

# **Between the national and the local level**

## **The role and function of provinces**

Evert Heringa  
Provincie Zeeland,  
PO Box 524, Middelburg 4330 AM, Netherlands  
E-mail: eh.heringa@zeeland.nl

### **Summary**

The Dutch governmental system consists of three layers: national, regional and local authorities. The provinces have a typical intermediate task. Upwards, they influence the national government to establish different accents of policy for different regions, on the other hand they co-ordinate (as far as possible) the municipal activities. In the Netherlands this is usually called the role of “regional policy director”.

With regard to bicycle policy, the possibilities for direct influence on citizens/cyclists by provinces are limited. Municipalities have much better opportunities. The value of provincial efforts with regard to bicycle policy lies mostly in establishing co-operation between municipalities, stimulating bicycle infrastructure projects by allocating a restricted amount of national funds over local projects, and in setting traffic safety targets for the roads that are managed by provinces.

In the past, the main goal of bicycle policy was to reduce car use growth. An overview of the bicycle policy of the Dutch provinces shows that accent on road safety and recreational bicycle use is growing and that several interesting actions have come up in recent years.

The paper closes with several statements regarding the general course provincial bicycle policy should take, according to the author.

### **1. The role and function of provinces in the Dutch governmental system.**

#### *1.1 Brief description of the Dutch governmental organization*

The Dutch governmental system is founded in the Constitution of 1848. This means that the outlines of the “house of Thorbecke” (named after the writer of the constitution) have been roughly the same for over 150 years. As all good things come in three, the house of Thorbecke discerns three floors or levels: the national level, the regional/provincial level and the local level.

There have of course been reshuffles of tasks: both centralization and decentralization. And for the last 40 years there have always been discussions, especially about the regional level. Several ideas to rebuild the regional level have come up and gone by: replacing 12 provinces with 20 to 30 regions, replacing provinces with corporations of municipalities etc. The latest operation was the introduction of 7 strong urban areas, that were to develop into a region without provincial influence. After a while it turned out that it was much easier to call them new-style provinces than to change the constitution. It therefore seems that the house of Thorbecke will stand for a few more years. I will try to give a brief overview.

In contradiction to what most Dutch people think, there are two types of local government: the municipalities (“gemeenten”) and the water boards (“waterschappen”). The major difference is that waterboards only have assigned tasks (watermanagement and sometimes roadmanagement), whereas municipalities have much more autonomy: they can take decisions to their own discretion on all kinds of topics, as long as there is no higher regulation involved (e.g. laws). In other (translated Dutch) words: waterboards have a closed household, municipalities have an open household. At this moment there are some 600 municipalities, but due to upscaling that number is lowered every year.

The municipality is the government layer that has the strongest influence on the physical surroundings of citizens. The city development plan (“bestemmingsplan”) is the only plan in the field of land use planning that has legal consequences for citizens. Municipalities maintain the city roads and rural roads. In some provinces, the waterboards maintain rural roads and municipalities only manage city roads.

The regional government is called the “provincie” (province, county). The province is the government layer that is least known by citizens, which results in rather low attendance at elections (less than 50%). Provinces hardly ever directly influence citizens, neither physical,

nor in the “emotional” way. Provinciale staten (County council) chooses a board of executives, the chairman of which is the Queens commissioner, appointed by the Crown (Queen plus minister).

Provinces are active in the fields of environmental affairs, physical planning, traffic and transport, economic affairs, agriculture, recreation, nature and scenery, welfare, culture, water management, supervision of waterboards, and municipal finances. Provinces are legally obliged to make four plans: a regional land use plan, water management plan, environmental policy plan and (since two years) a traffic and transport plan.

In the field of traffic and transport provinces are also responsible for providing public transport. Provinces maintain some roads also, that can be best described with secondary roads.

On the national level there are two chambers and the cabinet. The second chamber is directly elected, once every four years. The Cabinet is then formed by a combination of parties that have a majority in the second chamber. The cabinet is the highest governmental institute. The first chamber is elected by the members of county councils. The national government influences citizens mostly in the non-physical way: taxes, large projects, outlines of policy on physical fields, policy on non-physical fields. Every minister has his or her own ministry. The traffic ministry is responsible for the maintenance of motorways and other primary roads, that are meant for (inter)national traffic.

### *1.2 Further discussion of the role and function of provinces*

The provinces have a typical intermediate task. Upwards, they influence the national government to establish different accents of policy for different regions, on the other hand they co-ordinate (as far as possible) the municipal activities. In the Netherlands this is usually called the role of “regional policy director”. Typically for the Dutch situation (the poldermodel with lots of consultations of all relevant parties) is that there are not many legal instruments to back that role up. Only in the field of land use planning there is the instrument of directions (“aanwijzing”), but that instrument is restricted in so many ways that it is hardly used.

The provinces do have some financial resources. From 1996 on, the provinces allocate a grand total of 350 million guilders a year (from the national government) over “small projects”, i.e. all projects costing less than 25 mln guilders. Usually, these funds are for the better part used to co-finance municipal bicycle- and traffic safety-projects, especially in the smaller provinces.

In the field of traffic and transport, the main direct instruments a province can use are therefore the management of provincial roads and the allocation of the above mentioned national funds.

In short, the character of the provinces could be described as follows: not very close to the citizen, not focused on local details, large enough to have overview, small enough to keep internal lines short and have an integrated view on different policy fields. The influences of provinces are rather indirect.

## **2. The role of the provinces with regard to bicycle policy.**

### *2.1 General facts about bicycling in the Netherlands and Europe.*

The Netherlands are known as a bicycle friendly country. There are several sources for figures on this matter, but there are sometimes big differences. According to EU statistics (ref. 1), the Netherlands are absolute leader with 27% of all trips produced by bicycles, followed by Denmark with 18%. Greece, Portugal and Spain are lowest with 1% or less. The EU average is about 5%. The Danes bike longer distances though: 889 km per person per year against 846 km for the Dutch. Other countries lay way behind. There are studies (ref. 2) that proclaim Groningen as the third most bicycling city, with 50% of all trips performed on a bike.

In the field of bicycle policy, the Dutch Bicycle Master Plan has drawn international attention, but this plan has also had an influence on regional traffic policy. This Bicycle master plan was a result of the second structure scheme for traffic and transport (SVV II) of 1988.

### *2.2 Standing policy: the second structure scheme for traffic and transport (SVV II)*

Main theme of this SVV II was a balance between environmental and economical issues like attainability. Car use was growing too fast from an environmental point of view, so public transport and bicycle should divert that growth (volume-policy: maximum growth of car use 35 % in 25 years from 1986-2010, instead of 70%). The bicycle should be an alternative for

the private car on shorter travel distances, up to 10 kilometres (although my personal view is that for most people 5 km will be the limit for everyday trips). There are a significant number of car trips in this distance-category. Environmentally these trips are important, because a cold car engine will use more fuel and produce more pollution.

The goal was set to 30% more bicycle-kilometres. These goals have been adopted by all provinces and municipalities, at least formally, and are still standing policy in most provinces. As stated before, provinces have almost no instruments to directly influence bicycle use. There is therefore a tendency to adjust policy here.

### *2.3 Informal survey of provincial activities with regard to bicycle policy*

In 1999 a short survey was executed to get an insight on what provinces do in the field of bicycle policy.

The results will be summarized below.

#### *Bicycle policy*

All Dutch provinces have formulated a policy for stimulating bicycle use. In all provinces bicycle policy is part of the “general” traffic and transport plans. Five provinces have a separate, more detailed bicycle plan. Four more provinces have made separate plans to stimulate recreative bicycle use.

As reasons for this policy the role of the bicycle as alternative for the private car is dominant. For shorter distances (up to 5, up to 10) the bicycle in itself is an alternative, for longer distances the combination of bicycle and public transport (chain-mobility) can compete with the private car.

Traffic safety for bicyclists is mentioned as a necessary condition for further stimulation of bicycle use. About 20% of the traffic fatalities are bicyclists. Especially younger bicyclists have in safety plans been appointed a special policy target.

#### *Instruments*

The instruments that a province can use to promote bicycle use seem rather limited. Obvious is the building of bicycle infrastructure, both for traffic-related and recreative purposes. Apart from that, provinces do invest in

- bicycle parking, especially near entering points for the public transport;
- signposting, both for work-related and recreative trips, and
- financial contribution to projects of waterboards/municipalities.

#### *Miscellaneous*

There are some interesting projects that are not (as most of the abovementioned items) common in provincial policy. The “bike to your boss”-project originated in Zeeland. Employees of all kinds of businesses join in this project and set a target for themselves in terms of a number of kilometres they plan to bike from home to work. The participants can win some prizes, but through sponsoring also contribute to a development project in Bhutan. Zeeland and Brabant also have installed a bicycle co-ordination point/bicycle advisory team, that gathers information and knowledge for other roadmanagers and also tries to make them invest in bicycle policy. Utrecht and Overijssel created transport management information points, that approach companies to partake in transport management plans.

#### *Integration with other policy fields*

The other provincial policy fields are almost always involved, in one way or another. In the physical planning (and the supervision of municipal development plans) plans are checked on adequate bicycle routes. The environmental partners stimulate bicycle use as much as possible, as the bicycle is regarded to be one of the most environmental friendly means of transport.

#### *Monitoring*

The measuring of effects is still in development. Most provinces use data from the central statistic agency. That agency (CBS) only provides the number of personbicycle kilometres. With regard to one of the goals of the bicycle policy, reducing car use, that is a debatable indicator. Apart from that, as stated before, the influence of provinces is for the greater part indirect. That makes it difficult to point out measurable results.

## *Investments*

The last question is the amount of money that provinces invest in bicycle provisions. A rough estimate (and that is the best I can do, based upon the information provided) comes down to 100 million guilders a year (roughly 50 million US \$), by all provinces together.

### **3. Conclusions and statements**

I think it can be stated that the Dutch provinces are well on track to do what can be done within their possibilities. The most important contribution is not in direct influence of building bicycle infrastructure, but in that -somewhat elusive and indirect- role of stimulator and co-ordinator of regional policy, that is backed up by the allocation of national funds over local projects.

In conclusion I would like to present some statements about the general course provincial bicycle policy should in my (personal) take. These statements refer to the matters addressed in this paper, together with information of the Dutch statistical agency (ref 3).

Given the fact that roughly 75% of all personkilometres in the Netherlands are made by car, against 8 % by bicycle, it is an illusion to think that the amount of car-kilometres can be seriously reduced by bicycle policy alone.

Of all car trips, 40% is shorter than 5 kilometres. Of all trips shorter than 5 kilometres, 20% is made by car. There are therefore possibilities to replace short car trips with bicycle trips, which gives several benefits: less pollution by cold car engines, less congestion in city-areas, higher "liveability".

In the Netherlands:

60% of all bicycle trips are shorter than 2,5 km;

76% of all bicycle trips are shorter than 3,7 km;

81% of all bicycle trips are shorter than 5 km.

It can therefore be assumed that the potential of daily bicycle use growth lies in distances up to 5 km.

From the point of view that the bicycle could be an alternative for the car, there is not much provinces can do by themselves: the radius of 5 km around city centres implies that those trips will be almost only by roads that are maintained by municipalities. Provinces should therefore wonder if it is wise to set a goal for bicycle use growth concerning traffic on the roads they manage.

With regard to traffic on provincial roads, provinces should concentrate on road safety targets, with special interest for cyclists. High speed traffic (80 km/h and more) should imply separate bicycle infrastructure.

The value of a well equipped network of recreational bicycle infrastructure trips is underestimated. Apart from goals with regard to traffic safety and public health, a good recreational network will raise the (economic) recreational value of an area.

### **References**

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3. CBS, De mobiliteit van de Nederlandse bevolking in 1998
4. <http://www.ibike.org/statistics.htm>