

Progressive Planning

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Fighting Displacement in Barcelona



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Fight Against Fracking in Rural Netherlands

From Community Meetings to Decision-making

Paul Benneworth and Willem-Jan Velderman

IN LATE 2014, in our home region of Twente, the Netherlands, the local newspaper reported that the Dutch National Oil Company (NAM) was meeting with local citizens to give them information about the injection of waste water from oil drilling operations (an extraction technique similar to *fracking*) in the area. The report came some three years after the pumping had started. The story set off alarm bells. Why would a company organize meetings to tell residents about something that had been happening legally for more than three years?

More than a year of organizing and meetings followed, during which time the NAM had to suspend pumping and the Netherlands declared a ten-year moratorium on fracking in response to widespread opposition. This is a story of how local residents were able to unmask the manipulation masquerading as citizen participation, gather information and develop knowledge about fracking, and insist on a more democratic approach based on open discussion and full disclosure by the authorities and NAM.



Paul Benneworth is a senior researcher at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente, the Netherlands.



Willem-Jan Velderman is a research assistant at the University of Twente, the Netherlands and is currently working on the Plugging In Smart Citizens as ExpertS (PISCES) project.

Community Meetings Sow Distrust

Residents were clearly unhappy at the initial public meetings. Their questions were either unanswered or brushed off with general reassurances that fracking was safe. Some residents spotted discrepancies in the case that the NAM was putting forth. There were minor inconsistencies in the company's information about the depth of waste injections, temperatures and pressures that sowed doubts among local citizens. It turned out that some of those who raised these questions were well informed about the process of extracting oil and disposing of waste water. A core group had already been active for years in opposition to the granting of the initial permits.

In the late 2000s, the NAM had applied for permits for water injection and to change the use of pumping stations from extraction to injection. In their challenge, the citizens had assembled an impressive dossier of evidence that challenged many of the claims made in the permit applications, and they appealed to the Dutch Council of State to overturn the granting of the permit. But their appeals at the time were deemed inadmissible on the grounds that they were not directly party to the process nor were they sufficiently expert. To the untrained eye, they were not as slick as the stylish presentations and consultancy reports offered by the NAM, but they did challenge NAM's version of events in a number of key areas.

The process took on a new dimension as local politicians started panicking in the wake of the series of reports on waste water injection that appeared on the local

television station in December 2014. In three broadcasts, a number of external experts pointed to the possible risks of subsidence, sinkholes and worse. These local citizen-experts were also given a platform to explain their position, and the knowledge they had assembled for the licensing challenge three years previously. The television reports were thus the first real reporting in which both sides to the story were presented.

From Environmental Impact Analysis to a 10-year Moratorium

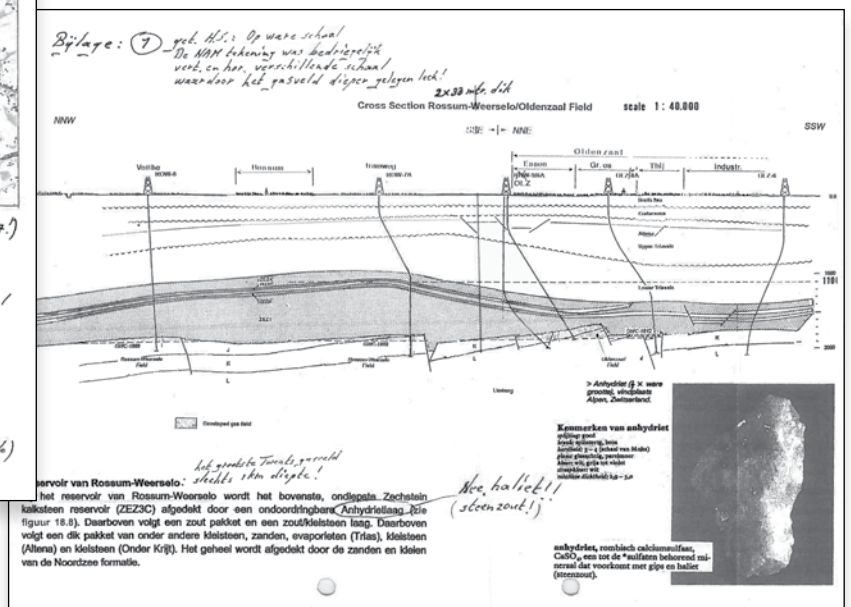
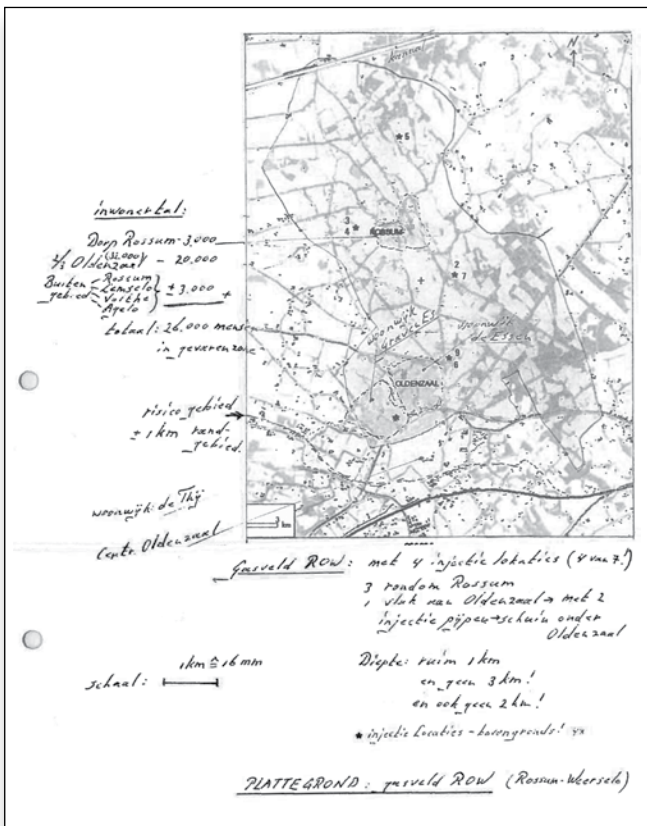
Following the television reports, the political weather in the region turned against waste water injection. A number of existing problems that were closely associated with the injection practices were revealed, including subsidence in houses near points of injection and a leak at a pumping station. Despite a supposedly vigilant monitoring regime claimed by

NAM and regulators, the leak was spotted when an alert dairy farmer saw the waste water leaking.

The Dutch Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) dating to 2007 had evaluated injection against other possible solutions and identified injection as being the best alternative in terms of cost, technical safety and environmental impact. The provincial government announced in late 2015 that its evaluation would follow that methodology, but also include social acceptability as a factor in this reassessment.

This evaluation was to be carried out by an engineering consultant, but shortly after this announcement, the Province stated that it could see no legal grounds to challenge the injection permit. At the time of writing, the NAM declared that there was no way to match the consultants' methodology with social acceptability, and it remains to be seen whether this re-evaluation will indeed heed citizens' clearly stated desires.

After the meeting in late 2015, in December a group named Stop, a group named *Stop Waste Water in Twente* was formed by a broad constellation of concerned citizens. They started gathering signatures on a petition, signed at a press conference led by local European parliamentarian Annie Schreijer-Pierik, who announced that she would raise questions about the practice in Brussels at the European Parliament.



Pages from the "Citizen Expert Dossier" highlight the less polished and improvised character of citizen involvement.

Helped by their presence at a number of Mardi Gras parades in local villages, the campaign reached a total of 30,000 signatures within three months. This petition played to a growing sense of unease over what was being done invisibly underground. Indeed, in early 2016 the Dutch Lower House voted in favor of a fracking moratorium to 2025, in direct opposition to previous government proposals.

Technical Knowledge and Decision-making

As progressives we are actively following the anti-injection campaign, and even had a poster in our window at home. As local residents we hope its success allows us to continue living in a pristine environment unsullied by environmental disasters. But as planners, we worry that there is little consideration of what went wrong in the permit-granting process. Even with hindsight, it is impossible for those of us who are not experts to judge whether waste water injection is safe, reasonable and desirable. What does seem indefensible from a planning perspective is the way citizen knowledge was excluded from a permit-granting process that could be regarded as rigged against the interests of local residents.

Politicians cannot be expected to pore over every tiny decision regarding changes in land use. The process of granting a permit was put on a fast track because at the time it was judged to have no significant environmental impact. This meant that the conditions for review promoted decision-making that avoided controversy and secured fast permit approvals. For many planners, the alternative would have been a much longer and more difficult process subject to political criteria. If too many decisions become political, then the system will grind to a halt, and fundamentally fail in making land available for socially beneficial development.

What happened in Twente over a decade ago was that citizens wanted to challenge NAM's assertion that the injection activity fulfilled the requirements of the permit granting process, that it had no significant negative environmental impact. The NAM had used the EIA to claim that the injection met formal requirements, technical standards, environmental assessment and financial con-

siderations. Completed EIAs are filed at a central office where the NAM is, unsurprisingly, a frequent applicant.

With the knowledge we have today, it is clear that the fracking case would have benefited from a more politically conscious approach that would take into account citizen knowledge. It is therefore the task of progressive planners to consider how we can do that given the limitations we face.

Planning With Citizens as Consultants

We face a shift towards a post-industrial sustainable society, where the balance between growth, social justice and environmental protection is not clear-cut. This makes harnessing citizen knowledge all the more important as a way of making our societies places where more of our citizens can do more of the things they value.

In gathering knowledge, policy-makers took soundings from consultants, professional companies widely acknowledged for their general expertise in assembling information in accordance with a proposal. Citizens were allowed to participate and express emotions, feelings and beliefs, but were not listened to when they presented objective evidence.

Yet in this case it was locally-specific citizen knowledge rather than generic, transferrable knowledge that would have allowed politicians to take control of a decision in 2008 which later became controversial. For us, the message is clear: citizens must not be restricted to the role of passive participants but allowed to become consultants using their knowledge in the process.

There is clearly a huge space for the involvement of citizens as knowledge consultants in local decision-making processes. It is surprising that policy-makers fund universities, businesses and even charities to provide them with strategic knowledge, but do not allow local residents to play that role. When local media in Twente put citizens in that position, we see there was a turning point, and we ask why that did not happen five years ago?

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