

The Dutch Agricultural Governance Model in a Period of Modernisation towards Market Orientation: A Historical Analysis

Introduction

With the re-establishment of the Ministry of Agriculture, which had been abolished in 2010 (under the name Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality), the third Rutte cabinet sought to demonstrate that it took agriculture and farmers seriously. However, the gesture did not prevent the resurgence of farmers' protests in the Netherlands from autumn 2019, led by new agricultural networks such as *Agractie* and *Farmers Defence Force*.¹ In the Rutte IV cabinet, which took office in 2022, the coalition programme placed strong emphasis on policies aimed at combating climate change: accelerating climate ambitions, reducing CO₂ emissions, and cutting nitrogen output.² This, in turn, sparked new, fierce, and confrontational farmers' protests. In response, the cabinet attempted in the first half of 2023 to negotiate an Agricultural Agreement.³

The process began in December 2022 with agreement on the sector tables and their representation. Six sector tables were established: dairy and veal farming, arable farming, greenhouse horticulture, pig farming, poultry, and multifunctional agriculture, along with a main table where strategic negotiations were to take place.⁴ Farmers Defence Force declined the invitation to participate at the main table.⁵ In June 2023, the Agricultural Agreement failed when LTO Nederland, the oldest and most general farmers' organisation in the Netherlands, also withdrew. *Agractie* had already left earlier, but the departure of the largest agricultural organisation left the chairperson of the Agricultural Agreement with no option to continue.⁶ The failure of the Agricultural Agreement was a serious blow to the cabinet, as well as to the expectation that organised consultation could provide a solution to a major societal challenge.

What I aim to show in this article is that this expectation was illusory, because the social, institutional, and organisational conditions necessary for the success of such an agreement no longer existed. Even if an agreement had been reached, one could still question its value. Although the largest agricultural organisations were present at the table, what was, and is in 2023 and 2025, the actual power of these organisations? Could they have delivered on their

¹ J.D. van der Ploeg, 'Farmers' Upheaval, Climate Crisis and Populism', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 47.3 (2020) 589-605; A. Siegmann, "'The Farmers' Revolt in the Netherlands: Causes and Consequences', *European View* 23.2 (2024) 156-166.

² Parlement.com, 'Kabinet-Rutte IV (2022-2024)'. <https://www.parlement.com/kabinet-rutte-iv-2022-2024>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

³ Rijksoverheid, 'Kamerbrief over aanbieding concept Landbouwakkoord en vervolgtraject'. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2023/06/23/kamerbrief-aanbieding-concept-landbouwakkoord-en-vervolgtraject>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

⁴ LTO, 'Update Landbouwakkoord: Overeenstemming sectortafels'. <https://www.lto.nl/update-landbouwakkoord-overeenstemming-sectortafels/>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025

⁵ Farmers Defence Force, 'De judaskus – het grote verraad "voor alle wiepie's en roelie's"'. <https://farmersdefenceforce.nl/de-judaskus-het-grote-verraad-voor-alle-wiepies-en-roelies>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025; Veeteelt, 'Agractie schuift wel aan bij overleg Landbouwakkoord, FDF niet'. <https://veeteelt.nl/stikstof/agractie-schuift-wel-aan-bij-overleg-landbouwakkoord-fdf-niet>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

⁶ Landbouwakkoord, 'Kom in beweging: verslag van de voorzitter van het Landbouwakkoord'. <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/b0dce18b-8d97-480a-b561-67953e23f592/file>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

commitments, as had been customary after the Second World War when agricultural organisations, within the framework of the Public-Law Governance Organisation (PBO), acted as co-governors of agricultural policy through the Agricultural Board and through strong, broadly rooted farmers' organisations? The farmers' protests of recent years reveal not only substantive issues but also organisational ones – which are equally important, and not confined to the agricultural sector alone.⁷

The Development of Dutch Agricultural Governance up to the Early 1960s

Dutch agricultural governance, as it functioned throughout much of the twentieth century, had its roots in nineteenth-century developments. After the First World War, agricultural administration in the Netherlands was essentially complete.⁸ During the decades preceding the First World War, it had become a professional institutional matrix. At the centre, in many respects, was the Department of Agriculture, established in 1898. This department was responsible for agricultural education, various services such as extension services, agricultural experiment stations, laboratories, and veterinary services, as well as agricultural legislation such as the Butter Act, and for agricultural reports and statistics.⁹

However, the handful of civil servants staffing this department would not have managed without the agricultural organisations that had developed in the nineteenth century, initially under liberal/conservative leadership and later also under Christian-democratic leadership. This agricultural civil society had taken shape from 1840 onwards. It promoted scientific agriculture.¹⁰ The central organisations were the provincial agricultural societies (mostly liberal or conservative-oriented), and in the last decade of the nineteenth century, farmers' unions (Christian-democratic oriented) were added. In 1884, all these societies and unions had united in a national organisation – the National Agricultural Committee (later KNLC). After the First World War, although the farmers' unions left the KNLC and formed the Catholic Farmers and Horticulturists' Union (KNBTB) and the Christian Farmers and Horticulturists' Union (CBTB) – national federations for Catholics and Protestant denominations respectively – collaboration between the three national organisations continued.

In addition to the department and governmental services, and alongside the agricultural societies and farmers' unions, numerous economic farmers' cooperatives had emerged since the end of the nineteenth century: purchasing, processing, marketing, and credit organisations. Together, they

⁷ H.D. Tjeenk Willink, *Groter denken, Kleiner doen. Een oproep* (Amsterdam 2019); K. Putters, *Veenbrand. Smeulende kwesties in de welvarende samenleving* (Amsterdam 2019); R. van Stipriaan, *Afscheid van het oude Nederland. Kunnen we onze democratie nog redden?* (Amsterdam 2024).

⁸ A. Schuurman, 'Agricultural policy and the Dutch agricultural institutional matrix during the transition from organized to disorganized capitalism', in: P. Moser en T. Varley ed., *Integration through subordination. The politics of agricultural modernisation in industrial Europe* (Turnhout 2013) 65-85; A. Schuurman, 'Dutch agricultural governance, 1870s-1930s. The making of agricultural institutions and policies as an outcome of the coevolution of state and civil society', in: J. Planas, A. Schuurman en Y. Segers ed., *The formation of agricultural governance. the interplay between state and civil society in European agriculture, 1870-1940* (Turnhout 2025) 37-59.

⁹ Directie van den Landbouw, *Staatszorg voor den landbouw* (s-Gravenhage 1913).

¹⁰ A. Schuurman, 'Het Nederlands Landhuishoudkundig Congres van 1846-1896. Forum en showroom van de agrarische republiek.', in: T. Engelen, O. Boonstra, A. Janssens ed., *Levensloop in transformatie* (Nijmegen 2011) 318-335.

formed the Dutch agricultural institutional matrix.¹¹ An impressive professional system of interconnected organisations had developed in collaboration with the farmers, aimed at enabling international competition and promoting a technologically modernising agriculture, in which public interest and private enterprise were combined.

Although after the First World War the national government attempted to drastically reduce its increased involvement in the agricultural sector, the economic crisis of the 1930s and efforts to protect the agricultural sector led to the government obtaining near-total control over agricultural production through the Agricultural Crisis Act.¹² To implement this, an agricultural crisis office was set up independently of the Department of Agriculture, but still under the Ministry of Economic Affairs, to which the department belonged. With this law, the Minister of Economic Affairs could determine what crops were grown, in what quantities, and what was to be done with the products. Its purpose was to maintain Dutch export agriculture and protect the sector so that, once circumstances returned to normal, it could stand on its own again and the law could be repealed.¹³

This governmental omnipotence was concealed in practice because farmers were already embedded in larger structures through their organisations and cooperatives; because the three major agricultural organisations supported these measures; and because the same individuals often came from the agricultural sector itself, sometimes working for the agricultural organisation and at other times directly employed by the government.¹⁴ The temporarily intended Agricultural Crisis Act formally made the government the authority in the agricultural sector, which was viewed as undesirable both by the government and by farmers.

The 1930s were important for the agricultural sector not only because from then on government involvement in agriculture became standard, but also because there was a serious political debate about the direction of Dutch agriculture. Already in 1930, a new national agricultural organisation had emerged: *Landbouw en Maatschappij* (Agriculture and Society). It quickly gained considerable support and by 1933 already had more members than the Christian Farmers and Horticulturists' Union (CBTB). This new organisation pressured the three central agricultural organisations and was critical of the established political parties.¹⁵ More importantly, it advocated a very different character for Dutch agriculture. According to Jan Smid, its leader and a respected retired civil servant from the Department of Agriculture, agriculture should focus much more on feeding the Dutch population; the sector should become more self-sufficient.¹⁶ The established organisations, however, rejected Smid's ideas. A similar debate had occurred earlier, immediately after the First World War, in Switzerland, which did lead to a change in policy. Like in the Netherlands, export-oriented agriculture had become increasingly important before the First World War. The outcome of the debate, however, was that Swiss agricultural organisations and the government

¹¹ A. Schuurman, 'Agricultural policy and the Dutch agricultural institutional matrix'.

¹² A. Schuurman, 'Dutch agricultural governance, 1870s-1930s'.

¹³ H.M.F. Krips-van der Laan, *Praktijk als antwoord. S.L. Louwes en het landbouwcrisisbeleid* (Groningen 1985).

¹⁴ Zie bijvoorbeeld het lemma Louwes: G.M.T. Trienekens, 'Louwes, Stephanus Louwe (1889-1953)'.

<https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/bwn1880-2000/lemmata/bwn1/louwes>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

¹⁵ J.H. de Ru, *Landbouw en maatschappij. Analyse van een boerenbeweging in de crisisjaren*, (Wageningen 1980).

¹⁶ J. van Loon, *Rapport aan zijne excellentie den minister van landbouw en visscherij van de commissie Reorganisatie Landbouw – Crisismaatregelen. Ingesteld bij beschikking van den minister van Landbouw en Visscherij, d.d. 19 November 1935, Afd. Landbouw - Crisisaangelegenheden*, No. 17102 ('s-Gravenhage 1936).

chose to be as self-sufficient as possible in food production – also against the backdrop of Switzerland’s neutrality policy.¹⁷

Post-World War II Developments in Dutch Agricultural Governance

It was only after the Second World War that more definitive solutions were found for the agricultural problems that had emerged during the 1930s. The issue of central government control was addressed through the introduction of the Public-Law Governance Organisation (PBO). The PBO enabled the establishment of private organisations that carried out public tasks and set public rules, thereby allowing a form of sectoral self-governance. These organisations included both employees and employers and functioned as genuine joint administrative bodies. The most visible of these organisations was the Social and Economic Council (SER). With the PBO, a formal legal framework existed within which the Dutch agricultural institutional matrix could operate and collaborate.

The Agricultural Board (Landbouwschap) was the highest body of the PBO in agriculture.¹⁸ Founded in 1954 as the successor to the Stichting van de Landbouw established in 1945, the Agricultural Board brought together agricultural organisations and agricultural labour organisations to represent and defend the interests of the sector. Membership was compulsory for all farmers, and the organisation could levy contributions to carry out its public tasks. According to Krajenbrink, the Agricultural Board primarily focused on interest representation and delegated co-management to the commodity boards, such as the Dairy Board or the Arable Farming Board. The strength of the Agricultural Board lay in its secretariat, which was financed through these levies. Another strength was its regional structure through district councils, which allowed the Board to maintain decentralised contacts. The secretariat acted as a professional interlocutor that maintained relations with the Ministry of Agriculture on behalf of the sector. However, the structure’s weakness lay in the dominance of the farmers’ organisations that controlled the Board, ensuring that they themselves maintained contact with the farmers.¹⁹ This increased the distance between the Agricultural Board and the farmers, making it appear not as “their” organisation but rather as a representative of the dirigiste government. The Board became “they” rather than “we.”

The Ministry of Agriculture was re-established after the war and had grown into a fully-fledged sectoral ministry.²⁰ It had its own legal service, foreign service, the Technical Service (Cultuurtechnische Dienst, responsible since 1935 for land consolidation, drainage, and agricultural reclamation), agricultural research institutes including the LEI (Agricultural Economic Institute, which calculated guideline prices for agricultural products and also served as a statistical bureau for agriculture), and was responsible for agricultural education and extension services. In a sense, the agricultural governance model represented a perfect example of a public–private partnership, though it must be recognised that the private partners had a very specific

¹⁷ P. Moser en T. Varley, ‘Corporatism, agricultural modernization, and war in Ireland and Switzerland, 1935-1955’, in: P. Brassley, Y. Segers, L. van Molle ed., *War, agriculture and food. Rural Europe from the 1930s to the 1950s* (New York, NY en Londen 2012) 137-155.

¹⁸ E.J. Krajenbrink, *Het Landbouwschap. 'Zelfgedragen verantwoordelijkheid' in de land- en tuinbouw, 1945-2001* (Groningen 2005).

¹⁹ Idem.

²⁰ S. Keulen, *Monumenten van beleid. De wisselwerking tussen Nederlands rijks overheidsbeleid, sociale wetenschappen en politieke cultuur, 1945-2002* (Hilversum 2014).

interest: agriculture. The model emerged more as the expression of democratic co-governance developed in the agricultural sector since the nineteenth century than as an expression of the postwar Dutch pillarised society. In this pillarised society, Protestants, Catholics, social democrats, and liberals came together by blending their guiding principles: sovereignty within their own circles, Catholic subsidiarity, social-democratic participation, and liberal self-reliance.

The agricultural sector's participation in policymaking was greater than ever, and the countryside was increasingly designed for efficient and rationalised agricultural production. It became farmland. The postwar objectives for agriculture were clear and widely endorsed both within and outside the sector: restoration of the food supply, low consumer prices, agricultural exports for foreign currency, and a reasonable standard of living for the agricultural population.²¹ Special attention was given to small farmers, who had struggled since the 1930s. In the 1950s, the public/private apparatus was further expanded: agricultural education, extension services, research, study clubs, land consolidation, and rural renewal were intended to 'modernise' farmers.²² The agricultural industry and cooperative enterprises also contributed to this path of technological modernisation. This development aligned with the broader political, economic, and cultural perspectives of the time. The government played a major role in economic life – consider guided wage policies, industrialisation policies, and the role of the Central Planning Bureau.²³ There was strong faith in technology, seen as neutral, and in progress more generally, reinforced by the (economic) success of this approach. The standard of living increased for broad sections of the population.

By the early 1960s, a system of agricultural governance had been developed that provided farmers with a high degree of co-governance, in line with the nineteenth-century pursuit of private initiative with attention to general and local interests. It had become a national agricultural institutional matrix with strong local roots, characterised by reciprocal influence between spatial levels. Such a form of governance suited a situation in which there was no debate over the direction of agriculture as such, as discussions mainly concerned practical problems within the sector.

Cracks in Agricultural Governance and the Erosion of Co-Governance

This agricultural governance system would persist until the 1990s, with its own ministry, a system of co-governance, and self-management, as Krajenbrink describes, but its decline began in the 1960s, albeit not immediately visible. The decline had multiple causes that did not all occur simultaneously; sometimes they influenced each other and were interconnected, sometimes not.

The Continuing Decline of Farms and Concurrent Consolidation

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, it became clear to the agricultural sector that educating and rationalising farmers and farmwives alone would not suffice as a solution. Farms needed to

²¹ J. Bieleman, *Boeren in Nederland. Geschiedenis Van De Landbouw, 1500-2000* (Amsterdam 2008) 274-275.

²² E.H.K. Karel, *De maakbare boer. Streekverbetering als instrument van het Nederlandse landbouwbeleid 1953-1970* (Groningen 2005).

²³ J. Touwen, 'Varieties of capitalism en de Nederlandse economie in de periode 1950-2000.' *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 3.1 (2006) 73-105.

become larger to achieve economies of scale and improve efficiency.²⁴ With the completion of the IJsselmeer polders, possibilities to expand cultivated land were largely exhausted, and competing claims for space emerged, including nature and housing. In other words, consolidation had to take place within agriculture itself. There was no longer room for small farmers. The postwar process of reducing farm labour and the number of farms continued through the 1960s and beyond, as shown in Figure 1. The figure also indicates that this process is still ongoing. Figure 2 shows that this does not mean less agricultural land is used; rather, farms have, as intended, become larger and continue to grow on average.

Farmers were required, if they were not already, to become entrepreneurs who invested in their farms and recouped these investments through economic farm management. This view was shared not only by scientists and policymakers but also by agricultural organisations.²⁵ Although farms were still referred to as family businesses, they were primarily economic enterprises. Farm closures from the 1960s onwards were socially managed as part of the developing welfare state and thanks to the agricultural governance model. A key instrument for this was the development and restructuring fund, which could be accessed by farmers wishing either to modernise or to exit their farms. In the second half of the 1960s, this fund was widely used.²⁶

Dutch agriculture remained export-oriented, and thus needed to compete with foreign farmers by producing at the lowest possible cost per unit. It also became clear that this continuation, and in fact radicalisation, of this policy could not have taken place without the involvement of agricultural organisations and their engagement with members. These ‘conversations’ occurred not only through official meetings but also through education, agricultural extension, study clubs, agricultural banks, cooperative and private industries, and informal encounters in daily local life. In the early 1960s, both the world and the agricultural sector were less abstract than they are today. However, the outcome of all this was a steep decline in the number of people employed in agriculture.

Immediately after the Second World War, dissatisfied farmers had joined forces as the Free Farmers (Vrije Boeren). With the establishment of the Agricultural Board and compulsory levies, they encountered a clear adversary. This group eventually became a political party: the Farmers’ Party (Boerenpartij).²⁷ Although the party won seven parliamentary seats in 1967, it was not comparable to *Landbouw en Maatschappij*. The Farmers’ Party opposed the modernisation process in agriculture and the government, but it lacked a leader of Smid’s stature and did not present a coherent alternative programme. Its influence on agricultural policy and on farmers was limited. Agricultural policy aimed at increasing productivity, consolidating farms through reduction of smallholdings, and ensuring a reasonable income for remaining farmers was broadly accepted.

²⁴ M. van Lieshout, A. Dewulf, N. Aarts en C. Termeer. ‘Framing Scale Increase in Dutch Agricultural Policy 1950–2012.’, *NJAS: Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences* 64-65.1 (2013) 35-46.

²⁵ T. Duffhues, *Voor een betere toekomst. Het werk van de Noordbrabantse Christelijke Boerenbond voor bedrijf en gezin, 1896 - 1996* (Nijmegen 1996).

²⁶ A. van den Brink, *Structuur in beweging. Het landbouw-structuurbeleid in Nederland, 1945-1985* (Wageningen 1990).

²⁷ D. Strijker, and I.J. Terluin. ‘Rural Protest Groups in the Netherlands.’, in: D. Strijker, G. Voerman en I. Terluin ed., *Rural Protest Groups and Populist Political Parties* (Wageningen 2015) 63-77.

More Stakeholders Acquire Direct Interests in Agriculture

Technological modernisation policies led to the elimination of postwar shortages, and on a European level, agriculture began to achieve self-sufficiency. Attention shifted towards quality changes, which corresponded with the broad rise in living standards in the 1960s and beyond. Agricultural requirements were no longer limited to productivity; a wide range of quality standards also emerged. Additionally, there was growing concern for production conditions, animal welfare, and impacts on landscape, nature, and the environment. This development brought more players and organisations into the agricultural sphere, each with a stake in the outcomes for agriculture and rural areas. The countryside was no longer solely a production space for agriculture.²⁸

Where agricultural organisations had previously claimed to adequately represent agriculture and rural areas, nature, environmental, landscape, animal welfare, and consumer organisations began to assert themselves and sought to influence policy. These new themes not only created more groups and actors with an interest in agriculture but also led to increased government regulation. Regulations were no longer solely market-focused. Regulatory pressure on farms increased, partly due to effects beyond the immediate agricultural operations. For example, from the 1990s onwards, farmers were required to maintain detailed manure records in response to the acid rain problem that had become apparent in the 1980s.

The Agricultural Sector and the European Integration Process

Initially, the influence of the new stakeholders was limited. Not only were agricultural organisations institutionally better embedded in policy preparation, formulation, and implementation thanks to the Agricultural Board, the Ministry of Agriculture, and parliamentary representatives, but agricultural policy had also been transferred to the European Economic Community (EEC).²⁹ Since 1962, agriculture had been part of the EEC's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), under which it thrived. EEC agriculture was protected, and the CAP could not fail; a failure would have stalled the European integration process. The CAP also promoted economies of scale, mechanisation, rationalisation, specialisation, intensification, and efficiency. Surpluses created by these measures caused problems but did not fundamentally change the policy. For instance, the milk surplus was addressed in 1984 through the introduction of milk quotas: farmers exceeding their quota faced penalties. Milk quotas remained in place until 2015. Following the milk quotas, in November 1984, the Interim Act limiting pig and poultry farming was enacted nationally, imposing production-limiting measures enforced by the government.

Significant changes to agricultural policy occurred only in the 1990s, after the 1980s saw the creation of a new European integration project alongside the customs union and CAP: the single market (European Single Act), a European integration response to the economic crisis that began in the late 1970s. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the European Monetary Union emerged with the Maastricht Treaty. From the 1990s onwards, the single market and monetary union became the driving forces of European integration. While agriculture continued to

²⁸ A. Schuurman, 'De wording en verdwijning van het Nederlandse platteland als boerenland, vanaf 1870. Een ruimtelijke en sociale analyse.', in: E. Bulder, M. Molema en V. Tassenaar ed., *Spitten in de economische en sociale geschiedenis* (Hilversum 2021) 109-125.

²⁹ A. Oskam and G. Meester, *EU policy for agriculture, food and rural areas* (Wageningen 2011).

dominate the EU budget, it lost its prominent position in the integration project. CAP changed not only in response to surpluses but also due to the accession of Central European countries with large agricultural populations. The new CAP reflected the transition from internationalisation to globalisation.³⁰ In the pursuit of global trade with minimal restrictions, the old CAP market and price policies came under pressure.

The EU's significance for agriculture differed from that of the EEC. The new EU agricultural policy, starting with the McSharry reforms in 1992, focused on income support for landowners. Initially, EU income support was tied to production (historical rights), but later (2003, 2008) payments became increasingly decoupled from actual production and linked instead to conditions concerning food safety, hygiene, environment, animal welfare, and land management. The extent of this so-called cross-compliance varied by country, as implementation, as usual within the EU, was left to the member states.³¹ The effect was a certain renationalisation of agricultural policy.

The new European policy recognised additional objectives (nature, animal welfare) beyond merely ensuring sufficient food at reasonable prices and a decent income for farmers. Dutch agricultural policy remained primarily focused on efficient production. The EU increasingly engaged in environmental and nature policy, leading to initiatives such as Natura 2000.³² Through Natura 2000, emphasis was placed on the protection of coherent habitats. National governments proposed these areas to the EU, which approved them, after which national conservation objectives were formulated and elaborated in management plans. From that point, permits were required for any activities that could affect these objectives. These nationally and provincially prepared management plans, based on EU rules, were adopted after 2013. Farmers had to comply with these plans to obtain permits for their activities. This led, from 2015 to 2019, to the implementation of the Nitrogen Approach Programme (PAS), allowing entrepreneurs, including farmers, to continue activities provided they limited nitrogen emissions. These were the “PAS-reporters,” bringing us to the issues of the years since 2019.

The European integration process following the establishment of the EEC influenced Dutch agriculture and its organisation in various ways. Initially, the sector greatly benefited from the availability of financial support. However, this changed from the 1980s and 1990s, also because the EU, in the words of Sebastian Princen, should be viewed as an arena rather than purely as an actor—an arena where coalitions of actors are active and which functions alongside and above other spatial arenas. This made European decision-making, as well as national (and provincial) decision-making, less transparent and more complex. Although decision-making became more abstract, its effects were concrete. For farmers, in addition to market demands, government requirements played an explicit and significant role in their operations.

³⁰ S. Sassen, *A sociology of globalization* (New York, NY en Londen 2007).

³¹ W.J.M. Kickert en F.B. van der Meer, *Laat duizend bloemen bloeien. Hoe het Ministerie van LNV omgaat met externe veranderingen* (s-Gravenhage 2007).

³² S. Princen, *Het moet van Brussel. De verhouding EU en lidstaten tussen retoriek en werkelijkheid* (Utrecht 2015).

The dismantling and hollowing out of twentieth-century agrarian governance: a smaller state, market ideology, and globalisation

More favourable moments could have been imagined for what I have here referred to as a certain renationalisation of agricultural policy. Internationally, 1989 gave a considerable boost to the rise of market-oriented thinking.³³ The process of economic globalisation acquired a new dynamic with the end of the Cold War. In the Netherlands, under the “Purple-coalition” government of Prime Minister Kok, market thinking received a fresh impetus. Outsourcing, privatisation, and marketisation became the new ‘buzzwords’.³⁴ The Ministry of Agriculture came under the control of liberal ministers – first Van Aartsen (VVD) and later Brinkhorst (D66). Both were proponents of a policy that emphasised the primacy of politics and decentralisation. This meant that they distanced themselves from the Agricultural Board as co-governor, paid greater attention to other actors (the food industry and retailers), and delegated agricultural policy more extensively to the provinces.³⁵

However, changes in government policy towards agriculture had already begun in the 1980s under the three Lubbers cabinets (1982–1994). A distinction was made between policy and implementation.³⁶ Initially, the motive was the consolidation of public finances. In the 1990s, preparation for the unification of the European market was added, aimed at fostering economic growth. At the same time, marketisation became something of an ideology. The idea was that the delivery of services via the market was more efficient and effective than through the government. Implementation was placed at a distance from the ministry, became spinoffs, and were sometimes privatised.

The Ministry of Agriculture participated in this process. The National Agricultural Extension Service was made an agency in 1986 and privatised in 1992 as the DLV Advisory Group; the Land Reclamation Service became the Agency for Land Development in 1989, later transformed into the independent administrative body Service for Rural Areas, and eventually abolished in 2015; in 1997 the Ministry’s research institutes were made autonomous as DLO, which became part of Wageningen UR; the various inspection services became independent foundations or were merged into the NVWA (Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority), which also absorbed the Plant Protection Service and the General Inspection Service; the Service for Regulations was first made an agency and is now part of RVO (Netherlands Enterprise Agency).³⁷

In other words, the Ministry of Agriculture underwent major changes from the 1980s onwards. It lost its executive services. These organisational changes also brought about changes in the

³³ D. Yergin en J. Stanislaw, *The commanding heights. The battle for the world economy* (New York, NY 2002).

³⁴ B. Mellink en M. Oudenampsen, *Neoliberalisme. Een Nederlandse geschiedenis* (Amsterdam 2022).

³⁵ H. Bekke en J. de Vries, *De ontpoldering van de Nederlandse landbouw. Het Ministerie van Landbouw, Natuurbeheer en Visserij, 1994-2000* (Leuven 2001).

³⁶ Eerste Kamer der Staten Generaal, ‘Verbinding verbroken? Onderzoek naar de parlementaire besluitvorming over de privatisering en verzelfstandiging van overheidsdiensten. Hoofdrapport’. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025. https://www.senate.nl/9370000/1/j4nvjllhjvvt9eu4_j9vvkfvyj6b325az/vj41l5f306tx; R. Kuiper, *De terugkeer van het algemeen belang. Privatiseringsverdriet en de toekomst van Nederland*, (Amsterdam 2014).

³⁷ Eerste Kamer der Staten Generaal, ‘Bijlage 3: samengesteld overzicht privatiseringen en verzelfstandigingen 1 januari 1989 – 31 december 2010’.

https://www.eerstekamer.nl/behandeling/20121030/deelrapport_van_de_parlementaire. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

financing of the various services (users paid the costs) and in the distance from end-users: the farmers. The public–private layer that had developed around agriculture in the twentieth century, and had been greatly expanded after the war as part of the development of the welfare state, was dismantled. Agricultural governance became more centralised and, in many respects, more complex. This process of outsourcing, privatisation, and marketisation was not aimed at the agricultural sector as such, but was the result of general policy principles which, precisely in the field of agriculture – where government, market, and society had been strongly interwoven – had a major impact. Ultimately, in 2010 the Ministry of Agriculture was even abolished. Seven years later it was re-established, but apart from all the changes that had already taken place before 2010, agricultural education had in the meantime been transferred to the Department of Education. The new ministry was only a shadow of the ministry as it had existed in the 1960s.³⁸

The position of the Central Agricultural Organisations had also weakened since the 1970s.³⁹ It had become increasingly difficult to resolve issues within the agricultural sector through consultation. For example, the *Interim Act* of November 1984 (which imposed limits on the number of pig and poultry farmers) was introduced by Minister Braks without prior consultation with the sector. Moreover, since 1982 the Ministry of Agriculture had also been responsible for nature policy, which likewise had to be taken into account. In addition, the number of farmers continued to decline, which in turn reduced the membership base of the agricultural organisations. Furthermore, the increasing specialisation of farmers resulted in increasingly divergent interests. Consequently, by the early 1990s, separate trade unions had emerged outside the central agricultural organisations, such as the Dutch Arable Farming Union (1992), the Dutch Pig Farmers' Union (1994), and the Dutch Dairy Farmers' Union (1996), each devoted to representing the specific interests of a particular branch of agriculture. In 1995, the erosion of the three central agricultural organisations (the Royal Dutch Agricultural Committee; the Catholic Farmers' and Horticulturists' Union; and the Christian Farmers' and Horticulturists' Union) led to their merger into a new organisation: the Dutch Federation of Agriculture and Horticulture (*Land- en Tuinbouworganisatie Nederland*, LTO Nederland). LTO Nederland became a federal organisation of independent regional and sectoral associations, with the regional organisations assuming predominance, and with the primary objective of direct interest representation.

At the moment when this national and central agricultural representative organisation emerged, the very legitimacy of the Agricultural Board as a central representative body was also called into question.⁴⁰ Moreover, this body, as a more or less closed agricultural bastion, increasingly no longer fit with the philosophy of marketisation as the principal steering mechanism. The Agricultural Board may have functioned best during the 1960s and 1970s, even though the first small cracks were already visible. With the increasing difficulties of the 1980s, changes in the EEC and EU, and particularly the new ideas regarding economic policy and the role of government, the Agricultural Board found itself in serious trouble. The original idea of sector co-governance had eroded, as agriculture and rural areas of the 1980s were no longer the same as

³⁸ 'Organogram Ministerie van Landbouw, Visserij, Voedselzekerheid en Natuur'. <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/d7f5f075-85fc-49e5-a5d7-7339110b14cc/file>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

³⁹ D. Broersma, *Het Groene Front voorbij. De Agrarische belangenbehartiging door LTO Nederland 1995-2005*, (Groningen 2010).

⁴⁰ E.J. Krajenbrink, *Het Landbouwschap. 'Zelfgedragen verantwoordelijkheid' in de land- en tuinbouw, 1945-2001*.

those of the 1950s and pre-Second World War period. Farmers had become a small minority in rural areas; economically they were no longer dominant; politically, they were also not. Only in land use they remained dominant.⁴¹

The problems that arose in agriculture from 1990 onwards (mad cow disease, swine fever, dioxin-contaminated poultry; and in the twenty-first century foot-and-mouth disease, avian influenza, and Q-fever) were increasingly difficult to resolve under the old agricultural governance model, because they directly affected agricultural practice, which had become ever more 'industrialised'. Parts of Dutch society became more critical of agriculture, which among other things led to the formation of the Party for the Animals in 2002. Some farmers experienced the sometimes harsh criticism of agricultural practice as a rejection of, and insufficient recognition for, their achievements.

When in 1995 the central agricultural organisations merged into LTO Nederland, not long afterwards none of the participants in the Agricultural Board were able to sustain it. 'The ideal of collective action suddenly acquired a more individual, business-economic interpretation rather than a collective one,' as Krajenbrink observed.⁴² In 2000 it was formally abolished. The commodity and sector boards continued to exist – precisely because, in practice, many of the public tasks of the Agricultural Board had been administered through them. In 2015 they too were formally dissolved.⁴³ The VVD in particular, through MP Charlie Aptroot, had strongly advocated for this: he viewed the public-law business organisations as incompatible with free enterprise. He saw entrepreneurship as an individual endeavour, and not – as it had emerged in the nineteenth century – as a means to shape collective free enterprise within a democratic co-governance framework. The debate on the primacy of politics reflected that a very different climate had taken hold. In fact, the abolition of the sector boards ran counter to the downsizing of the ministry. Tasks reverted to the ministry, at least to its externalised services. At the same time, sectoral organisations were established under EU law to perform part of the functions of the former commodity boards, including the authority to set general rules and levy charges.⁴⁴

By around 2010, the hollowing out, decline, and dismantling of agricultural governance, which had taken shape after the Second World War but was largely a continuation of pre-war developments, had been completed without a clear new model having emerged. It can be said that the modernist solution of controlling social processes through the nation-state, which had functioned for most of the twentieth century, no longer sufficed in an era of marketisation, globalisation, individualisation, and digitalisation, in which authority, science, and control operated differently.⁴⁵ Agricultural co-governance and self-governance no longer existed. The share of the agricultural sector in the economy and employment had fallen to a minimal level;

⁴¹ A. Schuurman, 'De wording en verdwijning van het Nederlandse platteland als boerenland, vanaf 1870. Een ruimtelijke en sociale analyse'.

⁴² E.J. Krajenbrink, *Het Landbouwschap. 'Zelfgedragen verantwoordelijkheid' in de land- en tuinbouw, 1945-2001*, 397.

⁴³ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 'Einde product- en bedrijfschappen in zicht'.

https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/plenaire_verslagen/kamer_in_het_kort/einde_product_en_bedrijfschappen_in_zicht. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

⁴⁴ Kamerstuk 21501-32, nr. 788'. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-21501-32-788.html>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

⁴⁵ Zie: U. Beck, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. (Frankfurt 1986); A. Schuurman, 'Changing the narrative, again. Transitions and transformations.', *TSEG. The Low Countries Journal for Social and Economic History* 19.1 (2022) 87-109.

farmers' organisations were no longer the powerful entities of the 1950s with a large and closely connected membership; the public–private layer around agriculture had been dismantled; and the Ministry of Agriculture had been abolished. Rural areas had changed through suburbanisation and an influx of urban migrants. The agricultural sector itself had changed. Agriculture was no longer the mix of strong organisations, market, and government. In large part, the sector had become trapped in market forces, with a need for further intensification and specialisation to compete globally, while simultaneously facing government measures aimed at mitigating undesirable effects on landscape, animals, nature, and climate. The narrower agricultural layer remained partly cooperatively organised and therefore still in farmers' hands, but at the same time was highly centralised and distant from individual farmers. Courage and legitimacy (who could still provide them?) and the coalition of actors to overcome this impasse were still lacking.

What did occur, however, was that since 2019 the Netherlands once again saw the emergence of a farmers' party: the Farmer–Citizen Movement (BBB).⁴⁶ It was perhaps unsurprising that this happened at a moment when the debate about agriculture was no longer primarily administrative, but above all political. Behind the discussions about practical problems in agriculture, the question had increasingly become: what kind of agriculture can and does Dutch society still permit? Despite its name, the BBB focused primarily on defending existing agricultural interests, rather than advocating for a broader, green, acceptable, and productive form of agriculture.

Conclusion

In this situation, it was difficult in 2023 to reach an Agricultural Agreement in the manner of the agricultural governance model, in which sector, market, and government worked together. That model no longer existed, and the social conditions under which it functioned were also absent, as I have shown in this article. That this issue is not purely an agricultural problem, but a broader societal one; not purely a Dutch problem, but one that occurs in many societies, is self-evident and adds further complexity, as these different sectors and spaces actually influence one another.

Although there is no clear direction, this does not mean that nothing is happening or that nothing has been achieved in recent years. The chairperson of the (failed) Agricultural Agreement advocates learning from the experiences and organisation of that process, and establishing an agricultural table responsible for setting the agenda, monitoring implementation, and addressing generic policy developments.⁴⁷ Such an agricultural table could form a new coalition of actors. In addition, there are numerous serious proposals for a more sustainable agricultural sector.⁴⁸ Furthermore, there are sectoral and regional attempts to arrive at workable solutions.⁴⁹ Recently,

⁴⁶ Parlement.com, 'BBB (BoerBurgerBeweging)'. <https://www.parlement.com/partij/bbb-boerbürgerbeweging>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

⁴⁷ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2023/07/05/bijlage-2-verslag-landbouwakkoord>. Geraadpleegd 22 augustus 2025.

⁴⁸ E.g. Bijvoorbeeld: Imke J. De Boer en Martin K. van Ittersum, *Circularity in agricultural production*. Wageningen University & Research, 2018; A.P. Bos, e.a., *Wur-perspectieven op landbouw, voedsel en natuur*. Wageningen: WUR, 2023; Martijn Vink en Daan Boezeman. *Naar een wenkend perspectief voor de Nederlandse landbouw. Voorwaarden voor verandering*. Den Haag: Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving (PBL), 2018; Harry Lintsen, Frank Veraart, Jan-Pieter Smits, en John Grin. *De Kwetsbare Welvaart Van Nederland 1850-2050. Naar Een Circulaire Economie*. Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2018; <https://www.wkr.nl/documenten/rapporten/2024/12/11/briefadvies-boeren-in-een-veranderend-klimaat>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

⁴⁹ Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, *Gesloten vanwege stikstof. Achtergronden, uitwegen en lessen*. Groningen: Noordboek, 2023; Bettina Bock en Han Wiskerke. "Voedsel van ver en dichtbij. Verschuivende relaties in de voedselketen." In *Tien*

a number of organisations (government, sector parties, market and supply chain actors, and civil society organisations) agreed to a covenant on animal welfare in livestock farming, although others immediately claimed that it was insufficient.⁵⁰ On a completely different level, within the EU, the discussion on the Green Deal is ongoing.⁵¹

Activity abounds, but what remains absent is a widely accepted framework that can provide direction for solutions and legitimacy to coalitions of actors. In its absence, we can expect many protests and societal conflicts in the coming years.

essays over de internationale verwevenheid van ons voedselsysteem. Edited by Arjen Van der Heide: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2024, 113-123; <https://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/bij-gebrek-aan-overheidsbeleid-doen-deze-friese-boeren-zelf-aan-landschapsbeheer~b36e3beb/>; <https://www.nieuweoogst.nl/nieuws/2019/11/19/landbouw-collectief-bereikt-stikstofakkoord>; <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2025/07/30/de-bbb-gedeputeerde-die-strenger-wilde-zijn-dan-het-kabinet-kwam-tegenover-boeren-te-staan-hoe-meer-natuur-erbij-komt-hoe-minder-ruimte-wij-krijgen-a4901720>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

⁵⁰ <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/f978da79-eca3-4c7e-a8d1-460c977871ae/file>; <https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/opinie-we-zullen-later-met-schaamte-en-afschuw-terugkijken-op-het-systeem-van-dierenleed~b2fb6091/>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

⁵¹ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en; <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/duurzame-economie/green-deal>. Accessed on 22 augustus 2025.

Figures

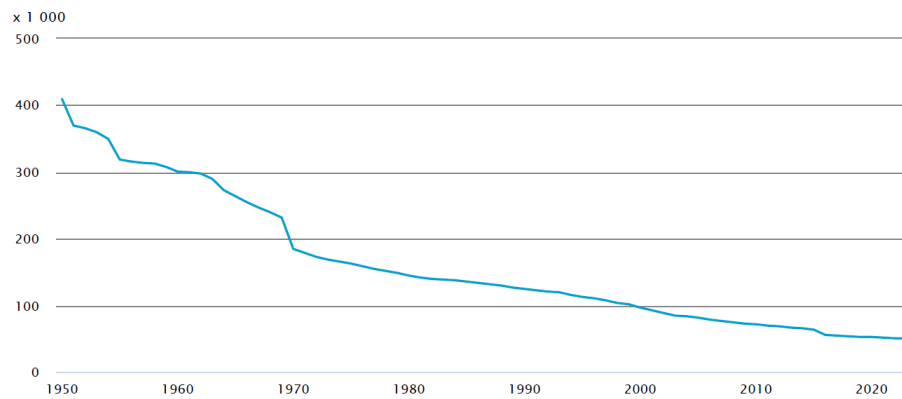


Fig. 1: Total number of agricultural holdings (CBS, *Developments in Agriculture in Figures*. https://dashboards.cbs.nl/v4/dashboard_landbouw/. Accessed 5 September 2025).

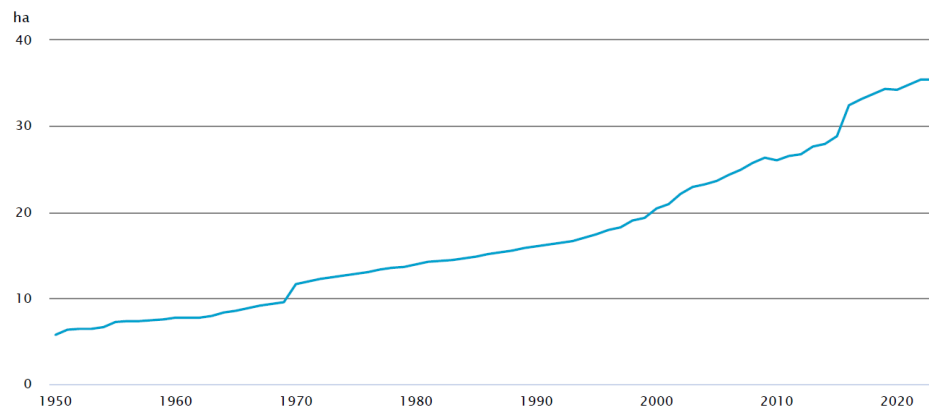


Fig. 2: Average cultivated area per holding (CBS, *Developments in Agriculture in Figures*. https://dashboards.cbs.nl/v4/dashboard_landbouw/. Accessed 5 September 2025).