

## **SOCIAL CAPITAL IN RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE NETHERLANDS**

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### **Abstract**

#### **Social capital in rural communities in the Netherlands**

The quality of life in Dutch rural communities is high in comparison with urban communities in the Netherlands because of the residential quality of villages, the mobility of the inhabitants and the strong commitment by the inhabitants to the local society. However, today's Dutch villages bear no resemblance to the traditional village and neither is social capital self-evident nowadays.

This article presents evidence from two projects. It summarizes some results of a national survey organised within the framework of the research programme entitled 'The Social State of the Countryside', as carried out by the Social and Cultural Planning Office of The Netherlands (SCP) and a project in one of the most rural parts of the Netherlands (Zeeland). In the Zeeland villages, social capital is analysed from the point of view of the relationship between quality of life, social cohesion and local community care in small villages.

#### **Key words**

transformation of rural communities, civil society, social capital, quality of life, social vitality, social cohesion, community care

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## 1. Introduction

The Dutch countryside is turning into a multifunctional consumption space. It is no longer just the natural preserve of agriculture. Land is increasingly in demand for new functions, like new residential areas, recreation, nature and water storage, mobility and infrastructure (Steenbekkers *et al.* 2008). Country life is also in a state of flux because of ongoing urbanisation in the Netherlands and general developments in the Dutch society, like individualisation (Schnabel 2004). The impact of these developments on the living situation of rural dwellers is a matter of growing concern. At the same time there is the idea that rural communities still have enough social capital to guarantee that rural residents themselves are able to make their environment a good and viable place to live.

A lot of people choose to live in villages in the Netherlands. Village life is associated with safety, tidiness and going 'back to nature'. Moreover, physical planning policy in the Netherlands is less restrictive with respect to new housing in small villages than was the case a few decades ago. However, more and more villages in the Netherlands are faced with a shrinking and ageing population. These developments are seen as a threat to the local social infrastructure and the social capital of villages (Simon *et al.* 2007).

One of the topics of concern is the development of the local community and the local civil society in Dutch villages. In the wider Dutch society the civil society is seen as threatened by developments in the private domain (individualisation), by the development of the Dutch welfare state and by developments in the public domain (privatisation). Modernisation is often connected to new forms of distrust and the loss of social cohesion or social capital (Schnabel 2004; Elchardus 2007; Putnam 2000; Lupi 2005). Although most attention is focused on the Dutch urban neighbourhoods in this respect, the local community and the civil society in villages is also a matter of concern. Issues affecting rural communities which are referred to by local politicians and rural organisations include the further loss of local services, the loss of meeting places, and the effects of demographic and social developments. The closure of primary schools because of the dejuvenation and the loss of volunteers because of the increasing involvement of women in the formal labour market (Droogleever Fortuijn 1996) are, for instance, seen as significant threats for the local community.

One of the main reasons for the current attention paid to social capital and the local civil society in Dutch villages is the Social Support Act (Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning (WMO)), which took effect in January 2007. The Act is the result of two long-term policy processes involving the decentralisation of national welfare policies to local level and the deinstitutionalisation of care for vulnerable members of the local society, especially older people, handicapped people and psychiatric patients (Koops and Kwekkeboom 2005). The Act is oriented around individual responsibility and active involvement with respect to care for all citizens. Local councils are required to stimulate and support local support networks for vulnerable people. The fear that the costs of professional care will grow too fast because of further individualization of the society and because of the burden of an ageing population is also key.

A central idea behind the Social Support Act is the concept of *community care* (Bulmer 1987), defined as 'support for people with serious disabilities (including

support of their social network) to help them live in the local community and be part of it' (Beraadsgroep Community Care, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, in: Hortulanus 2004). 'Community care means that care *inside an institution* has to be replaced by care *in the community*' (Duyvendak and Verplanke 2007). The Social Support Act describes nine fields of action for local authorities. Quality of life in villages and neighbourhoods is the first field of action, which presupposes that this is a precondition for local social cohesion and community care.

In general, the social atmosphere in Dutch villages is often still seen as being akin to that of a real 'community' (a 'Gemeinschaft', cf. Tönnies). However the socio-cultural changes brought about by the new functions of the Dutch countryside, the influx of new residents with an urban background and the modernisation of rural dwellers are seen as a potential threat to the social cohesion in these villages. Besides these developments, the inhabitants of rural communities are facing specific problems. General scale enlargement is causing local service levels and public transport to decline. This is compensated for by a further growth in mobility, but this development exacerbates the access problems of (small) groups without a car. Rural areas are also facing a more marked dejuvenation and ageing of the population than urban parts of the Netherlands (Steenbekkers *et al.* 2006).

Local and provincial authorities in the Dutch countryside want to support social capital in villages and to strengthen a sustainable social infrastructure in rural areas. Social capital is seen as essential for future vitality of villages where people show initiative and responsibility for local affairs. A sustainable social infrastructure will support social cohesion by taking the actual qualities of villages as a starting point and is at the same time open to new realistic perspectives on the development of social cohesion in the future.

In this article we discuss the outline and main results of two research projects: a national survey of social capital in the Dutch countryside and a local survey of social capital for community care in eight small villages in a rural municipality at some distance of the Dutch metropolitan area of Randstad Holland, namely in the province of Zeeland.

If one describes urbanisation in the Netherlands at a regional level (NUTS<sub>3</sub>-regions) and takes an address density of 1,000 addresses (of households, firms, etc.) per square kilometre as the distinction between urban and rural, then one has to conclude that rural regions do not exist in the Netherlands. However, at the local level, the level of the village or neighbourhood, large parts of the Netherlands are still 'rural' and seen as rural by their inhabitants. Nevertheless, urbanisation is occurring at a rapid rate in the central and southern part of the Netherlands (Steenbekkers *et al.* 2006).

The national survey of social capital is the fourth report of the research programme entitled 'The Social State of the Countryside', carried out by the Social and Cultural Planning Office of The Netherlands (SCP) and financed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (LNV). The purpose of this programme is to develop a monitor which can track future developments in the Dutch countryside. The final conclusion of the first report of the project (Steenbekkers *et al.* 2006) is that the living situation is more favourable in Dutch rural areas than in urban areas. More important is that this is based on a more favourable housing situation, a higher involvement of inhabitants with the local civil society, and is facilitated by high

levels of car availability at an individual level. The conclusion supports the idea that there is a relationship between the residential function and the involvement of inhabitants with the local civil society.

The report on social capital (Vermeij and Mollenhorst 2008) is based on quantitative data gathered during a survey in 2007. 2058 respondents, who live both in rural and urban parts of the Netherlands were interviewed at home.

The local survey was carried out in April 2006 in eight villages in the municipality of Borsele in the province of Zeeland in the southwest of the Netherlands (Van der Meer *et al.* 2008). 358 inhabitants aged 16 and older were interviewed at home and 368 inhabitants filled in a shorter questionnaire. Some of the data can be compared with the result of a questionnaire organised in 1991/92 in the same villages and filled in by 847 inhabitants. The central theme of the project is the social infrastructure and social capital of the village. This was studied by analysing the relationships between the local quality of life, local social cohesion and local community care.

## **2. Local civil society and social capital in Dutch villages**

An important change that has affected Dutch villages can be described as a change from the autonomous village to the residential village (Thissen 2001). Until 1970 many villages in the Netherlands were important to the majority of their inhabitants as providing the principal context for their life and day paths. Many inhabitants were born and grew up in the same village. Their daily routines were carried out in the village and the jobs, services, social contacts, local politics and cultural identity of many inhabitants primarily had a local orientation. The new wealth that developed in the period of reconstruction after the Second World War was reinvested or at least spent locally. As a result, a lot of villages flourished as a local civil society at that time. However 1970 was also an important turning point. From 1970 onwards, jobs were increasingly concentrated in regional employment centres and consumption was transferred to regional shopping centres that offered more choice at lower prices. Increased mobility due to car ownership was the precondition for this development. This resulted in a function loss as far as villages were concerned, that is a loss of jobs and services. The residential function remained and was strengthened because of scale reduction in the cultural and political domain. Inhabitants started to become more and more interested in their home territory. The house itself developed as an important expression of the identity of the people who lived there. The residential environment developed into an important focus of political interest.

With respect to the local quality of life the opinions of certain groups of inhabitants can be summarised as a 'community lost' perspective. In this perspective the 'autonomous village' is still their frame of reference. The core of this frame of reference is a circular chain of relationships that was typical for the autonomous village and that links the development of the number of inhabitants to the development of the local service level and the development of the local quality of life and so on (Fig. 1). Although local causal relationships changed in the direction of the residential village, the autonomous village is still a strong frame of reference.

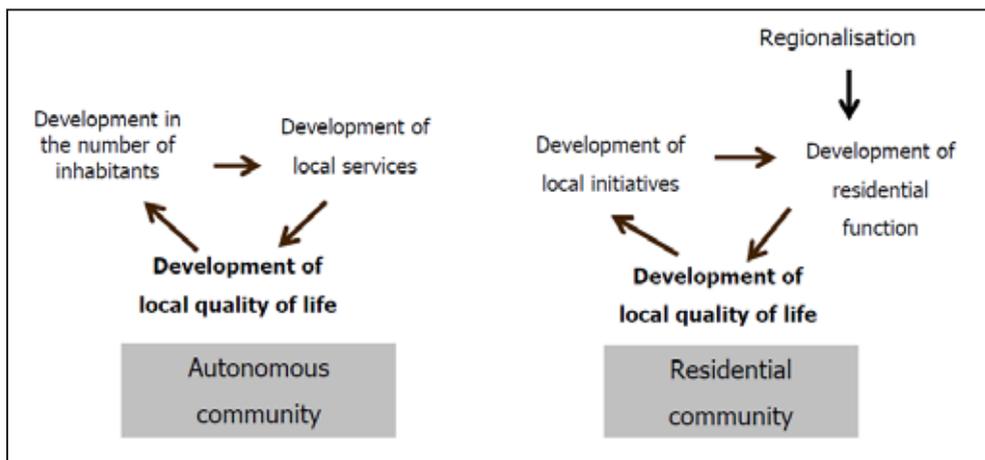


Fig.1 Relationships at a local level in the autonomous community and the residential community, which also act as frames of reference.

However, in a growing number of inhabitants of villages the opinions regarding the local quality of life can be summarised as a 'community transformed' perspective. In this perspective the 'residential village' is the frame of reference. The main difference with the autonomous village is that the development of the local quality of life is dependent on the development of the residential function within a regional housing market. However, in the context of this article, the most important relationship is between the development of the local quality of life and the development of local initiatives. In a growing number of Dutch rural communities, such local initiatives create, from the bottom up, all manner of new services which strengthen the local civil society and social capital. Examples are a village library run by volunteers, a driving service for school children, a village website, a Christmas get-together, a second-hand book shop, maintenance of local small monuments, a village survey by the inhabitants themselves, a local nature project, and so on. These local services are special in this context because they are not a *condition* for the local quality of life but the *result* of the local quality of life (Fig. 1). Moreover, certain local initiatives directed at community care are developing in a similar way. The change in rural communities from relatively traditional autonomous communities to residential communities is strongly related to the changing behaviour of villagers. Changes in the life path and day path are fundamental.

Social capital is a popular concept nowadays and associated with many definitions and approaches. The definitions have in common that social capital is about the value of social relations for the 'productivity' of individuals and groups (Putnam 2000; Vermeij and Mollenhorst 2008). The value of social relations between villagers can be positive as well as negative. A close-knit local community can, for instance, contribute to local support networks and local community care. However, social cohesion can have advantages and disadvantages, often depending on the concepts of bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital concerns the social relations within a group, for instance among the inhabitants who were born and bred in the village. Bridging capital relates to the social relations between groups, for instance between the inhabitants born and bred there and newcomers to the village. Although bonding social capital can be productive for the people it includes, it can be unproductive for the village as a whole. Bridging capital can be

productive because different kinds of people are then linked, including people living outside of the village.

### **3. Social cohesion and the quality of life and vitality in the Dutch countryside**

A central hypothesis in the survey of SCP (Vermeij and Mollenhorst 2008) is that social capital exists when social cohesion is productive for, and contributes to, the quality of life and the vitality of the village. All kinds of variables were developed for the survey to measure differences in social cohesion, opinions about the quality of life and the vitality of the village. With respect to the vitality of the village a distinction was made between bonding types of vitality like volunteering and membership of social clubs, and bridging types of vitality like the attitude to newcomers and to politics. Central to the analysis was the relationship between social cohesion characteristics on the one hand and quality of life and vitality on the other. This was controlled for personal characteristics and characteristics of the local context (urban vs. rural; type of rurality).

Considerable differences exist in the Dutch countryside with respect to the transition from autonomous villages to residential villages and these differences are seen as relevant to social cohesion and to the productivity of social cohesion for the quality of life and vitality of villages (social capital). In order to portray those differences a social typology of villages was constructed based on differences in urbanisation and four groups of social characteristics. Three groups of criteria describe the age distribution, the socio-economic status and life path characteristics of the inhabitants. The fourth group describes the importance of the village in the day paths of inhabitants and visitors.

The resulting social typology (Vermeij and Mollenhorst 2008) more or less reflects the kind of differentiation in the Dutch countryside discussed above. Apart from the distinction between relatively autonomous, 'closed', villages vs. residential villages, two types of residential villages with a relatively high socio-economic status are discerned. The two types differ with respect to age composition (old vs. young). Besides that, two types of 'urbanized' villages can be distinguished: key villages, the local service centres in the countryside, and urbanized villages near urban areas. Only one third of the inhabitants of the last type consider themselves to be living in the countryside. According to this typology one third of all Dutch rural dwellers lives in closed, relatively autonomous villages, nine percent lives in residential villages.

Inhabitants of the Dutch countryside report a somewhat higher social cohesion than the inhabitants in urban areas, with the exception of those in the urban countryside. They focus slightly more on the local community than city dwellers. In this respect the perception of a close-knit local rural community is realistic: people in the village know each other and greet each other to a greater extent than people in urban neighbourhoods. They also more frequently expect neighbours to help each other and team up to combat local problems. This type of social cohesion is typical of the closed, relatively autonomous village. No real differences were found in the case of other forms of social cohesion.

The quality of life in Dutch villages is good in comparison with urban settlements. Loneliness and a lack of safety are reported less frequently in the countryside. Villagers are more satisfied with the residential environment. Although they report

problems with access to special shops more often, they have fewer problems with mobility, although distances are greater. Although they differ from the urban areas, these are differences of gradation, without any sharp contrasts. The high quality of life is partly related to compositional characteristics. For example, the low percentage of people living alone in the countryside is important for the high quality of life reported there.

As regards certain characteristics the Dutch countryside appears to be more vital than Dutch urban areas. However, this relates to quite traditional, bonding relations, like church membership, attending church and participation in cultural traditions. Although there are no differences with respect to active volunteering and active membership of clubs or associations between urban and rural settings, the number of active volunteers in one type of the residential villages is high. The difference with respect to participation in local cultural traditions is particularly related to the closed villages and the use of a local dialect. The Dutch countryside appears to be less vital for some bridging relationships. The attitude of rural dwellers to ethnic minorities is considerably more closed than that of city dwellers. Given that only small numbers of people from ethnic minorities live in these areas, this may be attributable to a lack of familiarity.

An indication for the existence of social capital in the Dutch villages is that many quality of life indicators correlate with social cohesion in the neighbourhood. Especially the strong local relationships in Dutch villages correlate with the quality of life experienced by villagers (Vermeij and Mollenhorst 2008). This is however not the case as regards vitality. There is almost no correlation between social cohesion in the neighbourhood and vitality characteristics. Only participation in local cultural traditions is related to social cohesion in the neighbourhood.

In more general terms (therefore not specific to Dutch villages), there is a relation between the size of individual networks and the contribution that people make to social vitality. People with large networks are more often involved in bonding activities such as working as a volunteer and providing informal care than are people with smaller networks. However, they are also more active in bridging activities: they are more open to new residents and ethnic minorities and are more positive about their influence in politics. People with a large network therefore make a key contribution to the civil society in urban and in rural settlements in the Netherlands (Vermeij and Mollenhorst 2008).

#### **4. Patterns of social cohesion in Dutch villages**

The development of Dutch villages from relatively autonomous villages into residential villages has important consequences for patterns of social cohesion and the contribution of social cohesion to, for instance, the willingness to participate in community care and the actual participation in local community care. Self-evident forms of social cohesion are probably in decline and it is unclear how new forms of social cohesion will develop and, if so, whether they will act as social capital. The question is whether new forms of social cohesion will be productive for the local society.

A main conclusion of the project in eight small villages in Borsele (Van der Meer *et al.* 2008) is that these local communities have a lively civil society, that the social cohesion appears to be strong and that the quality of life is high in the opinion of

the inhabitants. The differences between the villages are small, although these reveal a certain pattern.

With respect to the quality of life the differences between the villages are more important than those relating to social cohesion and community care. People are generally positive about their village and they are even more positive than fifteen years ago. However, they attribute this positive opinion less and less to their opinion about the services in the village and more and more to their opinion about the residential quality of the village.

Social cohesion is approached at an individual level on the basis of a description of participation, involvement and place attachment (Lupi 2005). Differences in this respect can be explained better by differences in social position than by differences in geographical position. The social groups with lower participation levels are youngsters, the oldest of the older people, non-religious inhabitants, people who recently settled in the village and residents who do not have a car. Certain groups, like youngsters and recently settled inhabitants, may become more active later on. Non-religious inhabitants exhibit a lower level of social integration in spheres other than church-related activities as well. This demonstrates the importance of the local church in these villages. The oldest of the older people and the inhabitants without a car demonstrate a certain vulnerability.

An analysis of a set of indicators of social cohesion using principal component analysis for ten indicators of social cohesion produces two components (Tab. 1). The most important component (with six indicators and accounting for 25 percent of the variance) can be described as local involvement, including all kinds of active and consumptive participation in local activities. The second component (with four indicators and accounting for 13 percent of the variance) can be described as local orientation, including different kind of life path and day path characteristics. Inhabitants with a strong local orientation also exhibit a high local involvement, but not all inhabitants with a high local involvement have a strong local orientation. This demonstrates that high local involvement is not exclusively related to a strong local orientation.

Tab.1: Indicators for social cohesion and two components (result of a Principal Component Analysis) and their factor scores for the two components

	Component 1 'Local involvement'	Component 2 'Local orientation'
Organises activities in the village	,576	,192
Attends activities in the village	,609	-,002
Attends village council meetings	,552	,090
Is proud of the village	,507	,254
Is active in local associations	,548	,335
Is willing to do something for the village	,545	-,112
Main activities located in the village	-,184	,744
Uses as many facilities in the village as possible	,237	,551
Has family members in the village	,085	,593
Feels first and foremost a villager	,207	,628

Source: Van der Meer *et al.* (2008).

Community care is measured by giving and receiving support to and from other people. One of the main conclusions is that support relationships do not exist between two different groups of givers and receivers. Most people (68 per cent of the respondents) participate in giving and receiving, which illustrates that support relationships are characterised by exchange, reciprocity and social networks.

In the Borsele villages a clear correlation exists at the individual level between several indicators of local involvement and willingness to participate in community care and the actual participation in local community care. It demonstrates the existence of social capital: local involvement contributes to community care. However there are differences between the eight villages with respect to local involvement.

A description of the relationship between local orientation and local involvement at the level of the village reveals a pattern that is summarised in figure 2. This pattern can be related to the day path and life path orientation in each of the villages. In villages that are still relatively autonomous, a high local orientation is accompanied by a high local involvement. This relationship is viewed at individual level as self-evident by the inhabitants of this type of village. Of course, residential villages show a decline in local orientation, but also more variation in local involvement (Van der Meer *et al.* 2008).

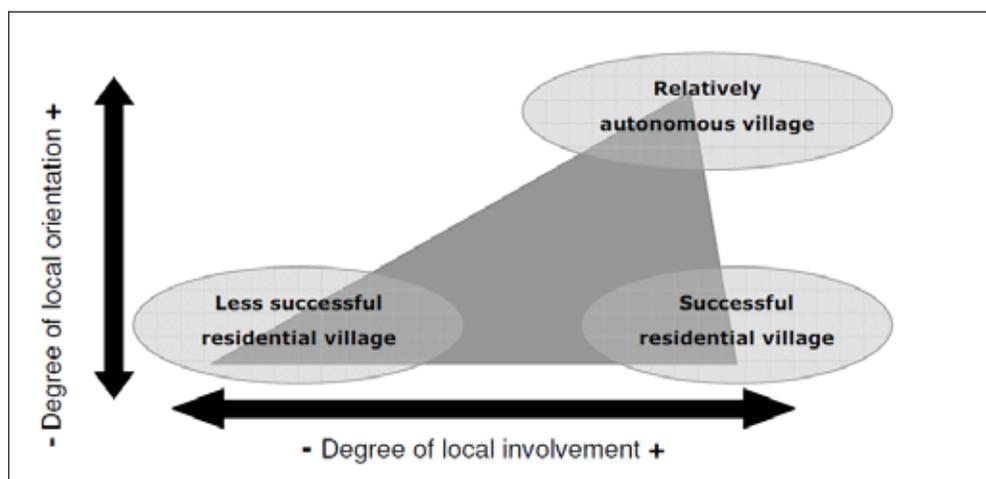


Fig.2: The relationship between local orientation (vertical axis) and local involvement (horizontal axis) at village level (triangle) and types of villages (axes of the triangle).

At first glance these differences in local involvement of residential villages are related to the quality of the residential function and the socio-economic status developed by the village within the regional housing market. Villages that are attractive on the regional market seem more successful in developing (new) forms of social cohesion that are not self-evident related to local orientation. This fits with the idea presented above that villages that are able to develop with success a residential function have also more success with respect to the development of local initiatives.

## **5. Conclusion**

Traditional, relatively autonomous, or closed villages in the Netherlands are characterised by local social cohesion or local involvement that is closely and self-evidently related to the local orientation of their inhabitants. This local orientation is reflected in the relatively local life path and day path of the inhabitants. Local social cohesion or local involvement act as social capital in these traditional villages because it contributes to important values like the quality of life and a positive attitude towards community care. However, this social capital does not seem to provide a firm base for the future, because social cohesion in this type of village contributes more to quality of life and less to social vitality.

Relatively autonomous villages are engaged in an ongoing transformation into villages with a dominant residential function. This transformation is characterised by a constant decline in the local orientation at individual and community levels. This has significant consequences for local social cohesion and social capital. In villages that are successful in developing a residential function, local involvement is also high and acts as social capital that contributes to community care and new local initiatives. The perspective for the development of bridging relations and social vitality appears to be better in this type of community. This is probably due to the fact that they are more successful in attracting residents with large social networks.

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## **SOCIAL CAPITAL IN RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE NETHERLANDS**

### **Summary**

The article presents evidence from two surveys carried out in the Netherlands about social capital in rural areas and small villages. After an introduction of the main concepts and the policy context of both projects, the development of Dutch villages after 1970 is conceptualized as a transformation of autonomous villages into residential villages.

The first survey was carried out at national level and investigates the relationship between social cohesion and the quality of life and vitality in the Dutch countryside. The second survey was carried out at local level and investigates the relationship between quality of life, social cohesion and community care in eight small villages in a rural part of the Netherlands. It aims to identify patterns of social cohesion at village level.

The conclusions of both projects underline the existence of local involvement in traditional villages in relation to a relatively strong local orientation and the existence of social capital in these villages. However, the transformations that are taking place in Dutch villages raise doubts as to whether such social capital will be useful for future developments. Knowledge about the development of social cohesion and social capital in residential villages can contribute to knowledge that is useful for future policy development with respect to small villages.