

Thesis summary

STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF NATURE-INCLUSIVE AGRICULTURE IN SOUTH HOLLAND PEAT MEADOW AREA: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

by

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My thesis explores stakeholder perspectives on nature-inclusive agriculture (NIA) in South Holland's peat meadow region (Veenweiden) and their alignment with policy goals. Through semi-structured interviews with farmers, policymakers, environmental groups, and citizen initiatives, the study uncovers diverse viewpoints on NIA's benefits, such as environmental sustainability, biodiversity conservation, and enhanced landscape appreciation. However, stakeholders also voice concerns about regulatory complexity and the impacts on traditional farming practices, emphasising the need for clearer definitions and better communication regarding NIA.

In South Holland's peat meadows, intensive farming has caused environmental degradation, including nitrogen excess, declining soil quality, and land subsidence. NIA offers a solution by promoting practices that integrate biodiversity, improve soil and water quality, and mitigate environmental damage. NIA aligns with concepts of regenerative and circular agriculture, aiming to enhance ecosystem resilience and sustainability. Despite its promise, NIA faces implementation challenges due to protests and resistance across Europe, reflecting socio-economic and environmental complexities.

Governments play a key role in regulating and incentivising NIA, ensuring alignment with broader socio-economic objectives outlined in Dutch policy frameworks like Brede Welvaart (BW). BW, introduced in 2011, conceptualises welfare as improving quality of life without compromising future generations' well-being.

My thesis examines stakeholders' attitudes toward NIA in the South Holland peat meadow area and how these align with BW's socio-economic objectives. By understanding stakeholder perceptions, policymakers can better shape interventions and landscape planning to support sustainable farming practices.

The research question guiding this study is: **What are the perceptions and attitudes of different stakeholders towards nature-inclusive agriculture in South Holland's peat meadow area, and how do these align with policy objectives?** Farmers, citizen initiatives, environmental organisations, and policymakers were all considered in this analysis. Understanding these perceptions is vital for achieving policy goals related to social equity, life satisfaction, economic resilience, and environmental sustainability, as outlined in Brede Welvaart and the South Holland Province policy report (ZHPLG, 2024).

The study found that the definition of NIA remains unclear, and different stakeholders interpret it in varying ways. Furthermore, stakeholders expressed conflicting attitudes, with farmers initially sceptical but increasingly interested in NIA's objectives. Negative perceptions often stemmed from associations with regulations and government interference. The complexity of NIA's implementation is marked by varying degrees of support and opposition among stakeholders.

Opportunities identified by stakeholders include landscape valuation, wet cultivation experiments, stronger consumer-farmer connections, and technological interventions. However, challenges such as economic viability, unclear policy strategies, and stakeholder resistance must be addressed to fully realise NIA's potential for sustainability and socio-economic well-being. A key opportunity for NIA is the valuation of the landscape, which involves compensating farmers for managing and maintaining ecosystem services like flood regulation, soil quality, and cultural services (Potschin & Haines-Young, 2016). This approach, which encompasses both financial compensation and broader societal appreciation, was highlighted as a crucial factor in accelerating NIA's adoption.

Social value capture, or the creation of societal profit through initiatives like community-supported agriculture (CSA), was also identified as a vital benefit of NIA. CSA fosters urban-rural connections, supports biodiversity, and enhances ecosystem services, all contributing to societal well-being and environmental health.

Stakeholders' attitudes toward NIA vary depending on the specific initiatives involved. NIA presents challenges, including the potential for industry consolidation, social tensions, and questions about the economic viability of transitioning to NIA-based farming. NIA is seen as a strategy to reduce farm and societal costs, create employment opportunities, and promote public health. Its socio-economic benefits include strengthening urban-rural connections, fostering landscape appreciation, and supporting cultural and regulatory ecosystem services (CES and RES).

Policy recommendations include refining NIA definitions, tailoring strategies to local contexts, and ensuring coherence across policy documents. Future research should explore socio-economic trends through quantitative analyses to maximise NIA's benefits. Suggested NIA-related measures that need a further social economic effect analysis include raising groundwater levels, transitioning business models to NIA-based approaches, endorsing organic farming, and implementing water infiltration systems (WIS).

In conclusion, my thesis provides insights into stakeholder perceptions of NIA in South Holland's peat meadow region. It underscores the importance of stakeholder engagement, clear policy definitions, and strategic alignment with regional socio-economic contexts. Balancing environmental benefits with regulatory concerns is crucial for effective NIA policy formulation and sustainable agricultural transitions.