

REVIEW ARTICLES AND REPORTS

Cornelis M. J. van WOERKUM^{*}, Marie N. C. AARTS^{*},
Margriet van der POEL^{**}

COMMUNICATION IN POLICY PROCESSES: reflections from the Netherlands

1. INTRODUCTION

In spatial and in environmental policy making communication is a subject that gets more and more attention. Governments have to inform the people about existing plans, but communication is also used as an instrument to implement certain plans, like nature conservation plans, or – and this is quite another function – to formulate such a plan in interaction with societal groups.

We will discuss the place of communication in policy processes in general, with special attention to the Dutch experiences. Historically, the Dutch have solved their problems by talking. There has been a search for compromise and consensus. Consultation and co-operation have been more common than hard negotiation (Hemerijck, 1993). This tendency encourages a climate in which public communication flourishes. We will look at the main tendencies, making a distinction between three functions of communication: (1) the use of **communication as a product of policy** as part of a policy mix, that is as an instrument used together with other instruments, such as regulations or taxes in order to influence the attitude and behaviour of the community; (2) the use of communication to improve policy processes in order to create a more effective policy, mainly by interaction with those target groups which are most affected; we will call this: **policy as a product of communication**; (3) the use of com-

^{*} Cornelis Martinus Joseph van WOERKUM and Marie Noelle Cornelia AARTS, Department of Communication and Innovation Studies, Wageningen Agricultural University, Hollandseweg 1, 6706 KN Wageningen, the Netherlands, phone: 31 (0) 317-484310/489111, fax: 31 (0) 317-484791.

^{**} Margriet van der POEL, House of Province, s'Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands.

munication as an essential element of governance, not directly oriented to a fixed policy product, but more generally to societal problem solving. In this case government fulfils its function in collaboration with other actors. We will call this: **policy as communication**.

In this article we will elaborate on these three functions drawing upon several studies concerning the integration of communication in policy processes (cf. Aarts and Woerkum, 1994; Poel and Woerkum, 1994; Molder, 1995) as well as upon current discussions in the Netherlands in this respect. We will start with a critical evaluation of the notion of communication as a product of policy.

2. COMMUNICATION AS A PRODUCT OF POLICY

Communication can be used by a government deliberately to change people's perceptions, attitudes or behaviour. This objective goes further than just informing people and raises many questions about the democratic aspects of such use (cf. Weiss and Tschirhart, 1994). Critics often stress the danger when governments, via campaigns, attempt to influence the outcome of public discussion or to interfere with political processes (Katus and Beets, 1985). Officially, in the Netherlands, the instrumental use of communication is restricted to policy that has been discussed and assessed in parliament, or to policy of a noncontroversial kind, without moral or ethical consequences. But in the case of town-planning in Amsterdam, where nature-values were affected by the development of a new housing district, the official communication, going together with a referendum, was explicitly pro houses, and in the eyes of the nature conservationists: anti-nature.

In the international literature this function has been discussed by several authors. Hood referred to 'nodality', that "works on your knowledge and attitude" (Hood, 1983: 7), Weiss and Tschirhart raised issues about 'public information' to shape public attitudes, values or behaviour in the hope of effecting some desirable social outcomes (Weiss and Tschirhart, 1994: 82), and Doern referred to 'exhortation' (cf. Howlett, 1991: 11).

How communication is positioned in the policy mix depends on how its function is viewed relative to other instruments (Linder and Peters, 1989; Salamon, 1989 and, in the Netherlands: Glasbergen, 1992 or Bressers and Klok, 1988). Let us begin with a model that highlights the differences between a set of basic instruments (figure 1).

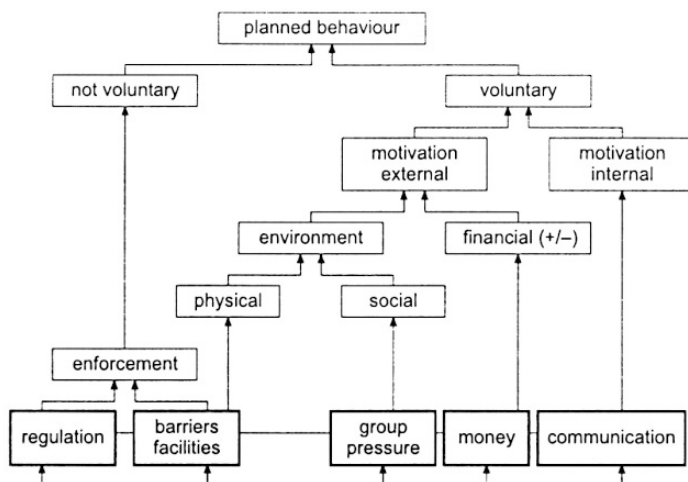


Fig. 1. Planned behaviour and policy instruments

We have chosen to restrict ourselves to those situations in which the behaviour of people is (part of) the solution to societal problems (Green and Kreuter, 1991). In this view, regulation is seen not as a way to codify existing practices, but as an instrument to change the behaviour of people, to facilitate that change. The physical environment can stimulate a certain behaviour, for example: playing grounds for children, recreation areas, museums, learning facilities. It can also hinder undesirable behaviour, for example: fences around valuable natural sites or roadblocks. Group pressure can be an important strategy to involve target groups in a policy program. Money can be used as an incentive (subsidies) or as a disincentive (taxes).

Communication is depicted in two positions. It can be used as an instrument on its own, for example, in the case of campaigns on specific issues (Windahl and Signitzer, 1992; Rice and Atkin, 1989; Rogers and Storey, 1987; Weiss and Tschirhart, 1994). It is probably more useful, however, to analyse communication as a supportive instrument. This position receives less attention in the literature but is much more common in practice.

Most plans in the reality of environmental and spatial policy consist of a combination of instruments. They encompass regulation, facilities (like roads, watersupply, etc.) and financial measures. Communication can be applied: (1) to inform people about these plans, (here: supposing that they are assessed by the parliament or other representative bodies); (2) to make people accept these plans and (3) to manage a smoothful implementation.

An example of the specific communicative aspects in spatial problems in the first and second function is the use of pictures. By using pictures or computer-

-animations citizens are told what will be the end result. Interesting is the point in what respect these pictures are 'real' or 'manipulated'. Communication experts are increasingly aware of the 'constructional' part of pictures.

An example of the third function is the communication about the use of a certain area. People have to stay on footpaths in vulnerable areas or they have to drive carefully in housing districts, where many children play.

Interesting is also the point that the policy plan itself has a symbolic meaning. A law is a message and can be studied in that way (Witteveen *et al.*, 1992) and especially in matters of nature conservation many citizens, and certainly many farmers, are inclined to react negatively, for the very reason that such intervention takes place. These plans undermine their feelings that they are responsible persons, able to look after their own environment (Aarts and Woerkum, 1994).

For these reasons, it seems a logical idea that a government communicator is consulted during the process of policy making from the very beginning. He/she should not be invited only at the end to communicate what has already been resolved. This approach, described as "decide, announce and defend" (Wolsink, 1990) is still very common, but it often results in an impossible mission (Aarts and Woerkum, 1994; Meegeren, 1995). The intended messages that are sent to the community eventually are unable to compensate for the unintended messages, the (negative) communicative consequences, of the chosen plan. Therefore a more interactive approach of government communication, including a wider awareness of the importance of participation of 'target groups' will be suggested.

3. POLICY AS A PRODUCT OF COMMUNICATION

In order to explain what we mean by this description, we have to step back and analyse, from a more theoretical viewpoint, what communication in an instrumental approach really means. In the problems we have then to confront, we will find the basic ideas for a new orientation. In the Netherlands, many policy scientists, as well as government communicators, are confronted with certain limitations deriving from the instrumental approach and consequently are thinking along the same lines (Roon and Middel, 1993; Leeuwis, 1993).

Theoretically, an interventionist approach resembles a so-called stimulus-response scheme. In this scheme, a desirable reaction is the product of optimal interventions. In the case of communication, we imagine an effect created by well-structured messages and based on analyses of communicative

predispositions, for example the interests of an individual, his/her attitudes or previous knowledge.

In such a scheme, certain aspects that influence the process of acceptance are consequently underrated. We will select three aspects that are crucial in understanding what goes wrong so often if communication is analysed in this way.

Firstly, we tend to deny the relationship aspect. An important prerequisite for effective communication is the credibility of a sender (Lewicki *et al.*, 1996). People have to trust the intentions of a government – that it will deal with their interests in a responsible way. This credibility is not only shaped by communication activities, but also by the functioning of government as a whole, how a government acts, by an evaluation of policy products, and the policy process behind these products. It directs our attention to processes of image construction.

Secondly, we tend to deny the historical dimension. A message is not a part of one isolated communicative event, as a mechanistic interpretation of a communication model (“a sender constructs a message and reaches a receiver via a medium, creating an effect”) could suggest. It is a part of a long series of communicative actions (intended or not) over time, but also over different policy domains. What is separated in the institutional bureaucracy of a government, with its strict divisions between different policy fields (health, education, land use planning, transport, etc.), comes together in the head of an individual. This forces us to think about the total impression a government produces over a period of time.

Thirdly, we easily overlook the way citizens perceive societal problems – how they define it, how they think about solutions and which (active) role they see for themselves. We tend to treat a certain policy product as given. For this solution, awareness has to be created and acceptance has to be gained. Citizens must change. They have to adapt their ideas to the ideas of a government. Government organisations are mostly confident about the way they define problems and solutions. Their reports are based upon (scientific) inquiries, and discussed at length in the political government arena. For governments, it is difficult to accept that a totally different approach to the same problem is possible. Wagemans makes therefore a distinction between the field domain and the official domain (Wagemans, 1987). Governments are not ‘reflective’, in the sense that they feel that others can depart from quite another rationality. This reflective mind has to be developed to make a government more responsive to its environment.

We could ask ourselves how this narrowness in the outlook of policy makers, which gives rise to so many acceptance problems, can exist.

One important explanation is the tendency towards 'self-referentiality' that is common in all bureaucracies, even in the field of communication. This is similar to McQuail's conclusions from studies on how journalists refer to their own working environment, compared with the audience:

... mass communicators frequently are not in the business of communication, and when they are, they are not necessarily communicating to the audience as normally conceived... (McQuail, 1975: 177).

This old phenomenon is now studied from different perspectives, such as the theory of autopoieses (Maturana and Varela, 1989; Veld *et al.*, 1992).

The tendency of governments not to stay in contact with citizens has several reasons. One of the most important explanations is the fact that in the political process the individual citizen is often not represented. For instance, in the field of environmental problems, the Dutch political system reacts easily to the large, influential Dutch environmental movement. An enormous flow of regulation is the result, directed towards different target groups, that were not involved in the political process and whose views were therefore underrepresented by political parties. Political parties represent the active citizens and strongly organised interests rather than the ordinary subjects of policy. Herein lies a major cause of image problems, ill-understood effects of a cumulation of policy products over time, differing rationalities in the way of dealing with problems, and eventually for a low acceptance which can not be corrected adequately by communication at the end of a policy process.

To overcome these problems a wide array of recommendations could be formulated. We will confine ourselves to our area of competence and look at communication as one of the disciplines by which government organisations can operate more effectively, that is, can develop a more acceptable policy. Therefore, we have to adopt another perspective, in which communication is no longer considered as one of the products of policy, but rather the other way around: policy is a product of communication. By this, we do not mean the process of elections. This phenomenon is given a lot of attention, by scientists and others, but does not reflect of course democratic processes at any sufficient level.

To fulfil his role in this perspective, a government communicator must be able to take into account four important principles, which are essential for an effective communicative approach.

Firstly, the policy in question must be open, at least during the initial stages of the process of policy development. With fixed problem definitions and solutions, the general public cannot be seriously involved (cf. Weiss, 1989).

There has to be room for alternatives – for completely new ways of creating results.

Secondly, the information that is delivered by the government must be easily understood. This obvious criterion is difficult to meet in practice, if we look at existing information habits. Policy makers often are incapable of talking about a problem in terms that people can put into their own words. They are limited to speaking according to their own rationality, which can differ considerably from the rationality of non-policy makers. This holds true certainly in the field of spatial and environment policy, where often experts are dominating the discussion.

Thirdly, the policy process must be organised to be interactive, not just at some fixed moments, but continuously – from the very beginning to the end of the process. Only in this way people can be involved and a sufficient level of understanding and commitment can be created. Understandability and interaction have to compensate for the uncertainties that inevitably arise from greater flexibility. Only in this way can a government learn to think in terms of the rationality of the target groups.

Lastly, special effort has to be made to realise social learning processes between different groups in society. Such learning processes should be directed in such a way that people: (1) understand their own problem; (2) understand the problem of other people involved; and (3) recognise that problem solution is only possible in conjunction with all groups involved, because of given interdependencies. For example, facilitating learning processes between farmers, nature conservationists and policy makers in order to realise regional nature-related policy turns out to be fruitful, at least with respect to the acceptance of the (jointly developed) policy by all groups involved (Woerkum and Aarts, 1995).

This approach is an answer to failure in conflict resolution in government as well as in society (Bennet and Howlett, 1992). Traditionally, interactive policy making has meant negotiating between government and special interest groups. The best result we can hope to achieve from this is a compromise which, although a measure of agreement has been reached on a certain level, no-one is really satisfied with. A better alternative then is to involve different parties in social learning processes, through which they can gain an appreciation of why the other actor is talking in a certain way, and through which they can look together for new solutions.

4. POLICY AS COMMUNICATION

Building on the above concepts, we can arrive at a completely new field of action for government communicators. Rather than being concerned about government processes resulting in a fixed policy, they would be concerned with problem solving without government intervention. The role of government in this instance is no longer to regulate, but to stimulate, to facilitate or to mediate (Hanf and Koppen, 1993). The conviction is growing that governance by talking and bringing people together is a more useful alternative than regulation from a central point. This view reflects not only Dutch thinking but also wider general tendencies (Weiss, 1990; Blackburn, 1988). It relates very much to policy network management (Kickert, 1993; Fürst and Kilper, 1995).

A number of actions can be taken towards achieving this goal. One is to stimulate a communicative infrastructure around certain subjects, for example, environmental problems in agriculture. Governments can subsidise journals or conferences. Another activity for government communicators is mediating between different actors in order to get the latter involved in negotiation processes. Recently, a lot of literature has been produced precisely on this topic (cf. Röling, 1994; Röling and Wagemakers, 1998; Aarts, 1998; Engel, 1995). In the Netherlands, several experiments on regional planning have been based on these ideas. Also in the field of environmental problems, agreements on different subjects are being made between the strong environmental movement and industry (Hanf and Koppen, 1993; Veld *et al.*, 1992).

It is too early to evaluate (from a communicative viewpoint) the outcome of these activities. There might be potentials as well as risks. On the one hand, if societal actors are talking with each other because they realise that they depend on the other to reach their goals, they will learn about the rationality behind the opinions or claims of the other party. If adequately coached this can increase the feeling of mutual trust and respect and can eventually lead to shared decision-making. In this way, society is fulfilling its role without the expensive and often ill-considered regulation by a government. The role of a government is then restricted to facilitation, by bringing actors together, providing them with reliable information, and by stimulating communication among the general public. On the other hand, we cannot ignore risks because responsibilities may be unclear, or decisions may not be made within an acceptable time-limit, both leading to a lack of any concrete result.

Writers in the field of 'mediation' are often quite optimistic about the possibility of consensus formation, the creation of win-win situations and of good learning processes (cf. Engel, 1995). Whether they are right or wrong has, however, yet to be determined through careful evaluation of the experiments that are occurring.

5. THEORY AND PRACTICE

According to one of our studies, government communicators are willing to change their roles (Poel and Woerkum, 1994). In the 1980s many of them made the move from an informative role to a more instrumental role, in the implementation of policy programs. Now, they are seriously considering the new challenge of making a government more 'communicative'.

Are they, however, able to change existing practices, which are rooted in so many fixed government procedures, and shaped by policy makers over many years? Of course not! This shift calls for a new view of the role of the state in solving societal issues. This will need to be developed by other professionals as well, and must be backed by policy science.

A new role for government communicators requires a new communication methodology. The common way of dealing with the public has been to distribute information to them directly, or to develop campaigns. Now the way back has to be discovered, but not in the naive sense of the 1970s ('hearings'). Then, discussions which took place outside of government were not actually incorporated in the policy making process, resulting in a frustrated, or a passive community. Unless a ministry is truly 'reflective' and responsive, any interaction is quite worthless. Moreover interaction can be used strategically in an instrumental approach with its inherent pitfalls, such as a loss of credibility. Therefore, the interaction between government and the community should be developed along three interconnected lines: (1) the external-internal communication ('bringing people in'); (2) the internal communication ("discussing how to adapt the content of policy to different interests and rationalities") and (3) the internal-external communication ("how to inform people of existing ideas"). Without the second track, the first track does not make sense.

We shall not elaborate on the new methods that are available. We could think about the prospects of tele-democracy, the use of interactive communication via Internet or about the communicative handling of network formation. Methods are important but deserve special treatment.

The proposed role also requires another position for communication specialists within an organisation. In the Netherlands, there is a lot of debate on this subject (line or staff management), inside or outside of a ministerial organisation. An important aspect is the integration of their work in the process of policy making. This means regular meetings with other specialists such as architects, technicians and financial experts, during the policy process, where they bring in the communicative consequences of decisions, derived from knowledge about the life-worlds of involved actors of society.

Communication, in this respect, can be compared with another instrument, money. Like money, communication is a part of all governmental action. Just as one can improve the financial base of future policy, by spending money in a responsible way, one can improve the communicative base for future policy, by taking into account the communicative consequences of governmental activities. This communicative base can be called trust or credibility. By enlarging the realm of trust, governments will be able to influence society in a more symbolic way, in a better balance with regulations or financial measures. It is common that financial experts pressure on what will happen in policy making. Communication experts have to get a same position in governments, guarding the trust-base and improving the overall effectivity of governmental activities.

REFERENCES

- AARTS, M. N. C. (1998), *Een kwestie van natuur; een studie naar de aard en het verloop van communicatie over natuur en natuurbeleid*, Wageningen: Agricultural University, Department of Communication and Innovation Studies, Dissertation.
- AARTS, M. N. C. and WOERKUM, C. M. J. van (1994), *Wat heet natuur? De communicatie tussen overheid en boeren over natuur en natuurbeleid*, Wageningen: Agricultural University, Department of Communication and Innovation Studies.
- BENNET, C. J. and HOWLETT, M. (1992), 'The lessons of learning' reconciling theories of policy learning and policy change, "Policy Science", 25: 275-294.
- BLACKBURN, J. W. (1988), *Environmental mediation as an alternative to litigation*, "Policy Studies Journal", 16(3): 562-584.
- BRESSERS, H. and KLOK, P. J. (1988), *Fundamentals for a theory of policy instruments*, [in:] KRABBE, J. J., *Principles of environmental policy*, "International Journal of Social Economics", 15(3-4): 22-41.
- ENGEL, P. G. H. (1995), *Facilitating innovation: an action-oriented approach and participatory methodology to improve innovative social practice in agriculture*, Wageningen: Agricultural University, Department of Communication and Innovation Studies, Dissertation.
- FISHBEIN, M. and AJZEN, I. (1975), *Belief, attitude, intention, and behaviour*, Reading, M.A.: Addison-Wesley.
- FÜRST, D. and KILPER, H. (1995), *The innovative power of regional policy networks; a comparison of two approaches to political modernisation in North Rhine-Westphalia*, "European Planning Studies", 3(3): 287-305.
- GLASBERGEN, P. (1992), *Seven steps towards an instrumentation theory for environmental policy*, "Policy and Politics", 20(3): 191-200.
- GREEN, L. W. and KREUTER, M. W. (1991), *Health promotion planning, an educational and environmental approach*, Mountain View: Mayfield.
- HANF, K. and KOPPEN, I. (1993), *Alternative decision-making techniques for conflict resolution; environmental mediation in the Netherlands*, Rotterdam: Erasmus University.
- HEMERIJCK, A. C. (1993), *The historic contingencies of Dutch corporatism*, Oxford, Dissertation.

- HOOD, C. C. (1983), *The tools of government*, Chatham: Chatham House Publishers.
- HOWLETT, M. (1991), *Policy instruments, policy styles, and policy implementation: national approaches the theory of instrument choice*, "Policy Studies Journal", 19(2): 1–21.
- HOWLETT, M. and RAMESH, M. (1993), *Patterns of policy instrument choice: policy styles, policy learning and the privatisation experience*, "Policy Studies Review", 12(1/2): 3–24.
- JANMAAT, R. and WOERKUM, C. M. J. van (1991), *Het imago van het ministerie van LNV*, Wageningen: Agricultural University, Department of Communication and Innovation Studies.
- KATUS, J. and BEETS, L. C. (eds), (1985), *Actuele vraagstukken van de overheidsvoorlichting*, Muiderberg: Coutinho.
- KICKERT, W. J. M. (1993), *Complexity, governance and dynamics. Conceptual explorations of public network management*, [in:] KOOIMAN, J., *Modern governance*, London: Sage.
- LINDER, S. H. and PETERS, B. G. (1989), *Instruments of government: perceptions and contexts*, "Journal of Public Policy", 9(2): 35–58.
- LEEUIWIS, C. (1993), *Of computers, myths and modelling: the social construction of diversity, knowlegde, information and communication technologies in Dutch horticulture and agricultural extension*, Wageningen: Agriculture University, Department of Communication and Innovation Studies. Dissertation.
- LEWICKI, R., HIAM, A. and WISE OLANDER, K. (1996), *Think before you speak: a complete guide to strategic negotiation*, New York: Wiley.
- MATURANA, H. and VARELA, F. (1987), *The tree of knowledge; the biological roots of human understanding*, Boston (Mass.): Shambala Publications.
- McQUAIL, D. (1975), *Communication*, London: Longmans.
- MEEGEREN, P. van (1995), *Communicatie en maatschappelijke acceptatie van milieumaatregelen*, "Milieu, Tijdschrift voor Milieukunde", 10(3): 147–156.
- MOLDER, H. te (1995), *Discourse of dilemmas; an analysis of government communicators talk*, Wageningen: Agricultural University, Department of Communication and Innovation Studies, Dissertation.
- O'KEEFE, D. J. (1990), *Persuasion; theory and practice*, Newbury Park: Sage.
- POEL, M. M. van der, and WOERKUM, C. M. J. van (1994), *De positionering van communicatie in beleid*, Wageningen: Agricultural University, Department of Communication and Innovation Studies.
- RICE, R. E. and ATKIN, C. (eds), (1989), *Public communication approaches*, Newbury Parks: Sage.
- ROGERS, E. M. and STOREY, J. D. (1987), *Communication campaigns*, [in:] BERGER, C. R. and CHAFFEE, S. H. (eds), *Handbook of communication science*, Beverly Hills: Sage.
- RÖLING, N. G. (1994), *Platforms for decision-making about ecosystems*, [in:] FRESCO, L. O. et. al., *The future of the land: mobilising and integrating knowledge for land use options*, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons: 385–393.
- RÖLING, N. G. and WAGEMAKERS, M. A. E. (eds), (1998), *Facilitating sustainable agriculture. Participatory learning and adaptive management in times of environmental uncertainty*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ROON, A. D. de and MIDDEL, R. (eds), (1993), *De wereld van Postbus 51: voorlichtingscampagnes van de rijksoverheid*, Houten: Bohn Stafleu Van Loghum.
- SALAMON, L. S. (1989), *Beyond provatization: the tools of government action*, Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute Press.
- VELD, R. J. in't, BRUIN, J. A. de and HEUVELHOF, E. F. ten (1992), *Recommandations for a process standard: concerning the environmental and feasibility analysis as laid out in the Dutch covenant for packaging*, Rotterdam: Erasmus University.

- VELD, R. J., in't, SCHAAP, L., TERMEER, C. J. A. M. and TWIST, M. J. W. van (1991), *Autopoiesis and configuration theory: new approaches to societal steering*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- WAGEMANS, M. C. H. (1989), *Analysis of the role of information in planning*, "Knowledge and Society", 3(4): 72-90.
- WEISS, J. A. (1989), *The powers of problem definition: the case of governmental paperwork*, "Policy Sciences", 22: 97-121.
- WEISS, J. A. (1990), *Ideas and inducements in mental health policy*, "Journal of Policy Analysis and Management", 9(2): 178-200.
- WEISS, J. A. and TSCHIRHART, M. (1994), *Public information campaigns as policy instruments*, "Journal of Policy Analysis and Management", 13(1): 82-119.
- WINDAHL, S. and SIGNITZER, B. (1992), *Using communication theory*, London: Sage.
- WITTEVEEN, W. J., STOUT, H. D. and TRAPPENBURG, H. J. (1992), *Het bereik van de wet*, Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink.
- WOERKUM, C. M. J. van (1990), *Voorlichting als beleidsinstrument: nieuw en krachtig?* Inaugurale rede uitgesproken op 17 mei 1990 bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar in de Voorlichtingskunde aan de Landbouwwuniversiteit in Wageningen.
- WOERKUM, C. M. J. van and AARTS, M. N. C. (1995), *From regulation to communication: learning by negotiation*, Paper presented at the 8th Annual Conference of the International Association for Conflict Management, June 11-14, LO-Skolen, Elsinore, Denmark.
- WOLSINK, M. P. (1990), *Maatschappelijke acceptatie van windenergie*, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
- WOODSIDE, K. (1986), *Policy instruments and the study of public policy*, "Canadian Journal of Political Science", 19(4): 775-793.