Framing regionalisation: how a Dutch environmental organisation puts the concept of sustainability into practice through frame alignment

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Introduction

Social movements and environmental organisations play an important role in setting regional sustainability agendas, yet their roles vary greatly. Some organisations are closely involved in particular policy domains bearing on regional development, such as transport, housing or land use development. Others aim for more 'fundamental' roles, aspiring to change the basic perspective and ideas of spatial-economic development. This paper will focus on one organisation pursuing such a strategy, namely Stichting Aarde (Foundation Earth, http://www.aarde.org/) in Utrecht, The Netherlands. Stichting Aarde (SA) participates in, and tries to initiate local development projects in which its key ambition is to foster *regionalisation*. It seeks, for instance, to nurture local buyer-supplier relations, the local consumption of regional products (reducing interregional trade), local entrepreneurship and social cohesion, as part of an overall ambition to increase sustainability and regional self-reliance. These initiatives are grafted onto an intellectual debate and vision that has been developed through a series of publications, as well as participation in a variety of international networks on sustainability.

Framing

Our research focuses on the way SA shapes and uses concepts of regionalisation when developing and carrying out initiatives and projects, and how this bears on the Foundation's position and performance. The key perspective underpinning this paper is that of *framing*. Frames are understood as culturally constructed interpretative schemata that enable agents to locate, perceive and label occurrences. Framing can be defined and interpreted along various lines. A first distinction can be made between two levels at which frames are constructed and operating, namely the individual and the collective level. At the *individual* level, frames present the outcomes of accumulated and evolving individual attitudes and perceptions guiding individual action; at the *collective* level, they reflect the result of the negotiation of shared meaning (Benford and Snow, 2000). One of the interesting questions is how within a social movement organisation such as SA, individual frames relate to, and resonate with, collective action frames (CAFs). Second, frames can also be characterised along a more *discursive* dimension, bearing on the selection and shaping of ideas, and a more *organisational* dimension, related to processes of communication, persuasion and steering of action. Social movement organisations try to bring perspectives and frames of target groups more in line with their own through a process called *frame alignment*. Generally, four types of frame alignment are distinguished, each manifesting a particular mix between discursive and organisational elements:

1. *frame bridging*, i.e. aligning the frames of agents with more or less the same action logic or frame of reference,
2. *frame amplification*, defined as "the clarification and invigoration of an interpretive frame that bears on a particular issue, problem or set of events" (Snow et al., 1986: 469),
3. *frame extension*, extending the boundaries of the (collective) action frame and,
4. *frame transformation*, involving the development and framing of a new (collective) action frame.

A third distinction that can be made is that between a forward and backward dimension of frame development and alignment. The *forward* dimension generally receives most attention, and involves the way existing and new ideas are shaped and politically and strategically positioned in a wider environment. The *backward* dimension refers to the sourcing of frame elements, i.e. the selective drawing on existing discourses, and the choice for particular narratives and ideas. It is obvious that the backward and forward dimension are closely intertwined. The choice for particular ideas and narratives is closely associated with the kind of advocacy and strategic positioning pursued by an agency. Yet, while most accounts of

framing pay some attention to the backward dimension, there is not much attention for how this enables as well as constraints the scope for 'forward' action. This relationship will be central in our examination of the processes of framing manifested by SA. What we want to explore, hence, is the political positioning of the ideational standing of a social movement by first tracing the origins of its collective action frame (CAF), followed by an examination of the collective action frame 'in action', and completed by an assessment of how these two aspects hang together.

Stichting Aarde's advocacy of sustainability and regionalisation

SA's activities are based on a CAF through which it understands the world and the meaning of sustainability, and through which it shapes its strategies and practices. A selection of ideas and theories drawn from a broader critical literature forms the basis of this frame. How does SA interpret and translate more abstract notions on regionalisation and sustainability when shaping its own collective action frame? How does it, on the basis of its own ideational standing, engage in processes of frame alignment? What kind of discrepancies and inconsistencies can we discover when we follow the trail from 'fundamental' ideas to regional project development in action? What is the power of the 'communicating texts' the organisation conveys (Entman, 1993)? How could, on the basis of these insights, an environmental organisation like SA improve its outreach? The empirical work is based on a close reading of the 'communicating texts' of SA, ranging from the website and project flyers to pamphlets and philosophical monographs, and interviews with internal staff as well as outsiders involved in SA's activities.

Starting with the 'backward' side of frame development, SA emerged in the early 1970s as part of a wider social and environmental movement attacking the relentless and compulsory growth and expansion of the capitalist 'neoliberal' economic system. Main theorist and founder of SA, Willem Hoogendijk, provides an extensive theoretical analysis of the negative impact of the growth compulsion, notably upon the world's ecological resources (Hoogendijk, 1991). Drawing on the work of the Swiss economist Binswanger (e.g. Binswanger, 1991), Hoogendijk's analysis centres on the role of money. Under capitalism, money has changed its role from providing an instrument of exchange to being a major driver of the economic system, inducing a constant need for reinvestment and ruthless expansion. To enable a transition ('revolution') to a genuinely sustainable economy, Hoogendijk advocates the return to a system of 'steady state economics', as developed by authors ranging from the 'classical'

economist John Stuart Mill to critical economists such as Herman Daly (Daly, 1991). The story combines fundamental concepts from physics, notably entropy, with notions of the 'human scale', the importance of immaterial values, social (and other, non-pecuniary forms of) capital and our relationship with nature.

Within SA, Hoogendijk's economic account is combined with more humanistic, and pragmatically oriented perspectives of other staff members. While Hoogendijk conveys the need for a paradigmatic shift in the way the economic system is working, most SA activities are oriented primarily to inducing and facilitating local collaboration geared towards sustainability. In terms of frame alignment, Hoogendijk is championing frame *transformation*, while most SA activities are more geared towards frame *amplification* and frame *extension*. Against this background, the region represents both an arena for broader engagement with a global agenda of fundamental change ('think globally, act locally') and a practical arena for human-oriented project development. Yet, while regionalisation thus emerges as a central theme, individual staff members continue to hold on to rather different perspectives on what the organisation's practical focus should be. Moreover, while certain issues are undoubtedly well developed and, to a reasonable level, rooted in broader discourses on sustainability and globalisation, the exploration of other issues still remains wanting. In particular, this applies to issues that feature in local projects such as the endorsement of intraregional trade and the development of local food chains.

Given the state of the 'backward' dimension, it is not surprising that the 'forward' dimension is causing considerable headaches. Throughout its history, SA has found it difficult to define its target group, the practices it aspires to change, and to strike a balance between its more ideological and pragmatic aspirations. This is due partly to the fact that the staff members vary greatly in their affinity with more abstract work on the one hand, and 'concrete' project development, on the other. It is also due to the fact that, within the broader discussion on sustainability, there is little consensus to what extent one should aim for a 'paradigmatic shift' or a 'revolution', and how that can be achieved. The result is that SA lacks a view on how it wants to *perform*. Some external observers argue for a dual strategy, with a more theoretical and practical strand, although it is not clear how this could match the present individual preferences and perspectives. It is also clear that, given the lack of a congruous collective action frame, the issue of frame *alignment* remains an unsolved problem.

Outlook

Promoting sustainable regions requires proactive *agents* that provide persuasive narratives as well as frames of action. Elaborating the concept of framing along a 'backward' and 'forward' dimension, we have sought to illustrate the practical problems one such agent faces in inducing an agenda of change. While Stichting Aarde spans the whole chain of critical work from fundamental analysis to project development, it has so far failed to shape a shared frame of action and a strategy for frame alignment. Partly this is due to the complexity of the issue of regionalisation itself, and partly to the specific individuals active in the organisation, bringing in their own frames of action.

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