest have therefore led me to studying the influence of environmental assessment processes on the development of the Environmental Visions.

I would like to make clear and emphasize that this research is completely separate from my role as an intern at Arcadis. This thesis research is conducted as a final chapter in my academic journey of becoming a spatial planner at the Utrecht University. No results are shared with or influenced by Arcadis. My internship at Arcadis is merely used as a platform to get in contact with people who can help me with my research.

Due to your role as **[INSERT ROLE OF INTERVIEWEE]** I am very interested in talking to you about your experiences with the development process of the environmental assessment and Environmental Vision for the municipality.

Interview objectives and topics

This interview is conducted as part of the empirical research for my thesis research. The main research question of my thesis is:

- What role does the environmental assessment process play in agreeing a municipality's Environmental Vision?

The objective of my research is to study and better understand environmental assessment processes for the development of the new Environmental Visions in the Netherlands. In order to better understand these processes, I focus on two case studies: the municipality of Lisse and Doetinchem. Arcadis have been responsible for conducting both environmental assessment studies during the development of the Environmental Visions and I mean to study these processes. In order to get a well-informed view of the process, I would like to interview people like you who are experienced with the development of these Environmental Visions and/or environmental assessments.

The interview will last between 30-45 minutes. During the interview I mean to discuss a few topics with you. First, I would like to talk about your role(s) in the development process of the **[Environmental Vision OR environmental assessment]**. Secondly, I mean to better understand the rationale underpinning the development of the **[Environmental Vision OR environmental assessment]**. Thirdly, the Environmental Visions obligate planners and government officials to strive for policy integration by including dozens of policy domains and stakeholders. I hope you can tell me how your organisation has tried to **[achieve OR assess]** this difficult goal of policy integration. Fourthly, I would like to learn more about the complex process of defining the municipal ambitions and what difficulties might occur from this. Finally, I am very interested in your personal opinions on the process of developing an **[Environmental Vision OR environmental assessment]** and how you might want to alter it.

Thank you very much for your time and participation!

Kind regards,

Björn Thomas

My thesis supervisor at Utrecht University is Dr. Rachel Macrorie. You can contact her at:

r.m.macrorie@uu.nl

Student: Björn Thomas

Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning

Utrecht University



Master's thesis research Spatial Planning at the Utrecht University

The influence of environmental assessment processes in the development of Environmental Visions

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Privacy regulations

In order to use the full potential of the interview, I mean to record our conversation. This allows me to not be distracted by constantly writing down notes, but instead focus on our discussion.

Afterwards, the recording of the interview is being transcribed. The transcript of the interview is used as a means for systematic analysis through data analysis software. I will send you a summary of our interview so that you can verify its validity.

The recording and transcript are being stored safely on a secure server by the Utrecht University.

Consent

- I confirm that I have read the information sheet and that I understand the purposes of the research.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw. If I decide to withdraw then I understand that the information I provide will not be used in the study.
- I agree for the interview to be recorded and stored by the Utrecht University on a secure server and for notes and transcripts made from the recording to be used in the research.
- I understand that any information that I provide will be treated confidentially and will only be included in publications in a completely anonymised form, unless I agree otherwise.
- I understand that information may have to be given to a 3rd party in an anonymised form if this research is subject to a Freedom of Information Act request.
- (Optional) I would like to receive the final version of the master's thesis. My email is:

Date: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Thank you very much!

Kind regards,

Björn Thomas

For further questions or remarks you can contact me via my UU-email address or private phone:

b.k.thomas@students.uu.nl & 06-12162179

You can also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Rachel Macrorie, at the Utrecht University:

r.m.macrorie@uu.nl

Appendix 3: Interview topic lists and questions

For respondents who worked on the Environmental Vision

1. Personal information

- Job description
- Years of experience

2. Role during process

- What was your role during the development of the Environmental Vision and what tasks did you do?
- Has your role changed during the process? If so, how and why?

3. Policy integration

- How were different policy domains and stakeholders involved?
- How were negotiations undertaken between these different actors?

4. Defining ambitions

- How did you decide what ambitions and alternatives would go through?
- Were there any conflicts while drawing up these ambitions and alternatives?
 - How were they resolved?
 - Were there specific themes or topics that led to (most) conflicts?

5. Personal opinions

- To what extent do you think that the development process of the EA during the development of the Environmental Vision has had a positive influence on the development process and final version of the vision?
- What would you have changed in order to get a better process and outcome for the Environmental Vision?

For respondents who worked on the environmental assessment

1. Personal information

- Job description
- Years of experience

2. Role during process

- What was your role during the development of the environmental assessment and what tasks did you do?
- Has your role changed during the process? If so, how and why?

3. Policy integration

- How were different policy domains and stakeholders involved?
- How were negotiations undertaken between these different actors?

4. Defining ambitions

- How did you contribute to deciding what ambitions and alternatives would be assessed?
- Were there any conflicts while drawing up these ambitions and alternatives?
 - How were they resolved?
 - Were there specific themes or topics that led to (most) conflicts?

5. Personal opinions

- To what extent do you think that the development process of the EA during the development of the Environmental Vision has had a positive influence on the development process and final version of the vision?
- What would you have changed in order to get a better process and outcome for the Environmental Vision and environmental assessment?

Appendix 4: Interview transcripts and codebook

The transcripts of the conducted interviews comprehend over fifty pages of text. Therefore, they have been collected into an external ZIP file. The codebook that was used for analysing the interviews through NVIVO 12 is included in this ZIP file as well.