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## Climate change, environmental NGOs and public awareness in the Netherlands: Perceptions and reality

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Banu Bayramoğlu Lise and Wietze Lise  
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# **Climate Change, Environmental NGOs and Public Awareness in the Netherlands: Perceptions and Reality**

## **Summary**

The climate change issue has been widely studied. To add to this literature, this paper focuses on the role of environmental non-governmental organisations in the Netherlands in raising public awareness. Besides, their role in relation to the Dutch government's climate policies is researched as well. The findings of this research indicate that, with respect to the climate change issue, environmental NGOs in the Netherlands may not always be active and systematic, as it is generally perceived, in raising public awareness and putting pressure on the Dutch government for implementing the targeted measures at the national level.

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## **CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENTAL NGOs and PUBLIC AWARENESS in the NETHERLANDS: PERCEPTIONS and REALITY**

**The climate change issue has been widely studied. To add to this literature, this paper focuses on the role of environmental non-governmental organizations in the Netherlands in raising public awareness. Besides, their role in relation to the Dutch government's climate policies is researched as well. The findings of this research indicate that, with respect to the climate change issue, environmental NGOs in the Netherlands may not always be active and systematic, as it is generally perceived, in raising public awareness and putting pressure on the Dutch government for implementing the targeted measures at the national level.**

In 1993 and 1995 the water in the Waal in the Netherlands reached such extreme high levels that the river dykes nearly collapsed. Moreover, substantial areas in the province Limburg were flooded due to a high flux of water in the Muese. A substantial increase of precipitation and earlier melting of glaciers in the Alps (only relevant for the Waal) were blamed for this. Consequently, a link with the climate change issue was hinted at.

Deteriorating ecological conditions on our planet create significant threats and security challenges for the whole international system today. Among the various environmental problems, climate change is a very complex global issue which requires further scientific assessments and more progressive international cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Creating public awareness and enhancing environmental friendly behaviours and life styles are fundamental and crucial to overcome such environmental problems like climate change. Environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS) the Netherlands, the Dutch government and

Dutch scientist agree that extreme events like these two times almost flooding situations in the Netherlands are very effective in raising public awareness of climate change.

Since the early 1970s ENGOS have been proliferating steadily.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that the ENGOS can keep the pressure up by enhancing environmental awareness, governments at all levels have been motivated to take action against environmental problems.

Within the developed world, the Netherlands is a country which displays a high level of environmental awareness, sensitivity and green consciousness.<sup>3</sup> The Dutch are assumed to be in favour of environmental friendly life-styles, well-integrated into the environmental political processes and policy making. In this context, ENGOS in the Netherlands are also considered as players which are well-integrated into the dynamics of environmental politics. ENGOS have more than 2 million members in the Netherlands and a continuous dialogue with the government. In addition, climate change appears to pose great risks to a densely populated country like the Netherlands where about half of the land is located below the sea level and where the drainage capacity of its main rivers can not be easily extended. Dutch have long battled against the sea and issues such as sea level rise have been on the agenda in the Netherlands for centuries. Concerning the stance of ENGOS towards the climate change problem, the general perception is that they play a significant role in raising public awareness at the domestic level and they are active at the international level.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, all these features of the Dutch context make it interesting and worthwhile to study ENGO attitudes towards climate change in the Netherlands, and it may provide us with more insight about such actors role in environmental issues. Arts (1999), for instance, studied the influence of NGOs on the climate convention and found that NGOs have a limited influence on policy making.

Terms such as ‘pressure group’ or ‘interest group’ are commonly used to describe NGOs. John McCormick (1993: 132) uses the terms ‘interest group’ and ‘nongovernmental organizations’ interchangeably and defines them as “private bodies organized for the purpose of directly or indirectly influencing public policy either on behalf of their members or on behalf of what they perceive to be the broader public interest”. This definition also applies to the ENGOS covered in our interviews. Also, for the purpose of this paper we define environmental public awareness raising as a process of information supply through various means and instruments with the aim of creating changes in knowledge, attitude and behaviour among the public in relation to the environment and environment-friendly life styles.

The outline of the paper is as follows. The first Section outlines the followed research methodology. The ability and functions of ENGOS in the Netherlands to raise public awareness, the first research question, is discussed in Section 2. The link between ENGOS and the Dutch Government, the second research question, is addressed in Section 3. The last Section concludes.

## **1. Framework and Methodology**

In this research the key method used was semi-structured interviews supplemented with a literature survey (see also: Bayramoğlu and Gupta, 1999). This method is also known as the stakeholder approach. Stakeholder analysis collects data about the stakeholders (persons, institutions, groups) regarding a particular research project or program and obtains information about their perceptions, actions, behaviours, experiences and thoughts with respect to the specific phenomenon (Burgoyne, 1994). Moreover, we deal with the

perceptions, experiences and ideas of different stakeholders with respect to awareness by the Dutch public concerning the climate change issue.

Representatives of national (5) and international (2) ENGOs in the Netherlands and Belgium, the Dutch government (6) and academic institutions (8) were contacted to respond to relevant open-ended questions. While some interviews were performed by phone, most interviews were done face-to-face and recorded on tape, in order to make sure to get the view of the stakeholders right. The respondents were chosen according to the criteria that they had substantial experience in climate change and were well-informed about the issue. Twenty of the interviews were conducted in the Netherlands whereas one interview was conducted in Belgium. Table 1 shows which institutes were contacted in the interviews. In some institutes more than one person was contacted.

**Table 1 Contacted institutes in the interviews**

Groups	Institutes
Government	VROM, EZ V&W, (RIVM, VU as former climate negotiators)
ENGO	FOE Netherlands, Greenpeace Netherlands, IUCN Netherlands, NCDO, WNF
International ENGO	Climate Network Europe, Greenpeace international
Universities	Amsterdam (VU and UvA), Nijmegen, Utrecht, Eindhoven

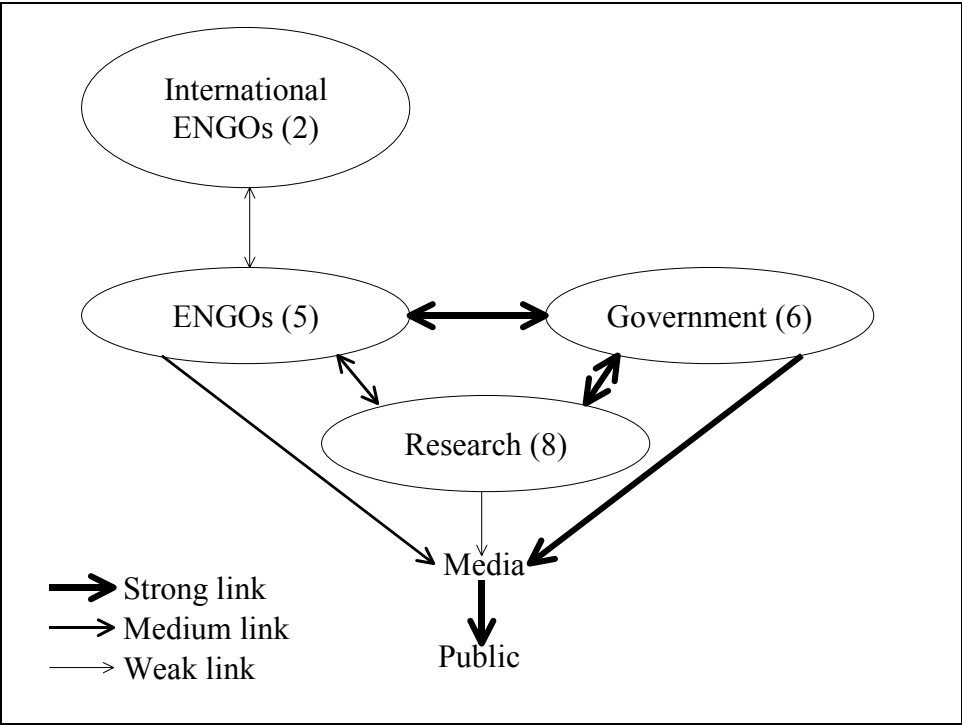
The respondents were asked 5 questions related to the role of ENGOs in raising public awareness in the climate change issue in the Netherlands: whether they were effective in doing so, which instruments they used, how they motivate households to save energy,

what is the level of public awareness, and whether ENGOs should be involved more. Consecutively, 5 other questions were posed on the influence of ENGOs on the Dutch government in raising public awareness in the climate change issue: whether the Dutch government has effective instruments, do these differ from ENGO's instruments, is the Dutch government linked with ENGOs, what is the role of mass media, and which factors influence people's perceptions with respect to the climate change issue. Finally, 5 more questions were posed on the role of ENGOs in the climate negotiations: whether ENGO's lobby is stronger than raising public concern, is there a role of ENGOs in the negotiations, do ENGOs communicate 'loopholes' to the delegation during negotiations, is there sufficient pressure of ENGOs on the government to go for the most stringent measures, and is there a link between local concerns and global cooperation.

The linkages between the pursued groups during the interviews are presented graphically in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Linkages between pursued groups in the society during the interviews**



Note: The size of the arrows represents the magnitude of the links, as indicated by the interviews.

Based on Figure 1, we can identify two crucial actors related to raising public awareness, namely NGOs and the Government. The interaction between these two actors can be studied by constructing a game theoretic model. On the one hand NGOs decide on how much pressure (by demonstrations, lobbying, etc.) to put on the Government in order to push them towards stringent climate policies. On the other hand, the government decides on the amount of funding to provide to NGOs. Table 2 shows a probable payoff matrix for the public awareness game, where the payoffs are picked illustratively.

**Table 2 Payoff matrix for the public awareness game.**

		Government:	
		High funding	Low funding
NGO:	Put lot of pressure	3,3	1,4
	Inform (little pressure)	4,1	0,0

The interviews indicate that NGOs in the Netherlands are closely linked to the government and that they do not put a lot of pressure on the government, while a substantial amount of funding originates from the government.<sup>5</sup> Funding by the government can be regarded as an incentive to an NGO to keep the state well informed about environmental problems. In an open and consensus-seeking society, as in the Netherlands, the government funds in hope for an informing and cooperative attitude of NGOs, who do not always ask for more, by continuously putting pressure. Hence, the lower left corner is the current equilibrium. The top right corner is also an equilibrium, which represents for instance the situation in Turkey or India, where NGOs are hardly obtaining funding from the state, while they put a lot of pressure. In this case, the state of environment is worse off as compared to the previous equilibrium.

Of course, NGOs could increase their pressure on the government, which is in fact also confirmed by the interviews. Then the game would move towards the top left corner, which is actually the most favourable case from an environmental point of view. This is, however, not a stable equilibrium, and the government may want to move on to the top right corner, which is the second equilibrium of the game.

This analysis so far holds for the one-shot game. In reality the game between ENGOs and the government may as well be repeated over and over again. Then we know from the Folk theorem (Fudenberg and Maskin, 1986) that the top left corner can be an equilibrium as well, provided that the players are sufficiently patient.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. The role of ENGOs in raising public awareness about climate change in the Netherlands**

Our interview responses show that there are some respondents who perceive ENGOs to be active and functional in raising awareness on the climate change issue in the Netherlands. For instance, a government representative conveyed his opinion by saying that,

“ENGOS had a strong impact on opinions on climate change. I think they’ve been effective in influencing individual opinions strongly.”<sup>7</sup>

ENGOS give some priority to the climate change problem, but according to themselves, their activities display some limitations. The following paragraphs shed more light on how the public awareness topic has been handled and managed by ENGOs in the Netherlands.

The climate issue was initially brought up by the Dutch scientific community in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> Especially around the early and mid-1980s various scientific efforts took place for the purpose of understanding the problem more clearly.<sup>9</sup> During that period many ENGOs were more concerned with other issues such as acid rain and the nuclear energy debate rather than climate change. In fact, the ENGOs wanted to keep the climate problem as low profile as possible, as they tried to avoid any argument in favour of carbon free nuclear energy. The climate change issue began to enter the environmental political agenda of the Dutch government in the late 1980s. In 1989, with the publication of the

National Environmental Policy Plan (NEPP), the climate change issue was officially put on the political agenda of the government. During the late-1980s, the Dutch government adopted an ambitious and progressive stance with respect to climate change.

Public campaigns addressing citizens on climate change were initially launched by the Dutch government in the Netherlands. This involvement has been systematic in the Netherlands since 1990.<sup>10</sup> Also, the government conducts systematic research related with the level of citizens' involvement in addressing climate change.<sup>11</sup>

Following government's initiatives, ENGOs also started to become more interested in climate change during the late 1980s and their concern regarding the climate problem obtained momentum in 1989. For instance, the Friends of the Earth (FOE) Netherlands initiated their first climate campaign in January 1991.<sup>12</sup> Along with the aim of increasing public concern, the focus was also on the local governments and groups, and various topics related to climate change were addressed within the broad context of this campaign. Also, several workshops were organized and numerous brochures were distributed with the purpose of informing and educating the Dutch people about climate change. Finally, the climate change campaign ended in 1994 with a boat running through the country for about 4 months, visiting 42 cities in the Netherlands. FOE is planning to have further climate related activities in the future. They find the role of media very important in raising public awareness. The organization has no substantial data about the level of public awareness or citizen involvement in addressing climate change. However, they think that the level is not high in the Netherlands.

Interviews with FOE indicate two major points: campaigning is expensive and environmental issues are no longer a top-priority for Dutch people. The Dutch public is

more concerned about crime and safety problems in the Netherlands, than environmental issues like climate change.

Greenpeace Netherlands launched a climate campaign which lasted for 6 years. During the campaign, Greenpeace Netherlands used leaflets, brochures, videotapes, television spots, and presentations for the public. They tried to educate people and give information about impacts of climate change, and by offering alternatives like solar, wind and bio energy. The interview with Greenpeace Netherlands indicates that the Dutch public is not highly aware of the climate problem. They neither have data about the impact of their public campaigns on the Dutch public nor research about the level of citizens' involvement in the issue and their answer on this matter is:

“ It is a difficult question. You can never know... Sometimes you are very disappointed, for instance people do not know the difference between climate change and ozone depletion”.

They think that only 10% have some knowledge on the issue, and the Dutch people do not want to change their life styles, moreover, the energy demand increases at a rate of 2% per year. Another important insight obtained from Greenpeace Netherlands is that scientific uncertainty over the climate issue makes it difficult for them to create a clear line of communication towards the public:

“Since climate change is not proven, there are still uncertainties about that, it is difficult to influence the public. One says that it is sure and the other says that it is not sure, therefore people are confused about it. We must act very carefully. The truth is the only thing that helps.”

Some ENGOs conducted campaigns jointly with the Dutch government as well. For

instance, World-Wide Fund for Nature Netherlands (WNF) and FOE Netherlands collaborated in the ‘greenhouse project’ of the 1991-1992 period as well as in the networking campaign of the 1992-1995 period (Ministry VROM, 1998). Furthermore, in early 1997, WNF, the government and energy distribution companies decided to coordinate their public information campaigns. The aim was to enhance the impact of communication to the public. However, this campaign did not last long and soon it came to an end due to the fact that the information officer left the job.<sup>13</sup> WNF also cooperates with the Dutch energy distribution companies in the ‘green electricity’ project, with the purpose of raising public awareness and influencing the government’s policy on the climate change issue. The interviewee describes their way of dealing with climate issue as follows:

“The way we work may very much surprise you, we work by business partnerships... We cooperate with the business sector... If these companies build very efficient houses, than the other companies in the sector will see and learn from it. We use it to raise public awareness because it generates a lot of publicity.”

The interview with WNF indicates that this organization is the only ENGO in the Netherlands which has a systematic approach towards the climate issue. The interviewee says that

“My general impression is that all NGOs have picked up this issue but at the same time the campaigns had limited success. And I would say that WNF has a systematic and consequent approach to this issue. WNF is in favour of consensus building in the Dutch society.”

“My analysis is that a major characteristic of climate change is that the solution of

this problem requires very long term consensus in the society. And the traditional approach of the NGOs is in a way not really adequate to generate such a consensus. Greenpeace is used to win conflicts, they are good in conflicts and fights, but not in bringing consensus.”

About the level of awareness in the Netherlands WNF agrees that the level is not enough and the people do not know anything about the solutions.

The Netherlands Society for Nature and Environment is another ENGO which dealt with the climate change issue occasionally. However, currently this organization is no longer particularly active regarding the climate issue.<sup>14</sup>

These activities of well-known ENGOs indicate that climate change is given some priority. At the same time the interview responses also indicate that there are certain limitations that restrain effective communication to the public. The following results can be derived:

- ENGOs in the Netherlands are not systematically involved in raising public awareness; and the most of ENGOs do not have systematic climate campaigns.
- ENGOs lack data about the influence of their campaigns on the public.<sup>15</sup>
- The level of public awareness in the Netherlands about the climate problem is still limited – although might be regarded as high compared to other countries.<sup>16</sup>

The observed limitations of ENGOs in raising public awareness in climate change seem stem from two basic factors. First of all, translating scientific knowledge for the purpose of environmental awareness raising is a complex process. This process becomes even more complicated in a global issue like climate change which is still surrounded by a

substantial amount of scientific uncertainty. In addition to this, climate change is a problem with long-term consequences and it does not appear to have an imminent effect on the Dutch people's everyday lives, which make it even more difficult to create concern and behavioural alterations among the public. All these complexities might have played a discouraging role for ENGOs in getting involved in public awareness and the climate issue in a systematic manner.

Secondly, public awareness campaigns are usually expensive and require substantial financial resources. Although the Dutch government increasingly subsidizes the environmental groups in the Netherlands, ENGOs still mention that reaching public requires substantial funding. Also, since the 1980s the government has been dealing closely with raising public awareness in climate change. Due to this fact most of the ENGOs might have assumed that the problem will be taken care of by the government. If a country's government deals with an environmental problem, puts it onto its formal agenda and commits itself to awareness raising, then it is more likely that local ENGOs focus on issues which they consider as neglected. Accordingly, ENGOs might not have perceived climate change as a topic with high priority for them.

### **3. The ENGO-Dutch government relationship in climate change**

In a domestic context, ENGOs are assumed to function well in open societies like the Netherlands, where the structure of the system and democratic mechanisms enable interactions and feedback among the government and other components of the system. In such a political system where flexibility and openness prevails, integration of actors into agenda-building and policy-making processes is quite feasible and practical. However, if



the pressure from environmental groups ceases, the governments may often be reluctant to give the issues priority that they deserve or they might be reluctant to implement the targeted measures to address problems. This appears to be the case in the Netherlands with respect to the climate change issue.

The interviews on the ENGO-government relationship concerning the climate change problem, indicate that some of the respondents from the scientific community believe that the Dutch government has had a progressive stance towards the climate threat, and it has been ahead of other countries in addressing the climate issue. Thus, they do not observe a need for ENGOs in the Netherlands to put more pressure on the government.<sup>17</sup> Some respondents from the government believe that ENGOs exert enough pressure on the Dutch government.<sup>18</sup> A researcher states that the Dutch government has a progressive stance already, so there is no need for more ENGO pressure.<sup>19</sup> However, a few respondents from ENGOs believe that the pressure is not enough, while they believe that they cannot do more than what they have been doing.

When the history of climate change politics is reviewed, one can observe that initially the Netherlands maintained a progressive attitude towards the issue in the international arena. For instance, regarding the establishment of international legal mechanisms over climate change, the Dutch government was quite active and ambitious as compared to the other countries.

According to the Dutch National Environmental Policy Plan Plus (NEPP+) which was published in 1989, it was decided that carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions were to be stabilized by 1994/1995 with respect to 1989 levels (Ministry of VROM, 1989). In addition to that, the Dutch government decided that the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions should be reduced

by 3-5% by the year 2000 (Ibid.). This would require an energy efficiency improvement of at least 1.7% between 1990 and 2000 in the Netherlands (Green Plan Center, 1998).

Nevertheless, in spite of the Dutch policy initiatives and comprehensive planning on climate change, the 1994/1995 targets have not been met and adequate measures could not be implemented. This shows the discrepancy between the government's intentions and what it actually does. Regarding this matter, a Dutch researcher commented:

“The Dutch society has a very high level of paying public attention to things but they do nothing... They are telling to the European Union and foreign countries ‘you should do something about climate change’, but they are not actually doing anything themselves.”<sup>20</sup>

This seems to originate from a conflict of interest between the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) and the Ministry of Economic Affairs (EZ) concerning climate policy.<sup>21</sup> While VROM is mainly responsible for the environmental policy in the Netherlands, EZ deals with energy and industrial issues as well. The latter is clearly connected to the climate problem, out of which a conflict of interest arises. While VROM supports CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction, EZ argues that the climate problem is still too uncertain for policy making and therefore prefers to focus on energy efficiency. As a result there are at date no carbon taxes in the Netherlands, while there is a regulating energy tax (REB) to achieve a higher energy efficiency. The discrepancies between these two ministries might have emerged as the main obstacle against the successful implementation of the Kyoto targets for the Netherlands, which aims at a 6% reduction in the period 2008-2012 with respect to 1990 levels.

As a result of an integrated approach towards environmental policy making in the

Netherlands, ENGOs are able to monitor whether the Dutch government has been successfully implementing the required measures. ENGOs can also monitor the implementation of voluntary agreements between the government and industry. However, until now there is no evidence that ENGOs have actively and effectively put pressure on the government for implementing the required measures since CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have been increasing. For instance a representative of an ENGO says that

“maybe we have to put more pressure. Sometimes we are loosing and winning the arguments.”<sup>22</sup>

Another response to the question on the ENGO influence on government policies is as follows:

“I think we have influence but the industry has an impact and influence too. They constitute a bigger lobby, they are more influential...When the people from the industry say that we are loosing the race with Belgium and Germany, this has an impact on the government’s policy. They [industry] have a better lobby than the ENGOs.”<sup>23</sup>

The basic factors that cause the lack of enough ENGO pressure for implementation of climate change targets might be related with the Dutch government’s relatively big influence in the international arena which made ENGOs more reluctant to put pressure on the government, ENGO’s financial concerns, and the scientific uncertainty over the climate issue that precludes a determined approach towards the issue.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This paper has focused on ENGO in the Netherlands and the climate change issue in the Netherlands. The following basic results can be derived from the research with respect to the climate change issue. Environmental NGOs in the Netherlands may not always be active and systematic, as it is generally perceived, in raising public awareness and putting pressure on the Dutch government for implementing the targeted measures at the national level.

While ENGOs are definitely valuable actors and integral parts of many environmental political processes, the global issue of climate change appears to create new challenges that are not easy to tackle. Scientific uncertainty as the lack of clarity on long-term impacts of climate change emerge as impediments that might have discouraged a high-level ENGO involvement in the issue and precluded a clear line of communication towards the public. Also, lack of financial resources and the idea that the Dutch government tackles the problem, might have avoided the ENGOs from putting further efforts into the issue.

ENGOS' role in climate change can be enhanced in some aspects, as ENGOs are sometimes better equipped than the government to deal with the public. Moreover, they work by the grace of financial contributions from the public, representing a closer link with the public than the government. Therefore, for VROM, ENGOs can be instrumental for obtaining public support for taking action towards the climate problem.

An analysis with a game theoretic model between ENGOs and the government sheds light on the discrepancy between the tension of ENGOs to put more pressure on the government and the amount of funding to ENGOs on the other hand. From an

environmental perspective, it would be most efficient if a situation can be achieved where ENGOs are free to put pressure and where the government provides them incentives to do so.

The concern over global issues like climate change can be considered as the most recent phase in environmental protection. Moving from the local issues towards more global issues requires further explorations and adjustments in connection with the mechanisms by which the global problems can be addressed. It takes time for national ENGOs to get acquainted with the dynamics of this process and to broaden experience, expertise and networks on such issues.

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**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of the global climate change cooperation see Bayramoğlu (1997).
- <sup>2</sup> Regarding the roles of ENGOS in the international arena, see Princen and Finger (1994).
- <sup>3</sup> Comprehensive long-range planning and consensus building in the society have been regarded as fundamental principles of Dutch environmental policy; therefore, involvement of different players in policy-making is regarded as crucial (Ministry of VROM, 1989; Bartels, 1995: 5–6; De Jongh, 1998).
- <sup>4</sup> This view is evident from the results of twenty-one in-depth interviews. The interviews show that the majority of the respondents consider ENGOS as important players in climate change at both national and international levels.
- <sup>5</sup> Of course, some ENGOS also obtain charity money from their members, which could also be an important factor, but for ease of exposition we refrain from such an extension.
- <sup>6</sup> More precisely, if the discount factor is larger than  $\frac{4-3}{4-1} = 0.33$ , the top left corner can be rationalised as an outcome in the infinitely repeated game (Lise, 1997).
- <sup>7</sup> Interview 14.
- <sup>8</sup> Concerning the agenda-setting process and the role of the scientific groups in the Netherlands in the climate issue, see Dinkelman (1995). Interviews 8, 13, 19 and 20 confirm the view that the climate change issue was brought up by scientists.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview 19.
- <sup>10</sup> See for instance Ministry of VROM (1998). In this document, the communicative efforts of the Dutch government concerning climate change are divided into six phases.
- <sup>11</sup> See for instance Bartels (1995) and Ministry of VROM (1997).
- <sup>12</sup> Interview 2.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview 10.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Interviews 2 and 4.
- <sup>16</sup> Interviews 2, 3, 4 and 13.
- <sup>17</sup> Interview 12, 16, 17.
- <sup>18</sup> Interview 7.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview 18.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview 15.
- <sup>21</sup> Interviews 8, 10, 11 and 19.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview 2.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview 2.



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- (liii) This paper was circulated at the International Conference on “Climate Policy – Do We Need a New Approach?”, jointly organised by Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, Stanford University and Venice International University, Isola di San Servolo, Venice, September 6-8, 2001
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