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Discussion paper

Right or just? Assessing and addressing social impacts in Dutch road planning

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Introduction

Are the opportunities for influencing the planning of infrastructure projects in the Netherlands spread evenly or is a richer neighbourhood better off than a poorer neighbourhood? An explorative study investigated this crucial question (Vos, 2020). The study shows that, overall, there is little statistical evidence that neighbourhoods with a higher socioeconomic status significantly influence infrastructure projects in time, money or scope. Nonetheless, socioeconomic status seems to play a role in the process of public participation and thus at the individual infrastructure project level. Uneven opportunities for local residents and therewith a misbalance in the positive and negative effects of a project imply an unjust situation for residents with a lower socioeconomic status. To prevent this, fairness, inclusiveness and communication are key in the participation process (Vos, 2020). In 2022 the new Environment and Planning Act will take effect in the Netherlands. In this new act, participation has a more prominent role, compared to the current legislation. However, how the participation process should be designed is not determined in detail in the act. Additionally, the current process of public involvement may not be as inclusive as hoped; are highly-educated citizens more prominent in the participation process? In addition, the benefits and burdens of a project may not always be distributed evenly. More fundamentally, how 'just' is such distribution? This is essential, as in social justice theory it is argued that participation is key for a just city (e.g. Harvey, 2003; Lefebvre, 1996; Marcuse et al., 2009). Openness to, and inclusion of the interests of, *all* residents is considered to be of increasing importance. Is this an (missed) opportunity for a more inclusive EIA in the Netherlands?

Road planning and EIA in the Netherlands

The construction of main road infrastructure in the Netherlands is often controversial and complex (Arts, 2007, Arts et al., 2016). Throughout the years, the number of instruments to test and integrate projects has increased. Participation plays more and more an important role in this system. Many authors argued that public participation can lead to a qualitatively better decision and more support for a project (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011; Breukers & Wolsink, 2007; Woltjer, 2002). Additionally, Berman (2016) stressed that residents have knowledge of the local environment, which can add value to a project. It was added by other authors that local knowledge enhances social justice in a project (Corburn, 2003; Gulakov et al., 2020; Vanclay, 2003). Infrastructure projects impact residents' daily living environment on the long term. For this reason, it is important that they are heard in the decision-making process. Different guidelines, like the Dutch 'Code of Societal Participation', give guidance to the participation process for the planning processes of national road infrastructure projects. Next to this, the input of residents is guaranteed via procedures to voice opinions, and is ensured in EIA and other legislation. Despite increasing attention for participation, such processes sometimes appear to be 'talking shops' (Reed, 2008). Stakeholders are involved too late in the process or they perceive their input as not to have an influence, leading to a 'consultation fatigue' (Burton et al. 2004; Hamersma et al., 2018; Olander, 2006; Molwus, 2014). Additionally, the Dutch National Ombudsman (2019) concluded that participation processes are not always experienced as inclusive as hoped. Also, a recurring picture is the so-called 'participation elite', consisting of mainly higher educated, older men that have time to read the plans and participate (Grillo et al. 2010; Faith-Ell & Jacobsson, 2006; Hamersma et al. 2016; Vos, 2020). Is low attendance and interest of residents a result of ignorance and lack of information, or do project organizations put too little effort in reaching out to (all) residents? Here, socioeconomic status could play a role as well.

Participation as an empty shell?

Participation processes in infrastructure projects are organized differently for each project. Some projects suffice with the legal minimum, maybe complemented with a few information meetings, while others organize elaborate design sessions with residents. The setup of the participation process

influences who participates and what opinions are heard. A retired, higher educated man may have plenty of time to visit an information meeting and prepare questions, while at the same time a lower educated, single mother might not be able to attend because she couldn't find a babysitter. The way participation is set up in projects seems to be strongly dependent on the project organization and stakeholder managers involved, as there is much freedom within the guidelines (Kenniscentrum Infomil, n.d.A; Kenniscentrum Infomil n.d.B; Hamersma et al., 2018; Vos, 2020). On top of that, each project informs, and communicates to, residents in a different way. For example, via the local newspaper, digital newsletters or social media. Different means of communication reach different groups of residents. Elderly might be more likely to read the local newspaper, while younger residents read information on social media. Focussing on one means of communication could easily exclude resident groups. Attendance of only specific groups, freedom in the organization of the participation process, and a variety in means of communication to residents, could lead to an incomplete view on the opinions and interests of the residents. For this reason, opinions and interests of residents with a lower socioeconomic status might be insufficiently heard (Vos, 2020).

Survival of the fittest

The influence of socioeconomic status of residents can be seen in different ways during a project and the participation process. Often, residents with a higher education or income are better informed on the project and their rights. Additionally, they tend to have a better network. For instance, having 'short lines' to the local politics or politicians. This group of residents generally has a higher interest in the project, enhancing the chance of active participation. Residents with a higher socioeconomic status also tend to be more assertive and empowered. This way, such residents can change the discussion and set the agenda of a project. As a result, residents with a higher socioeconomic status could experience more benefits of participation as opposed to residents with a lower socioeconomic status – their effort pays off better. Residents with a lower socioeconomic status could be disadvantaged: they might be less equipped to voice their opinion and to actively participate in a project as a result of the used instruments. For instance, how to officially voice an opinion when you are low-literate? Digital participation requires access to specific technologies that not everyone has. Elderly might not have the skills to read a newsletter via email, other groups might not have access to a computer. Also, residents with lower socioeconomic status could be out of sight of the project organisation and not easily reached by the means of communication used (Vos, 2020).

To minimize the influence of socioeconomic status and assure a just project, stakeholder management and the participation process should be designed in such a way that everyone is able to be informed and make themselves heard if they want. Residents with a lower socioeconomic status should not be disadvantaged by their education or income. To assure that every resident has opportunities to participate, special attention should be given to participation early in the project process, a broad range of communication channels and the integration of local knowledge and wishes. Additionally, in stakeholder involvement special attention should be given to communication, fairness and inclusiveness. Next to this, there is a chance for the instruments of impact assessment, like EIA, to include social effects in a project (Vos, 2020).

An opportunity for EIA?

One of the objectives of EIA is to incorporate the environment into the decision-making process (Glasson & Therivel, 2013). After all, the environment cannot speak for itself. In this line of reasoning, social impacts should be incorporated in decision-making as well. The sections above show that not all residents are able to make themselves heard or they are disadvantaged compared to the residents with a higher socioeconomic status. By increasingly incorporating social impacts into EIA, residents will get a more prominent place in decision-making. Thereby, the impacts of a project on residents with lower socioeconomic status, which do not always come forward in participation, are incorporated (Vos, 2020).

In the Netherlands, there is increasing attention for the wish to broaden EIA to include factors like sustainability, health and social impacts and inclusiveness as well (a.o. Artz & Maronier, 2021; Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, n.d.). In many other countries, assessment of social impacts is an obligatory step in the EIA process (Esteves et al., 2021; Vanclay, 2020). In the Netherlands, this is not (yet) required or common practice, but some first steps are taken. A social impact report could be of importance, because it can enhance support for a project. Additionally,

information about social impacts can provide insight into positive and negative effects and measures that could be taken to enhance or limit the effects. Local knowledge of residents is input, and participation plays an important role with a representative reflection of the residents. A way to incorporate social impacts could be by introducing Social Impact Assessment (SIA), as it analyses, monitors and manages social consequences and changes due to a project. Early implementation of SIA can help to increase feelings of involvement of residents (Vanclay et al., 2015). Another option could be the implementation of Community Values Assessment (CVA – Stolp et al., 2002), which can be seen as a specific elaboration of SIA for infrastructure planning. Such assessment gives insight into how an infrastructure project influences the local environment as seen from the residents' perspective. By the CVA, impacts on residents are then embedded in decision-making as well (Stolp et al., 2002).

The instruments SIA and/or CVA, next to or as part of EIA, can show how projects influence residents with different backgrounds or socioeconomic status. In this way, the disadvantages and benefits of a project can be better balanced. However, the implementation of another instrument next to EIA will increase the workload for projects and complexity of planning. For this reason, it is relevant to explore options to include CVA and/or SIA *in* the existing Dutch EIA system – for instance, by an additional chapter in the EIA report on social impacts and how they are dealt with. This way, social impacts could be better considered next to the conventionally researched topics like water, air, noise and spatial quality.

Conclusions

In Dutch infrastructure projects, there are increasingly efforts to take into account wishes and interests of residents. However, for an important group of residents, participation is perceived to be an empty shell. Often participation is dominated by a small group of residents who (are able to) make themselves heard. On top of that, such residents with a higher socioeconomic status are often better equipped to influence a project; the opportunities for participation are not always evenly distributed. Although literature is still scarce, there are indications that this is not only the case in the Netherlands (see a.o. Bradley et al., 2008; Faith-Ell & Jacobsson, 2006.) Residents with a lower socioeconomic status should not be disadvantaged by this. The implementation of social impact studies into the existing EIA system can provide insight into negative and positive impacts. Take these aspects into account and give the interest of *all* residents a more prominent role in decision-making. The implementation of the new Environment & Planning Act offers momentum to more explicitly secure a careful participation process and expand the scope of the Dutch EIA system with social themes. To ensure just stakeholder involvement, communication, fairness, and inclusiveness are key. This way, a project EIA is not only right but also more inclusive and just to all residents. It will be interesting to see how this theme will develop in the Netherlands and to place this in context with international reflection.

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