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### **Planning the Netherlands Europe's next metropolis, maybe**

*That's what Dutch plans for an extra 2m people could lead to*

The Netherlands has 16m inhabitants. By 2030 it expects, thanks largely to immigration, to have 18m. Where are the extra bodies to go?

That is no new question for this crowded country: in the almost pre-pill 1960s, horrified planners expected 20m people by now. But it is still a big question, for all the new forecast's wide margins of error, and not one that the orderly (and labour-led) Dutch, even in these free-market days, will leave to sort itself out. It is especially acute for the area called the Randstad, bounded roughly by Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and The Hague. This area, even more crowded, with over 6m people is the motor of the economy. Can the market be left free to keep it that way?

For decades, until the mid-1990s official policy was to disperse the rising population across the country. It never worked: people and money go where people money are. The new towns of Almere and Lelystad, on the last swathe of land reclaimed from the IJsselmeer, are de facto satellites of Amsterdam. Yet it is still debatable whether to stop trying. Predictably, the environment ministry leans toward seeking to manage development, those of the economy and of finance toward letting the market have its way. (all, of course, within reason: these are the Dutch.)

Not that it is clear what the market wants. The Randstad cities have grown, but the big recent growth has been in smaller ones elsewhere, as in the electronics area round Eindhoven, home of Philips. Nor is the Randstad a unit. Amsterdam does well on Schiphol airport, tourism and finance; Utrecht on services (and nice surroundings). The Hague thrives on government. But Rotterdam lives off its port, the prime port of the Ruhr, 120 km (75 miles) to the east. When German industry suffers, so has it, and it still does.

### **A new metropolis**

Hence an idea that has made rapid ground in the past two years: let's really treat the Randstad as a unit, not just a group of four large and sundry minor cities. Call it "Deltametropolis", no longer an overpopulated region but a single, thinly populated city, a conurbation to rival any in Europe. And the "green heart" of farmland and water in the midst? See that as its central park, an internal equivalent of London's "green belt".

The city councils concerned, happy to challenge the orthodoxy of dispersal, were swift to back this idea in 1998. The environment ministry has taken it up, in its latest 20-year look ahead at the shape of the Netherlands, issued in draft last winter and due for parliamentary approval this autumn. It may sound no more than a fun new name and a change of public image. In fact, far more is involved. The would-be "Deltametropolis" is the biggest land-use planning issue in Western Europe.

Green belts keep cities apart; a metropolis is joined-up - just what most planners seek to avoid. Can it be done without turning that central "park", already being nibbled away by the builders, into a central sprawl? No problem, say enthusiasts: restrain the building and improve the transport. Any part of the new metropolis should be within an hour of any other. Today it can easily take 90 minutes to drive from Rotterdam to Amsterdam, and even the efficient Dutch railways are creaking.

So? Well, double some rail tracks, and - besides planned long-distance high-speed rail lines - maybe build a high-speed "inner circle" round the Randstad. But rail alone cannot take the strain; that is a green fantasy. So improve the roads, while limiting motorway access, to deter local traffic. Improve bus services, and bring in high-frequency "taxis" (which, at European wages, is a Deltametropolis fantasy).

In sum - murder the green heart - reply environmentalists. "Build a road or railway and the houses will follow" says one

And "central park" be damned. The land should be used, as it is now, for a mixture of recreation - not least watersports, on its many lakes and waterways - and (mainly) dairy farming. It should not, as the greens fear, become semi-urban space or be used for glasshouses, which earn far more and employ far more people than do cows.

There is also a peculiarly Dutch snag: water. Most of the green heart is peat bog, drained in past centuries, and still sinking, parts quite rapidly. More variable climate and the canalization of small rivers has raised the risk of flooding in a wet winter. Plenty of space is needed (here the rivals agree) if flood is not to become disaster. How it is to be done and paid for no one is sure: where is the huge money needed to pay farmers whose land would be designated as real reservoirs or potential flood plains. But even were it practical, here, to environmentalists, is another argument for leaving well alone the green heart.

Yet is it well? Farming is under pressure already. The typical green-heart farm is a modest family business of 40-60 milking cows - and milk earns 15% less than two years ago. Yet land, even when not zoned for building, can sell for 100,000 guilders a hectare (\$16,000 an acre), as pasture for some town-dweller's horses, maybe. Most farmers want to stay as such, and they have learned to earn by other means. Their war of 20 years ago with the environmentalists has recently become an alliance. They use fewer chemicals than before. Over half of all green-heart dairy farmers, via local co-operatives, are paid to conserve the environment. A meadow bird's nest, for instance, can earn 20 guilders, even 100 for a rare species. Yet the result is still a poor living. Change is inevitable: the planners guess that up to a fifth of the country's farmland may not be such by 2030, and the Randstad will lose its share.

It will get more than its share of the extra 950,000-1.9m houses that planners guess the country will need by 2030, and the 740,000-2.2m workplaces. Inevitably, say the builders: this is where people want to go. Yet the builders are cautious. They too are trying to make peace with the green movement - "extreme, but that's the way the public is going," says one. And the Deltametropolis idea? Yes, but. Builders too worry that the cities might run into each other: the customers for the up-market houses they want to build will want up-market surroundings.

### **Maybe, maybe**

The debate - let alone future reality - is still open. Critics ask who needs a metropolis; hold down development in the Randstad, and encourage it in the nicer and emptier places even more in demand, to its south and east. Whatever the way ahead, officials reckon they can meet public fears, whether of sprawl or traffic gridlock. Use city space intensively; redevelop decayed industrial areas for multiple uses, housing included, which thins traffic; enforce zoning limits strictly, as often is not done now. Road-pricing and smart roads (eg, ones that can bring in extra lanes to meet peak demand, or control speeds electronically) can raise capacity. So can smart train-control. If new links are needed, parts can go underground, like 9km of the proposed high-speed rail line across the green heart.

Maybe, but will the public believe it? Here is a country where plans for a new freight railway, the Betuwe line linking Rotterdam's Europoort with the Ruhr, aroused fierce controversy, even though much of the route runs alongside an existing motorway. Europe's new metropolis may well happen, in higgledy-piggledy fashion, anyway. But the issues are big, and not just for the Dutch.