

Policy Process and SEA in parallel

Spatial Vision Overijssel

The new Spatial Vision of the province of Overijssel sets out spatial developments and investments to take place between now and 2030. The Spatial Vision makes policy decisions in many areas: accessibility, the future of agriculture, water safety, nature, and so on. To make deliberate choices on these matters, a sound knowledge base is necessary. This has been provided by an SEA which was undertaken in parallel with the policy process. The SEA provided input throughout the development of the Spatial Vision – both in terms of substance as well as process. The SEA has helped to define policy goals and has put various issues on the agenda for policy dialogue. In the next stage, the knowledge that has been compiled in the SEA can be used in monitoring.

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To draft the Spatial Vision, and the investment program that is derived from it, a solid foundation is needed for the policy choices that have to be made. In this article we describe how the necessary expertise and information for these choices was made available and how it was used in the various decision-making steps. The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) that was made for the Spatial Vision proved an important instrument to provide the knowledge input needed. Throughout the process, the SEA was the one-stop-shop for various knowledge questions that the authors of the Spatial Vision had. In this article, we will explain how the SEA process supported the policy process, what the added value of the SEA was, and what we can learn from the approach that was followed.

In the summer of 2009, the Provincial Assembly of the province of Overijssel adopted a "Spatial Vision". This new strategic plan revised and incorporates the operative regional plan, water management plan, traffic and transportation plan, environmental policy plan and soil policy. The Spatial Vision also informs the investment program of the province, which was finalised in 2009 as well. Through this investment programme the province will invest 2 billion euro in the next twenty years (2009–2025). To complete the planning framework, the province established a comprehensive provincial ordinance, which accommodates new spatial regulation established at the national level. Overijssel now has a comprehensive vision, a clear policy framework and an investment strategy. In combination, these three determine the role of the province in future spatial developments.



Deventer and the IJssel

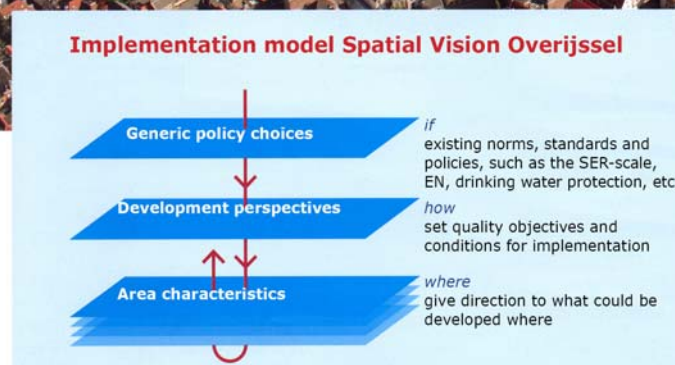


Figure 1 Implementation model Spatial Vision Overijssel

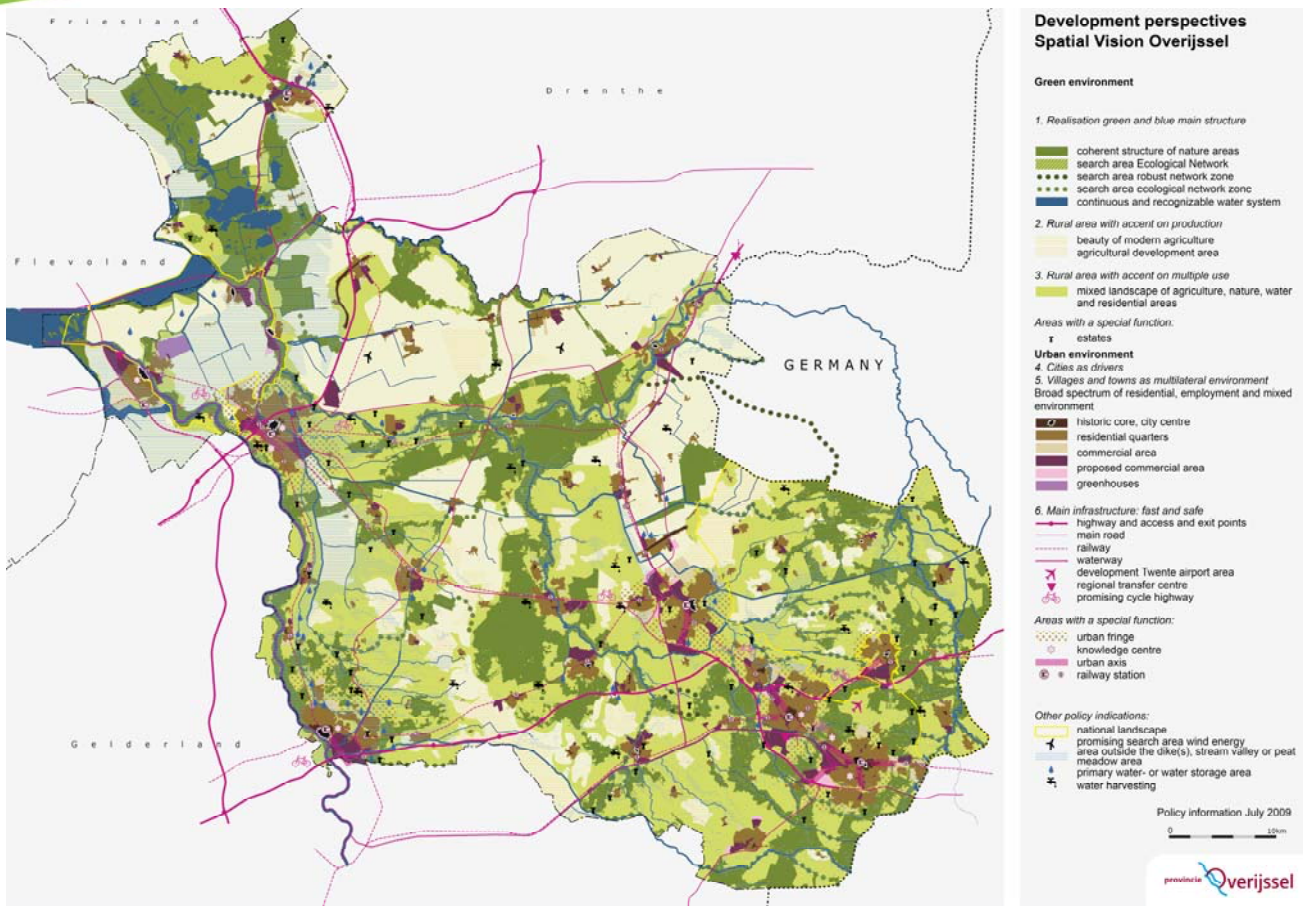


Figure 2 Development perspectives Spatial Vision Overijssel.

Spatial Vision: purpose, approach, content

Purpose

The ambition of the province for this Spatial Vision is to give a development perspective for the next 20 years, for the whole physical spatial domain of the province. The vision must be consistent with the societal issues that feature in the province and also compatible with the role the province can play in resolving these issues.

Approach

To clarify the role the province can have in developments in the physical environment, as well as which instruments fit this role, an on-going dialogue was organized with partners (national government, local government, companies and various civil society organisations). This way the cooperation amongst these partners, which is so crucial for the implementation of the Spatial Vision, started early, with the joint formulation of key policy questions and possible future perspectives. The overall vision on regional development that was established early in this dialogue was an important guide for the on-going policy discussions for the Spatial Vision. This early vision was based on a 'notification of intent' document, a 'building blocks' memo and a "View of Overijssel" statement. The latter two outlined key policy directions and themes. The 'notification of intent' sketched the planning process, and also outlined the scope and level of detail of the SEA.

Content

The Spatial Vision has four recurring themes:

- sustainability: facilitating socio-economic development that is future-proof;
- moving towards quality: preserving and enhancing spatial and environmental quality;
- vital coalitions: room for partners' input and focus on feasible implementation;
- creative solutions: multipurpose, appropriate / unorthodox arrangements, dynamics and quality.

These themes are addressed in an implementation model for the Spatial Vision. This implementation model represents a new planning approach, whereby the Province focuses less on allocating activities to locations, and more on providing a general framework for detailed planning decisions. This gives local authorities and private sector initiators more freedom to design the developments in their area, while at the same time ensuring that regional ambitions are not compromised. The Spatial Visions' implementation model sets out a three level development process for initiatives within the Province. Figure 1 shows the three levels of the Spatial Vision implementation model.

Any initiative should first be tested against the generic policy choices that have already been made (the top layer in Figure 1). These include national decisions that are set out in existing policies and in regulation and legislation. Think, for example, about areas reserved for water retention or the so-called SER-scale. The SER-scale dictates that use of existing buildings and restructuring needs to take place before expansion of built space can occur.

The next step is to determine where this initiative might be located. The Development Perspectives (middle level in Figure 1) is a map which gives direction to what can be developed where. These Perspectives show what the province prioritises in which area. For example, when the Development Perspective intends areas for “realisation of a green–blue main structure” (based on water and nature features), these areas are not considered suitable for the construction of a business park. The Development Perspective also deals with the tension between the combination of modern industrial agriculture and diversified agriculture. The map for Development Perspectives (Figure 2) indicates which areas have potential for further development of agriculture (for example up scaling in agricultural developing areas can take place in Salland–Twente) and in which areas agricultural production should be less intensive and combined with activities that make the most of the beauty of the landscape (for example National Park Sallandse Heuvelrug). In these last areas, farms can combine agricultural production with services such as tourism, leisure and nature. In this way the provincial interests are spatially allocated.

If an initiative fits within policies and a suitable location has been found, then the third step is to design the proposed activity in a way that best suits the local characteristics. These area characteristics are identified in a Catalogue (lowest level in Figure 1). The Catalogue provides detailed overviews of the characteristics of the different areas. For each separate area type this catalogue describes, for the entire surface, the characteristics, aspirations, development and management of four layers (the layer of natural features, layer of the agricultural landscape, the urban layer and a layer for recreation & cultural heritage). Provincial objectives and management measures are described per characteristic.

Based on these three levels in the implementation model:

- tools from the Spatial Planning Act can be employed;
- consultations will take place;
- programs and projects are formulated; and
- investments can be made.

Clarifying policy goals

A Spatial Vision encompasses all topics related to the spatial layout of a province. There are many topics, and the SEA supported the development of the Vision by structuring them in an assessment framework. In the SEA the topics were categorized according to the following goals: welfare, prosperity and natural resources (in other words: “people, profit, planet”). This assessment framework was also sustainable development yard stick by which to measure the different options for the Spatial Vision. A number of topics which are high on the government agenda were added to the framework, such as production conditions for agriculture, quality of life in the city, the accessibility of work locations, and bicycle and public transport. This categorization by the authors of the SEA gave the project team a clear structure to further develop the spatial plan: they could easily explain which item had to be addressed in the Future Spatial Vision and how. By putting the items together, it also

became clear where tensions arise. Such as, for example, in areas where farmers want to up scale agricultural production, but where the core qualities of the landscape also need to be maintained.

Knowledge questions for policy impacts

Consistent storylines about future developments were translated into spatial images by using a method developed by the National Environmental Assessment Agency. For the SEA, a future scenario was made for Overijssel in 2040 based on continuation of existing policies, as well as a scenario for the next 30 years based on the new policies that were developed by the Spatial Vision project team. This helped to provide insight into the differences in the possible outcomes between new and existing policies.

Usually an SEA assesses a reference variant (the business as usual option), a proposed policy and a number of policy alternatives. In the Overijssel case, because there were several strategic discussions ongoing at once, it was decided not to develop and evaluate detailed alternative spatial strategies. Only those options that were specifically requested on the basis of the ongoing policy dialogues were further developed and assessed, and this mostly took place at an early stage in plan development. For example, there was a request to make a spatial solution in which problems with noise pollution and safety were resolved as much as possible. This solution then translated into a condition for the scenarios in the model of the Assessment Agency: no buildings were allowed near key infrastructure and selected industrial sites. The resulting Spatial Vision also fit inside the Development Perspectives map of the implementation model.

Preparing for the policy dialogue

To make sure that the SEA matched the policy dialogue to the best extent possible, the assessment took place in two rounds:

- very early in the policy process – in the drafting of the ‘View of Overijssel’, the document prepared for the start of the policy dialogue –
- and a second time during the preparation of the draft Spatial Vision.

The first round consisted of a quick evaluation based on existing literature, while the second assessment was based on detailed calculations and expert meetings. During these meetings, project team members and experts discussed the potential effects of the policy choices. Using research by the Wageningen University, for example, the borders of the National Ecological Network and the effects of long–term nature development were reviewed. It turned out that the policy goals for protection of grassland birds were not yet included in the draft Spatial Vision. The texts of the draft were adjusted after deliberations with the authors of the SEA. The effects of the new spatial policy for accessibility were separately compared to existing policies, with the help of experts from Goudappel Coffeng, a consultancy specialised in traffic and transport issues. The evaluation tables for this aspect were completed based on the meetings with these experts.

Ensuring the quality of the SEA

In the Netherlands, all SEAs are reviewed by the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment. This Commission is an independent expert body that checks whether the SEA report is accurate, and adequate for decision-making. Review by the Commission is a regulatory requirement, but the Commission can also advise on a voluntary basis during other stages in the SEA process. In the case of the Spatial Vision, the Commission was twice asked to advise on the scope of the SEA: the first time on the basis of the starting notice, and again five months later when the SEA approach had been further developed. In its scoping advice the Commission suggested that the Province more precisely specify its key objectives and better operationalise those sustainability criteria in the assessment framework that were likely to make a difference in decision-making. Later in the process, when the Commission reviewed the completed SEA, it complemented the province on the way

- The draft Spatial Vision makes a positive contribution to the quality of the landscape, the diversity in living environments and the accessibility of businesses.
- However, as said earlier, some persistent problems will remain unsolved: noise pollution in urban areas, the need to reduce energy consumption and increase the share of sustainable energy in the total energy package in the province. Also the aim to improve the environmental conditions in and around sensitive natural landscapes will not be achieved. Even though there is a strong reduction of damaging emissions from agriculture, the concentrations remain too high for the desired development of nature. The province has concluded that this problem cannot be solved at the provincial level. Together with the national government and other concerned parties, the province is now looking for solutions. Precisely because of the results of the SEA, these persistent problems are now getting priority in the investment programs.

Farm restructuring near Tubbergen



in which the SEA was attuned to the planning process. The Commission also pointed out that the Provinces Spatial Vision would not resolve a number of existing environmental problems. It advised the Province to be clear in the SEA about the consequences of the persistence of these problems for its own environmental objectives, and to specify measures on these issues for the implementation of the Spatial Vision.

SEA results

The main conclusions from the SEA for the draft Spatial Vision showed that:

The policy process and SEA in parallel

As has been explained above, the policy process and SEA application for the Spatial Vision Overijssel ran in parallel. After completion of the project, the project team of the Spatial Vision noted that the SEA had added value in the following way:

- The SEA helped to show the relationship between different spatial information dossiers, by developing spatial scenarios. In these scenarios, the SEA identified concrete sustainable solutions, and as a result the discussion on sustainable development did not get stuck in abstract concepts.

- Because an initial qualitative sustainability assessment took place early in the policy process, this knowledge could be included in the preparation for policy dialogues. This way, insights brought forward from the SEA process could already be used in the preliminary consultations.
- The early assessment rounds highlighted which knowledge gaps still existed. As a result, further investigation into accessibility took place. The results of this investigation could be used when responding to public submission as well as in the discussion within the Provincial Executive Board.
- The contents of the SEA were used by other governments, citizens and various stakeholders in formulating their submissions to the Spatial Plan. And in its official response to these formal submissions, the province of Overijssel often referred to the SEA as well.

Recommendations for future SEAs

Parallel undertaking of the future spatial vision and the SEA places demands on how the two processes are organized and how the involved experts cooperate. In drawing up a spatial vision, a distinction can be made between three processes: drawing up the vision (negotiation), making the development perspectives (design) and the foundations underpinning vision and design (calculation). The following recommendations are relevant for future SEA practitioners:

- Make clear agreements on the role of the SEA and the (interim) results to be delivered. In this case, the structure of the policy dialogue asked for two assessment rounds: a quick scan and a more comprehensive assessment. In each SEA case the needs will be different, and even while an SEA process is underway, it may turn out to be necessary to adjust the assessment approach and the number of assessment rounds.
- Create ample room for discussion. In the Overijssel case regular meetings were held to talk about progress in the policy dialogue and in the SEA. The authors of the SEA were always informed about the key issues in the decision-makers' debate. Conversely, interim results in the SEA process were shared with the spatial vision project team.
- Thirdly, the chosen approach calls for a common information base. This has been a challenge in the Overijssel spatial vision process. The designers who elaborated the development perspectives and documented the area characteristics, used their own databases. These turned out to be difficult to share because the data could not easily be converted into a GIS format, which was what was used in the SEA. As a result, the authors of the SEA had a lot of extra work converting and comparing data. This problem may resolve itself in the near future, because new legal requirements dictate that all data should be available digitally.

A point of particular interest is the assessment framework in the SEA. As the provincial interests for the Spatial Vision of Overijssel were developed, the assessment framework of the SEA was used as checklist. To serve this function, the assessment framework should

focus on the sustainability issues that the authors of the plan recognise as relevant. If this is not the case, it is recommended to have a thorough discussion on this discrepancy. It means that the SEA is apparently not addressing the key spatial considerations, or that the planning team is making insufficient use of the assessment framework of the SEA in developing the different planning perspective.

What next?

In the approach chosen by Overijssel, the SEA was an important component of the knowledge base for the debate on the physical environment. The interaction between the planning process and the SEA had added value for decision-making on the Spatial Vision for the province of Overijssel. Has the role of the SEA been played out? No, certainly not. The completion of the Spatial Vision is a significant step, but it is also a prelude to the planning steps still to come. Based on signals from society and on consultations with governmental authorities, the Spatial Vision will be adjusted, further detailed and gradually implemented. Monitoring also plays a part. An SEA can be a component of the monitoring strategy for the plan. The province wants to use the set of indicators developed in the SEA in the evaluation of plan implementation. Data collected for the SEA can also be used as a baseline measurement for monitoring. In this way, the SEA is an important element in the interplay between vision development and policy implementation.

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