

# Summary

## Conflicts surrounding sustainability plans close to home

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Original title:

Barstjes in de lokale gemeenschap

978 90 377 0968 1

## Summary, conclusions and concluding remarks

The purpose of this study is to find an answer to the question: *Which factors influence the course of controversies between citizens in relation to plans to make the living environment more sustainable?* This summary presents the answer to this question and reflects on the broader lessons that can be drawn from this study.

### S.1 Approach

A fair amount of research has already been carried out on controversies surrounding the drive for more sustainability, including in the Netherlands. The bulk of that research focuses on conflicts between citizens and companies or public bodies. Given the growing volume of sustainability projects in people's immediate living environment, combined with the growing division of opinions on this theme (Den Ridder et al. 2019b), it is also useful to learn more about the tensions that arise between citizens. Those tensions are more likely to increase than reduce in the coming years, given the challenges imposed by the climate crisis and the threats to biodiversity, as well as other spatial planning issues facing the Netherlands.

There are many ways of studying those tensions. Here, we have opted to focus on local conflicts, as these offer an opportunity to learn in a manageable setting about the many factors that play a role in these kinds of conflicts, as well as to shed light on those factors from a variety of perspectives. This qualitative study comprises three case studies, each built around a local conflict: a conflict surrounding plans to create a linking heathland corridor at Hoorneboeg in the *Goois Natuurreservaat* nature reserve, with a view to strengthening biodiversity in the area; a solar farm in the village of Finsterwolde in the north-eastern province of Groningen; and an energy park in the Rijnenburg and Reijerscop polders in the province of Utrecht.

Since the aim of this study was to do more than simply gain an insight into what people think and do, we opted for a constructivist approach (Smaling 2016; Walker 2015) in which the emphasis is on the meaning people assign to events and experiences. This approach is of particular importance in a study of this kind because the meaning given by stakeholders to different aspects of a controversy colours their perspective and therefore contributes to the ultimate evolution of the controversy. The study homes in on the question of where that meaning comes from and then relates this to (local) contexts. Assigning meaning, and questioning the meaning given to a phenomenon by others, is moreover one of the few ways that citizens have of exerting influence (Benford & Snow 2000), and therefore ties in well with the theme of this study.

The study uses the framing approach to interpret the findings (Dewulf et al. 2009; Lewicki et al. 2003). Broadly speaking, frames can be described as the 'windows' through which people view the world, with different individuals giving more weight to some aspects than other people, or assigning a different meaning to particular events. Framing is the process

in which frames are created; it often takes place in interaction with others, for example in a conflict situation. Emotions play an important role here, although they are not infrequently ignored in studies of framing (Buijs & Lawrence 2013; Verhoeven & Duyvendak 2015; Verhoeven & Metzke 2018). This study investigated which frames could be identified in the three case studies in relation to the following aspects of the controversies: 1. the identity of the stakeholders; 2. the issue; 3. the process; and 4. the relationships with other stakeholders and the role played by argumentation and emotions.

Framing also has a pronounced persuasive element: particularly in conflict situations, people often try to persuade others to see the situation in the same way as they themselves do. We are concerned here with the stories that people tell about the conflict and the different factors that play a role in this. To gain a good impression of this aspect, elements of the narrative approach were also used in this study (Merkus et al. 2014).

## S.2 Answering the research question

### S.2.1 Conclusions about differences between the cases

Case studies were selected for the study which differed from each other on relevant factors. We sought to ascertain whether the factors cited above did indeed influence the course of the controversies in those case studies. Table S.1 summarises some of the differences and correspondences between the case studies.

Table S.1

Comparison of the case studies

	Heathland corridor (Hoorneboeg - Goois Natuurreservaat)	Solar farm (Finsterwolde)	Energy park (Rijenburg & Reijerscop)
Who was the initiator?	public body	citizen advocates as initiator or ‘presenter of an opportunity’	citizen advocates as (co-)initiators, limited acceptance by the community
Were conflicting missions discussed?	biodiversity vs. climate	climate vs. landscape	climate vs. housing need
Was there a public participation procedure, and how was it assessed?	initially no public participation procedure; positive view on ultimate procedure	no formal public participation procedure	immediate public participation procedure, with partially negative experiences

A first finding is that the role played by ‘advocates’ were indeed an important factor in creating the dynamic of the sustainability controversies. Advocates were the initiators in two of the case studies, but not in the third. When looking at a controversy, there is a tendency to think of the opponents, but in the case of controversies involving citizens, the

advocates (proponents) are at least as interesting. They may be the initiators of a project or people who joined in a policy initiative from the start, but it is also possible that citizens only develop into advocates in response to statements or actions by opponents. Although there are always people who are in favour of plans to increase sustainability, they are not always open about this. If advocates do not actively organise themselves and also have no direct stake in the plans, the chance of conflict is much reduced. The role of initiator is also the subject of much debate. Citizens sometimes do not see themselves as initiators but are regarded as such by the community (like the farmer in the village of Finsterwolde who described himself as someone who merely presented an opportunity). Citizens sometimes do unite explicitly around a civic initiative, but are not accepted because they themselves live just outside the area which is the focus of the sustainability plans (such as the Rijne Energie energy park initiative in Utrecht).

Second, the specific focus of the sustainability project – energy generation in two of our case studies, restoring biodiversity in the third – also determines a large part of the dynamic, though many other factors of equal importance are involved. Conflicts about projects to improve sustainability demand a ‘broad conversation’. These kinds of conflicts cannot be resolved by simply providing more and clearer explanations of the substance of the plans. Stakeholders engaged in robust debate about the societal challenges underlying specific projects, and not just in the conflict about restoring biodiversity, as earlier research has suggested (Arts et al. 2018; Buijs 2009a; Buijs et al. 2011; 2017; Langbroek & Vanclay 2012; Wallquist et al. 2012; Wolsink 2007). Research on conflicts surrounding renewable energy have focused mainly on the interests and implementation issues around the sustainability project. In this study the sustainability projects in all three case studies were weighed against different missions: the desire to maintain natural assets and the need for large-scale housing development. The debate also ranged over all kinds of things which had little to do with either the sustainability project or the interests and implementation issues. The debate in these three case studies was just as much about roles and identities, relationships that had developed over time, disruptive argumentation, obnoxious behaviour and the relationship between citizens and government.

Third, our study found that a formal participation procedure can indeed contribute to an outcome that is acceptable to all stakeholders, though certainly does not guarantee it (see § 5.2.2). Good conflict management is a discipline all on its own, which can only be successful if certain conditions are met. The Hoorneboeg heathland corridor and Rijnenburg & Reijerscop energy park case studies provided a good opportunity for comparison, because they had the same process supervisor acting on the basis of the same principles. Both conflicts became heated, but in the case of the Hoorneboeg project it proved possible to calm emotions and reach a compromise. This was not the case in the Rijnenburg & Reijerscop energy park project, which proved to be much more complex, with a greater number of stakeholders, including civic initiatives and commercial companies. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the project supervisor did not have the power to oversee the entire project; the transitions between different discussion levels, in particular, was a cause of great irritation. The goals of the participation procedure (e.g. how much energy needed

to be generated) and the frames (e.g. what would be done with the scenarios developed) were also much less clear than in the Hoorneboeg case study.

### 5.2.2 Factors in escalation and de-escalation

Escalation occurred in all three case studies at a certain point, with Hoorneboeg being the only project where the situation de-escalated again later. In conflict management research, escalation refers to the process whereby conflicts become more intense as time passes, while de-escalation is the reverse process (Glasl 1982). A good deal is known about the stages in that process; Glasl (1982) describes it using the metaphor of a ladder, with each rung higher leading to exacerbation and each rung lower being a step in the right direction. What can we say based on our study about the factors that play a role in the escalation and de-escalation of controversies between citizens around sustainability projects?

We cannot answer this question without also looking at the outcome of the controversy and the consequences for stakeholders. The de-escalation in the Hoorneboeg case made it possible to reach a consensus and meant that there were no deeply negative consequences for those directly involved. Things were very different in the other two case studies: this was symbolically illustrated in the Finsterwolde project by the collapse of the social club, and in the Rijnenburg & Reijerscop project by the cancellation of a community party. The broken friendships left particularly deep scars in Finsterwolde, even though most villagers were no longer keeping track of the solar farm project.

In essence, the differences of opinion led to controversies in all three case studies because stakeholders *adopted diametrically opposing interests and opinions about societal missions*, and were unwilling to deviate from them.<sup>1</sup> Interests and different opinions are sometimes difficult to separate, and this can make the discussion more difficult. However, much more was also happening in the margins here (see table S.2). Stakeholders *cast doubt on the roles of others* (Who is the initiator here? Who has the right to interpret opposing voices?) and *dredged up old stories about distorted relations* in the region and linked these to parties in the current controversy. This made relations even more fraught. Further irritation then arose in the interaction because many *stakeholders felt that those with opposing views were using ill-informed or opportunistic arguments*, and were moreover *behaving in an uncivil and disrespectful way* ('unhindered by any knowledge of what they are talking about, they try every trick in the book to get their own way', as a stakeholder in one of the case studies put it). Sometimes acute irritation masks a *deeper frustration*, for example based on earlier bad experiences with institutions, or concerning the position of power held by some of the actors. During the process this caused the irritation to shift away from the 'substance' of the plans to the attitudes of other stakeholders (a familiar phenomenon in conflict research; see also Glasl 1982). There were also a number of 'external' factors which stoked the fire further, such as *media which made the divisions much worse* by referring to a 'fractured' or 'split' community. *National politicians and opinion-formers sometimes also helped one of the camps by providing new arguments*, or helped them reinforce an argument.

Table S.2

Factors per case study which contribute to escalation

	Hoorneboeg	Finsterwolde	Rijnenburg & Reijerscop
What stories did stakeholders tell about strained relations in the area?	*	landowners vs. farmworkers; established residents vs. incomers	people to the east vs. people to the west of the Amsterdam-Rhine Canal people inside vs. people outside the polder residents of Rijnenburg vs. residents of Reijerscop
What role did argumentation and emotion play? Was there understanding?	irritation about argumentation understanding for emotions	irritation about argumentation accusations of uncivil behaviour by others	irritation about argumentation less pronounced role for emotions
What influence did local or national politics and media have?	compromise adjusted following reports and parliamentary debate	tensions heightened by reports about polarisation	difficulty being heard by government leave politics to the politicians

\* The realisation that such stories are important in the course of the case only dawned when studying the second case

As regards de-escalation, we need to look at specific *strategies for ‘coming closer together’* and at methods for keeping factors which can lead to escalation manageable. This is a discipline all on its own (see e.g. Cuppen 2018; Laws & Forester 2015; Verhoeven & Metze 2018; Verloo 2015; Wolf & Van Dooren 2017). The contribution of this study was to identify which factors are of specific importance in conflicts between citizens about sustainability plans in the living environment. In the Hoorneboeg case, it proved possible to achieve a rapprochement by *restoring personal contact, allowing space for emotions and challenging each other in a familiar setting to exhibit ‘civil behaviour’* (see e.g. Dekker 2009; Kopecký & Mudde 2005)). Both proponents and opponents *called on the government to take control and help with mediation* (*‘We’re too small here [...] we can’t do this on our own’, as an opponent of the Finsterwolde solar farm put it in a call for mediation from the local authority*), and to *put in place the conditions to reduce the risk of escalation*. Citizens in these case studies were looking for an *accessible and responsive government*, with policymakers who dropped by for a cup of coffee, who took their opinions seriously and who ‘marked time’ when necessary. They wanted a guarantee of *a degree of influence over things which affected them personally*, but above all wanted to *know clearly where they could and could not participate in the discussion*. A participation procedure without clear goals (e.g.: How much energy needs to be generated as a minimum?) and frameworks (e.g.: Are scenarios without wind turbines acceptable?) has a much greater failure risk. They also wanted to see that *political questions were answered decisively* by the local council and the

Municipal Executive; the current situation was that answers were often too long in coming, resulting in continuing frustration.

### 5.3 Conclusions and discussion

In this section we reflect on ways of dealing with factors which are not related to the direct substance of local sustainability plans, and what we have now learned about conflicts between groups of citizens that we did not know from research on conflicts between citizens and public bodies or commercial companies. We then discuss a number of lessons for policy that can be drawn from this study. We end by looking at the question of what we can learn from a constructivist approach and suggest a number of ideas for further research. This concluding section is not only based on the information collected in the three case studies; whilst drafting the conclusions, we also organised a focus group of six people who work as mediators or process supervisors in conflict situations such as those described here. The reason for doing this was twofold: to investigate whether participants could suggest supplementary ideas or case studies, and to ascertain whether they recognised a number of key findings based on their own experiences. The latter proved to be clearly the case. Their individual input and the group discussion also produced additional points of view.

#### 5.3.1 A difficult and broad discussion about spatial planning

Those involved as mediators in conflicts of this nature find it difficult to conduct a ‘broad discussion’ (see § 5.2.1) and at the same time to maintain the focus that is needed in order to reach a conclusion. Discussion about values, emotions and major societal challenges is often needed, even though this appears to divert attention from the discussion about the actual plans. The key, according to the focus group, is to determine to what extent broadening or ‘personalising’ the issues is useful in the light of an ongoing discussion. There is a perception that values, lofty goals and emotions are sometimes used as strategic tools by participants. Citizens sometimes refer to dominant societal values, such as the need for greater sustainability, in order to ‘reinforce their own perspective’, or ‘to avoid a discussion about the substance’. This also emerged during the interviews. Some believe that emotions are at times used ‘strategically’ (‘It becomes a problem if your voice is heard mainly when you’re angry’, as it was put in the focus group). In the participants’ view, the question should not be so much about whether such an argument has been ‘brought to bear’, but whether it is a valid point. In the participants’ experience, it is then a matter of ‘listening’, ‘naming’ and ‘questioning’, and that is something very different from ‘agreeing’, ‘rewarding’ and ‘acknowledging’. It is then vital to translate these kinds of points into specific actions: what is needed in order to find a way through?

#### 5.3.2 Be sensitive to different levels of authority within communities

Much of the dynamic of the controversies studied here is more comparable than we had originally thought to previously studied conflicts between citizens and commercial companies or public bodies (see § 1.2), in the sense that we also find power imbalances, different

levels of authority and an ‘expert/layperson dynamic’ in relations between citizens. However, the big difference is that conflicts between citizens always take place in the context of a local community.

It was not only policymakers and managers who labelled resistance on the part of citizens as irrational and emotionally driven nimbyism’ (Arts et al. 2018; Beukema-Siebenga et al. 1998; Buijs et al. 2011; Van Os et al. 2014; Pesch et al. 2017; Roth et al. 2006; Wolsink 2007); citizens also accused each other of being badly informed, opportunistic and uncivil in the interaction. They also explicitly used the term ‘NIMBY’. Those we spoke to did however often understand the interests of others. Some proponents of the plans under discussion even said they might have been ‘against’ if the projects had been planned ‘in their own back yard’. This may be an indication that the NIMBY debate is evolving in a broader sense. The ‘expert/layperson’ dynamic was also found to be just as prevalent in conflicts between citizens as in those between citizens and commercial companies or public bodies (Brunsting et al. 2011; Rasch & Köhne 2017; Terwel et al. 2012; Wolsink 2007). This was sometimes related to the fact that certain citizen groups had fairly close relations with a public body with a vested interest. At the same time, however, most groups of citizens, whether they were for or against the sustainability plans, sought to gather knowledge and display it (a phenomenon also recognised in studies such as those by Rasch & Köhne 2017; Terwel et al. 2012). This manifested itself, for example, in the way they stressed during the interviews that there were many people in their own ranks with relevant expertise, for example based on their professional lives (lawyers, ecologists, public authority policymakers, etc.).

It also proved to be incorrect to assume that only public bodies are advocates of the great values, goals and missions: citizens themselves also advocate these things. Whether they do so for instrumental reasons is of course another question (see § 5.3.1). Where societal missions, such as promoting biodiversity, were questioned, this was not because people did not support those missions or found them too abstract; it was more that they weighed them against other missions and challenges (see § 5.3.1). As stated, a discussion took place in all three case studies about the goals, and even in a context of a weighing of different societal challenges.

Finally, we found that citizens also debated procedural issues among themselves. It is not just public bodies that are familiar with and formulate procedures (Brunsting et al. 2011; Ganzevles et al. 2015; Van Os et al. 2014; Rasch & Köhne 2017; Wolsink 2007): so do citizens. This does not so much mean formal procedures, rather the steps that certain citizens have taken. In addition, of course, citizens can also have different ideas about the procedures followed by public bodies, and that can also be a source of conflict.

Does this mean that in reality, conflicts among citizens and between citizens and public bodies follow virtually the same course? That would be too simplistic. Ultimately, the relationships between citizens are different in several ways from those that citizens have with public officials or corporate project managers. One important difference is that conflicts between residents of a village or neighbourhood play out in the context of a particular community. People are in principle equal members of that community, although as stated,

in reality all kinds of power imbalances and different levels of authority play a role. They do however meet each other in the street and in the shop, they have sometimes known each other since nursery school, and sometimes have mutual connections through family or friends. As a result, the consequences of controversies between citizens sometimes appear to be more personal than in controversies between citizens and public bodies.

### S.3.3 Recommendations for policy

A number of recommendations emerge from this study for the thinking about a broader approach to spatial planning issues and the continued development of the role assigned to citizens in the new planning system.

#### A broad approach to spatial planning issues

The first message for government departments such as the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management and the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality is that plans in relation to sustainability projects need to be viewed in conjunction with other societal challenges such as the need for sufficient housing and an attractive landscape. In each case study, the stakeholders talked about the need to make judgments. The findings of this study dovetail with recent recommendations by the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL) (Van Dam et al. 2019), the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli 2019) and government architects (College van Rijksadviseurs 2018).

The environmental visions that need to be developed at different administrative levels offer good opportunities for an integrated approach. Other instruments, such as the Regional Energy Strategies (RES), the municipal Visions on Heat Transitions or the provincial Nature Management Plans, all currently begin from a single discipline. Each of the sustainability projects in this study similarly stemmed from a single policy domain. The term ‘energy park’ is illustrative here: a landscape area imagined from the single policy theme of ‘energy’. It was clear in the other case studies, too, that there was sometimes a lack of ‘integrated weighing’ of different interests, and if this did happen, the residents involved often knew nothing of it.

#### ‘Don’t ignore the citizen’ still applies

In an essay reflecting on the role of the citizen in the new Environment and Planning Act (Omgevingswet) (Van den Broek et al. 2016; see also Steenbekkers et al. 2020), a number of conditions were formulated which it was suggested government planners should follow. This study shows that there are still points to be addressed in all these dimensions. The conditions formulated were: 1. good communication; 2. good antennae for picking up what citizens want; and 3. an awareness that too much can also be asked of citizens. Those conditions assume even greater importance in situations where citizens are divided about initiatives in their own residential setting. The first condition – good communication – is more difficult to fulfil, especially where there are intricate conflicts. As stated, political

clarity and clear frameworks are very important. Conflicts between citizens can persist for longer if administrators and elected representatives cannot agree on important political choices. The same applies for setting clear frameworks: as long as citizens are not clear about where they can participate in decision-making and which goals and principles are *not* up for discussion, participation is particularly complicated.

As regards the second condition, the antennae need to be even more precisely attuned to picking up opposing voices. This applies in the first place for local and regional authorities, but also for the overarching role of central government. With a view to fulfilling its system responsibility, it is important that the government develops antennae to pick up the noise generated in communities when transitions are set in motion. The implementation process for the Environment and Planning Act could offer opportunities for this; in addition to ‘pioneer projects’ (I&W 2016), attention could also be given to conflicts. Monitoring of the Regional Energy Strategies (RES) has recently already shown that public participation is factored in only fairly late in the process (Matthijsen et al. 2020). It is plausible that this could lead to conflicts in a number of cases, especially as visible interventions begin to be implemented. Concerns were also expressed about this in the focus group.

As for the third condition, the stress generated by conflicts within the community increases the risk of citizens becoming overburdened. We know from earlier research that there are limits to how much citizens can cope with (see e.g. Van Bochove et al. 2014; Kampen et al. 2013), and that the ideas underpinning a ‘participation society’ are not attainable for everyone (Movisie 2017). This study shows that active citizens, too, can disagree vehemently and can become overstressed in the ensuing interaction. This is an important caveat to a policy vision in which more and more is expected of citizens.

This latter point was also underlined in the focus group. One participant opined that it is a risk to place too much process responsibility at the door of initiators, which is one of the basic principles of the Environment and Planning Act. Another participant said they would prefer to see an ‘independent and objective process’, organised by the public authority, ‘so that everyone is able to accept the outcomes’. A reflection on the role of public control thus also requires a reflection on the role that public authorities assign to citizen initiatives. Major societal projects such as the energy transition carry great expectations regarding participation and local ownership, as illustrated by this quote from a letter to Parliament from the Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, Eric Wiebes (2018):

*Participation by citizens in sustainable energy projects in their immediate setting can contribute to increasing the involvement of citizens and the level of public support for the energy transition. Ownership and local cooperation will ensure that citizens, both individually and collectively, will exercise control over their own energy management and thus be able to contribute to the energy transition as a whole.*

Based on this study, it would be sensible to apply some nuance to this expectation. The role of initiators (see § S.2.1) was regularly questioned. When the initiative comes from citizens, this does not automatically lead to community involvement and support, though there are of course instances where this does happen. Initiators are not always seen as

belonging to a specific community. For example, if they themselves live outside the immediate vicinity or are part of a population group with which a community has a history of tensions, they may not always be accepted. Even if they are, they can still attract much criticism, for example because of their approach and behaviour within the community. Also, given the calls cited above for the government to play a clear role, citizen participation cannot be said to be a panacea.

#### 5.3.4 Should we be worried about conflicts?

The answer to the question of how troubling these kinds of conflicts are overall is by definition normative and depends greatly on the lens through which they are viewed. A lot of research regards conflicts as ‘hurdles to be overcome’ in a transition process. These studies often end with recommendations on how to prevent conflicts or resolve them rapidly, in order not to slow down the necessary transition (e.g. Brunsting et al. 2011; Langbroek & Vanclay 2012; Van Os et al. 2014; Rasch & Köhne 2017). Other research emphasises the intrinsic value of conflicts, arguing that conflicts can contribute to local democracy and to the development of new insights and action perspectives, and can challenge new groups to participate in the discussion (see e.g. Cuppen 2018). Recommendations in this type of research are focused less on ‘prevention and cure’ and more on ‘learning’. This study builds on that last sentiment, though with the caveat that conflicts can also cause a lot of hurt. So, whilst it is good to learn what benefits conflicts can bring, it is also important to learn how to avoid unnecessary hurt by devoting more attention to good procedures, frameworks and agreements. Avoiding conflicts altogether is probably both impossible and undesirable.

We can also view the question of whether these types of conflicts are worrying from a slightly broader perspective. The conflicts in this study arose in a period when the number of demonstrations in the Netherlands appeared to be growing rapidly, including on issues not related to sustainability (at least in Amsterdam; see Den Ridder et al. 2019a). While we were holding the interviews, farmers, construction workers, teachers, care workers, climate activists and anti-racism activists all made their voices heard on the ‘national field of protest’ (Wynia 2019). The coronavirus crisis broke that trend in 2020, but even that year saw demonstrations against the measures taken by the government and the setting up of Covid-denial action groups. The sense of community spirit that many felt at the start of the coronavirus crisis (Miltenburg & Schaper 2020) appeared to have given way a few months later to tensions between groups who were pointing the finger at each other, for example with accusations of failing to comply with the rules (Schaper & Wagemans 2021, forthcoming). Protest thus turns out to be a highly volatile phenomenon. All in all, we can tentatively conclude that this is a time in which people organise themselves fairly rapidly in order to express their criticism of others. They often do this outside the regular consultation fora, as has been noted by several commentators (e.g. Wynia 2019).

The conflicts studied here can thus teach us something about a broader trend in which people are increasingly coming together to air their grievances. That trend was difficult to explain, given that the overall mood in the Netherlands was fairly positive (Den Ridder et

al. 2019a). Commentators in a variety of media pointed to the ‘bankruptcy of the polder model’ (Wynia 2019) – the once-famed Dutch social and economic model built on consensus – to the discontent about slow decision-making (Oomen 2019), and to the activation of latent opposing voices from right-wing conservative quarters (Hermetet 2019). Political scientists referred to the notion of ‘relative deprivation’ (e.g. Power et al. 2020): the anger and frustration that people may feel if they believe that others are better off than they are themselves. People in general can then have the idea that things are going reasonably well with the country, but that they are not sharing in the benefits of that. What this study adds to and underlines in these kinds of findings is that such frustrations can also be a local phenomenon. This can easily remain under the radar if we adopt a ‘helicopter’ perspective, using concepts such as the ‘mood in the country’ and the relative deprivation between population groups.

It would be a misconception to think that protests and conflicts are nothing more than incidents. We already knew from earlier research that local frustrations can build up over time (Langbroek & Vanclay 2012; Rasch & Köhne 2017; Terwel et al. 2012; Verhoeven 2009). The announcement of plans to drive up sustainability can spark off a conflict, but it would seem that in many cases they prove to be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back. People in our case studies were not only angry about the proposals to create a heathland corridor, the solar panels or the wind farms, but also about the pig sheds which had been an eyesore for years, the plans to allow prostitution and the reception of asylum-seekers, the plan to cut down trees to allow widening of the motorway or the redrawing of municipal boundaries which give people the feeling that the big city increasingly dictates everything that happens in their lives. This does not mean that we should always regard conflicts as worrying per se, but it does perhaps mean that we would do well to look more closely for sources of frustration than we often do at present. Given the many, often inter-related issues that are currently at play, it is not impossible that the trend of collective actions will continue in the coming years. This underlines the need to keep attention focused on these kinds of developments.

### 5.3.5 The contribution from constructivist research

Constructivist case study research has a specific quality that provides an insight into – as its name suggests – how people construct meaning in their approach to controversies, because it focuses on how people themselves shape their lives in interaction with the context in which they live. By paying close attention to stakeholders’ perceptions of the process in which they are involved, and listening to the stories they tell about them, we developed a picture of the local reality in which opinions are formed and distilled. The latter is particularly important given the development observed in polarisation research of looking not just at the themes on which people disagree, but also at the feelings they have about people who think differently from them. This is also referred to as ‘affective polarisation’, which exists alongside ‘ideological’ polarisation (Iyengar et al. 2012). Iyengar et al. show, for example, that although us Republicans and Democrats have not diverged much in their views in recent decades, they still have much more negative perceptions of each other

today than in the past. To really understand how feelings, emotions and other sentiments play a role in controversies, it is crucial to look at perceptions and stories: in short, at the assigning of meaning.

This type of case study research makes it possible to look at developments over a longer period in a manageable setting. There was observable movement in several respects in all the case studies, whether in the form of escalation and de-escalation, or the interaction between local and national actors. A combination of interviews and analysis of specific documents means it is quite possible to look back over a period of time.

Moreover, constructivist case studies make it much easier to portray developments in local communities. Although this study only gave voice to those directly involved, by studying interviews and supplementary documents we still obtained some impression of the rest of the community. This approach also confirms the picture presented in a lot of opinion research, that the most vociferous groups are relatively small (see e.g. Mensink & Miltenburg 2018 on polarisation in the refugee debate). The impact affects a much wider group, however, for example due to media reporting and negative perceptions.

### 5.3.6 Ideas for follow-up research

This study offers pointers for new topics in ongoing survey research, such as the Energy Transition Survey (Verkenning Energietransitie) (see e.g. Scholte et al. 2020). Examples might include questions about conflicts, both between citizens and public bodies and between different groups of citizens. A broader point is that many of the questions currently do not stray far from the ‘substance’ of the climate debate, whereas other factors could well play an equally big if not bigger role.

There is also ample scope for other qualitative research which places the debate about climate conflicts in a wider context. A first example might be multiple-case designs, in which climate conflicts are weighed against conflicts concerning very different themes, such as migration, Black Piet, the Oostvaardersplassen rewilding project, etc.

It would also be worthwhile looking more broadly at the urban/rural dynamic when considering land use issues and the controversies that surround them. Of our three case studies, only one had a slightly more urban context, and even there the proposed sustainability project was planned in one of the few agricultural areas on the edge of the city. The fact that sustainable energy, biodiversity, housing and landscape all need space means that the focus is often on rural areas. But sustainability transitions are of course also taking place in cities – think of the drive for more sustainable housing, solar panels on flat roofs, more green landscaping in the streets, etc. – but these often have a less visible impact on the public space. Future research could for example build on broader debates about farmers’ protests, the despoiling of the public space, the relationship between nature and agriculture, etc. Here, too, an approach based on assigning meaning is important.

A final way of placing this study in a broader perspective is to link it to debates about climate adaptation (see also: Mensink 2020). The solar farm and energy park case studies fit in with what is sometimes called ‘climate mitigation’: measures intended to moderate the speed or extent of climate change. Climate adaptation is another way of looking at climate

change: the focus is on how society is able to adapt to the changing climate. As a corollary to this study, it would be interesting to look at comparative case studies, for example, focusing on the specific local context in which the impact of climate change occurs. It would be even more interesting if such a study devoted attention both to climate mitigation and climate adaptation. An example might be a comparison of case studies where wind turbines are installed at locations where the effects of climate change are having relatively little impact, and at other locations where precisely the reverse is true. It is quite plausible that this is increasingly a factor in local conflicts.

The importance of this study is not limited to questions about sustainability or the configuration of the public space. There are many societal issues in which the perspective of local conflicts could be a useful addition. Starting in 2021, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) will be studying a number of topics of this kind (SCP 2020). Whether the focus is on the societal impact of coronavirus, the growing diversity of the population, the perception that a large swathe of the population has no influence on decision-making, or the increasing internationalisation of society, there are many factors which can give rise to divisions (just as they can give rise to many new connections). These divisions can occur across the whole of society, but also in smaller communities, in villages and neighbourhoods. The lens through which this study is focused offers the prospect of ensuring in a broader sense, too, that we maintain a good awareness of the role of local conflicts in a number of the big issues coming down the track in the years ahead. We can learn a great deal from the perceptions, norms and values that people hold, the stories they tell, the issues they debate, the arguments they put forward and the emotions they feel.

## Note

- 1 Specific factors are written in italics in each case.