

THE INEVITABLE GAS MINING IN GRONINGEN:
NARRATIVES SHAPE, INFLUENCE, AND CHANGE THE POLICY

By
Dante Tenbergen

Double Degree Master: Comparative Public Governance
University of Twente supervisor: Dr. Long
University of Münster supervisor: Dr. Freise

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Name, Vorname: Tenbergen, Dante

Matrikelnummer: 532007

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Abstract:

Minister Wiebes took a radical policy change decision in 2018 to end gas mining in Groningen by 2030. Gas mining had been an inevitable part of the Dutch energy policy for sixty years. However, as a result of mining, more and more earthquakes occurred, damaging property and people. As a result, the citizen movement *Groninger Bodem Beweging* (GBB) decided to guard the people's interests. After all, the national government and NAM served their opposing interests of maximizing financial benefits. Through a Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) application, the thesis analyzes how multiple narratives shape, influence, and change the policy. The thesis analyzes the hearings conducted by the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee to set out the different narratives by actor and over time. The results show that the national government did not act in the interests of the people in Groningen but prioritized the relationship with NAM and the attached financial benefits. Nevertheless, GBB's narrative became the dominant narrative in the policy issue between 2015 and 2017 through the help of the provincial government and the successful use of tools and strategies. Following this, the national government had to respond to the narrative and eventually changed its policies. GBB('s narrative) prevailed, changing the national government's willingness to end gas mining by 2030.

Keywords: NPF, gas mining, citizen movement, Groningen, GBB, blame avoidance, policy change

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
1.1 Research Question and Subquestions	6
1.2 Outline	7
2. Background and history before 2009	8
2.1 Discovery of gas and public administration	8
2.2 Relationship between gas mining, land subsidence, and earthquakes	9
2.3 Groningen as a gas colony?	10
3. Theoretical Framework	12
3.1 Theoretical Framework	12
3.1.1 NPF's position in academia	12
3.2 Narrative policy framework	13
3.2.1 NPF as a different policy analysis method	13
3.2.2 NPF and other studies on Groningen	14
3.2.3 Components in NPF	16
3.2.4 Level of analyses	19
4. Methodology	20
4.1 Methods of data collection	20
4.2 Methods of data analysis	22
5. Results	26
5.1 Gas mining as an essential part of the Dutch energy policy (1959-2012)	26
5.1.1 The national government and NAM's narrative	26
5.1.2 The province in no man's land	28
5.1.3 GBB as sole opponent of gas mining	28
5.1.4 A dominant narrative and the responses	29
5.2 Huizinge and the rise of the responsive narratives (2012-2015)	30
5.2.1 The dominant narrative continues	30
5.2.2 A pro-active province	31
5.2.3 GBB's emerging narrative against gas mining	33
5.2.4 Creaks in the dominant narrative	33
5.3 The successful flip of the dominant narrative (2015-2017)	34
5.3.1 The rule of law as policy solution for the province	34
5.3.2 GBB's narrative spreads across the nation	35
5.3.3 Responses to the new dominant narrative	36
5.3.4 A new dominant narrative	37

5.4 Aligning narratives towards policy change	38
5.4.1 Enactment of policy change	39
5.4.2 An unsatisfied province	40
5.4.3 A victorious, but wary GBB	41
5.4.4 One narrative?	42
6. Discussion	43
7. References	47
8. Appendix	58

1. Introduction

“You have always been right,” was the conclusion of state secretary Vijlbrief in his open letter in April 2023 to the people of Groningen and Northern Drenthe in the local newspaper *Dagblad van het Noorden*. The letter is part of the national government’s response to the final report by the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee on the gas mining activities, the subsequent earthquakes, and the damages to properties and people. Their main conclusion: the people of Groningen have been neglected for far too long. Vijlbrief’s letter indicates that the citizens’ narrative is finally acknowledged and that the policy will change, at least in part, due to those narratives. The working definition for narratives in this thesis is that of Weible and Sabatier (2017): policy narratives are stories that are being told to influence government (in)action (in)directly.

This thesis examines the policy response and change by applying a Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) to the earthquakes in Groningen in the energy domain, more specifically gas mining. After the 2012 earthquake in Huizinge, it became clear in various reports and investigations that the current policy of maximizing gas mining was not sustainable in relation to the safety of the citizens of Groningen. A reconstruction by the national newspaper *Trouw* tells the political story that took place in The Hague before an eventual policy change (Zuidervaart, 2018). The State Supervision of Mines (SSoM) advised the Minister of Economic Affairs to reduce the risk of earthquakes by lowering the gas extraction amounts (SSoM, 2013). This advice was the start of the policy process to change the national government’s policy. Hence, the emphasis is on the process, not the earthquake as an event.

The application of narrative analysis originates in the work of Jones and McBeth (2010). The core idea behind the Narrative Policy Framework is that narratives are part of the political world in **which policy marketing is becoming more and more important**. For example, the Dutch national government’s full-time equivalent¹ for communication civil servants grew from 703 in 2019 to 936 in 2023 and explains this growth by stating that, “image, storytelling, dilemma logic and the application of behavioral knowledge play an important role in the national government’s communications” (Rijksoverheid, 2023a). Therefore, the NPF is well-suited to analyze the policy on gas mining in Groningen and the events, earthquakes, and narratives that led to the decision in 2018 to end gas mining by 2030.

¹ A full-time equivalent, sometimes abbreviated as FTE, is a unit to measure employed persons or students in a way that makes them comparable although they may work or study a different number of hours per week. (Eurostat)

Narrative analysis is part of the larger theory on policy process research. Weible and Sabatier (2017), with references to earlier work by Lasswell and Shipman in the 1950s, define policy process research as, “the interactions that occur over time between public policies and surrounding actors, events, contexts, and outcomes” (p. 2). In this case, the interactions led to a policy change. One explanation provided by NPF is that narrative analysis is about the understanding of “policy narratives [that] relevant players use to make sense of their policy reality” (Jones et al., 2014). Hence, the state secretary’s letter to the citizens refers to the policy reality.

1.1 Research Question and Subquestions

As the relevant actors have different views and interests in gas mining, the NPF allows for an empirical dissection of the narratives and the policy process. Besides the national government, the other key actors are the province Groningen, the citizens’ movement *Groninger Bodem Beweging* (GBB), and the mining companies Shell and ExxonMobil. Since the narratives of the GBB and the province opposed that of the national government and the mining companies, the research question of this thesis focuses on their perspective as, eventually, their narrative ‘won’ the political decision-making process. The outcome of this David v. Goliath scenario is rare as the iron triangle literature (Adams, 1981) suggests that business interests tend to have a stronghold over policymaking in energy policies (Vietor, 1987; Gullberg, 2008). The Parliamentary Inquiry Committee begins its conclusion with, “the story about how the discovery [of the gas field] is dealt with in the 60 years that followed and what the consequences of this are, depends on the perspective from which it is viewed, the Committee concludes. It is a tale of two worlds” (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023, p.14). Therefore, the research question is: **To what extent have the narratives of the *Groninger Bodem Beweging* and province Groningen changed the national government’s willingness to allow the policy change?**

In order to answer the research question, three subquestions narrow the scope of the subsections. The first subquestion is: What were the main narratives and their structural elements and who was promoting them? This question is the starting point for the analysis. The GBB was founded in 2009, allowing for a ten-year study period until 2019. The second subquestion is: How have the narratives changed, and how do those changes influence policy through their influence on cognitive function? Jones and McBeth (2010) have explained the importance of cognitive function in NPF by building on the work of Herman, Bartels, and Lakoff. The final subquestion is: How do the narratives relate to one another and how do they

align? The levels of analysis are macro, meso, and micro which will be explained further in the methodology section.

1.2 Outline

The next chapter shortly discusses the history of gas mining in the Netherlands. The third part reviews earlier academic literature and links NPF theory to the topic of the thesis. Chapter four lists the methodology of the thesis and chapter five lists the findings of the analysis. The thesis concludes with the discussion. Chapter seven list the references and chapter eight is the appendix.

2. Background and history before 2009

As narratives are part of story-telling, it is important to understand the history of gas mining in the Netherlands since the 1950s and the different narratives circulating in the public and political spheres. Although, this thesis limits its scope to a ten-year period between 2009 and 2019.

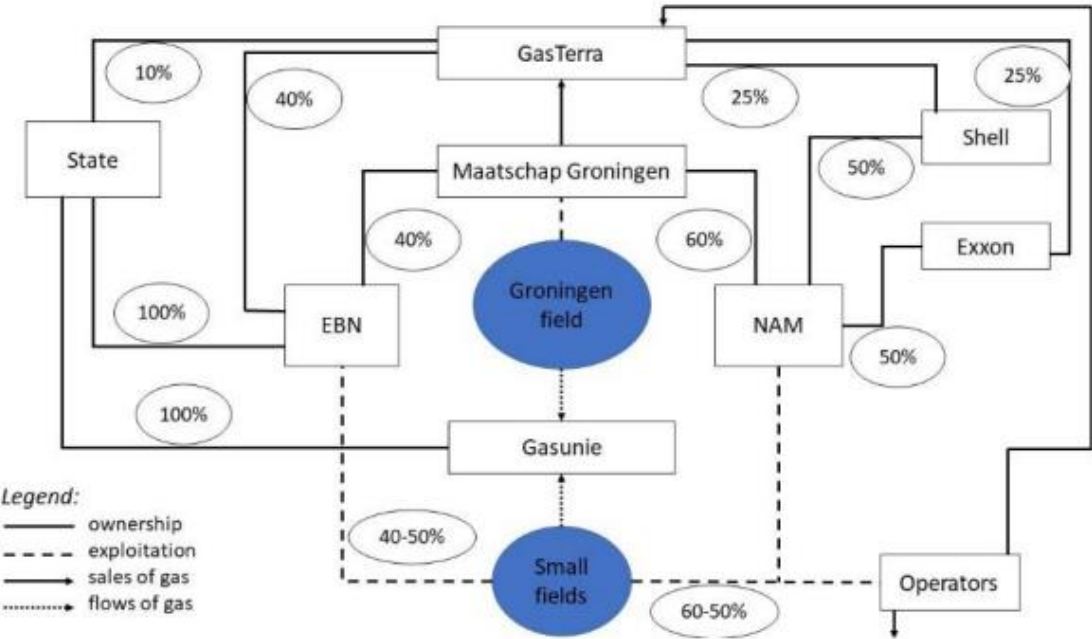
2.1 Discovery of gas and public administration

The story of gas mining starts in 1963 when the joint venture of Shell and ExxonMobil called NAM is permitted by the Dutch state to extract gas from the Groningen field. Between 1900 and the 1950s, coal mines in the province Limburg were one of the primary sources of the Dutch energy supply (Monkhouse, 1955). The discovery of the Groningen field in 1959 was a game-changer. Not just for the Dutch energy market and the development of the welfare state, but also for the European Economic Community (ECC). The French had found gas in Algeria and the discovery of the Groningen gas field urged Belgian European Parliamentarian Leemans to emphasize the duty to share these resources (Hakkens, 2020). The argument that border countries have legal rights on Dutch natural gas would return in the 21st century.

The construction of the exploitation is important for understanding the modern-day implications. The so-called *Gasgebouw* is set up as a public-private partnership between the Dutch state, ExxonMobil, Shell, and Energy Administration Netherlands (EBN)² in which the Groningen Partnership is responsible for the exploitation and GasTerra for the sale of gas. In this construction, the interests of the companies and the Dutch state are dependent on each other. Figure 1 shows an attempt by Scholtens (2018), building on earlier work by Mulder and Zwart in 2006, to visualize the complex structure of the gas system in the Netherlands. The construction has guaranteed two things for more than sixty years. First, the Dutch state maintains influence on the mining of gas and how it happens. Secondly, the oil companies become ‘owner’ of the gas field and are allowed to maximize revenues.

² In Dutch: EnergieBeheer Nederland

Figure 1: Organization of the Dutch natural gas system (Scholtens, 2018)



2.2 Relationship between gas mining, land subsidence, and earthquakes

Land subsidence is a known consequence of mining activities, whether gas, oil, or groundwater. Galloway et al. (1999) define land subsidence as, “a gradual settling or sudden sinking of the Earth’s surface owing to subsurface movement of earth materials” (p. 1). As a common consequence of mining activities, the problems of land subsidence have been known by scientists since (at least) the 1930s. In 1984, the province Groningen, the national government, and NAM launched a Committee Land Subsidence to gather information on how gas mining causes land subsidence and what measures ought to be taken. Hence, the governments have acted upon the scientific information and, for example, developed a policy to tackle the influence of land subsidence on groundwater levels and nature (Dijkema et al., 1997).

At first, NAM denied that earthquakes were related to gas mining. In 1993, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, NAM, and the KNMI acknowledged the relationship between gas mining and earthquakes (KNMI, 1993). In other words, if the production levels increase the number of earthquakes increases as well. Meanwhile, the KNMI recorded twenty-four earthquakes in Drenthe and Groningen between the first earthquake in 1986 and the publication of the report in 1993. Therefore, it has become clear that gas mining results in both land subsidence and human-induced earthquakes.

However, there is a difference in intensity between the two subjects. As the early reports showed, land subsidence is a containable issue and (provincial) governments have taken action to limit any negative consequences for nature. In contrast, earthquakes have a major impact on properties and mental welfare. The parliamentary inquiry report (2023) sums these up: 267,466 claims for damage due to earthquakes, 11,880 addresses are not safe, and for 7,289 addresses it is unclear whether they are safe. In addition, although lesser measurable, the mental effects such as stress, divorces, and children growing up in unsafe houses prove the profound implications that the earthquakes have on the Groningers.

2.3 Groningen as a gas colony?

The political sphere and popular culture have argued over time that Groningen is exploited as a gas colony due to the contrasting differences between the financial and welfare benefits for the Dutch state on the one hand and the disadvantages for Groningen on the other hand. The main reason for this rhetoric is the disparity in regional investments directly following from gas mining. The three Northern provinces only received 1% of the Economic Structure Enhancing Fund³ whereas the majority of the budget went to the densely-populated regions (Volkskrant, 2006).

The factual findings are a sequel to political warnings from the 1970s. The communist party in Groningen argued in the 1970s that the province should not be used as a colony. The communist party held successful People's Congresses in Groningen in which the central message was that the gas benefits should be reinvested in the region (Voerman, 1993). Their position highlights two points. First, the warning against Groningen's future as a gas colony had penetrated the political sphere within ten years of the field's discovery. Secondly, the political and societal rhetoric was not focused on preventing gas mining. These two points still existed in the 21st-century discourse.

Recent publications in popular culture have reiterated the 'gas colony' phrase. Journalists have concluded that Groningen has served as a gas colony (Brandsma, Ekker, & Start, 2016). Levine and Forrence (1990), Laffont and Tirole (1991), and recently Carpenter and Moss (2013) have combined regulatory capture theory with public administration and governance applications that prove corruption. Or in the words of one of the theory's developers, "the problem of discovering when and why an industry is able to use the state for its purposes" (Stigler, 1971, p. 4). In the case of gas mining in Groningen, the oil companies were able to use the state for its purposes due to the mutual dependency on the financial

³ In Dutch: Fonds Economische Structuurversterking

benefits hinting towards Groningen's colony status. Meanwhile, eleven out of twenty-seven municipalities in the so-called Labor Market Groningen⁴ are categorized as poor municipalities (SCP, 2019) indicating that, besides the (previous) non-existing investments in infrastructure, the social-cultural and socio-economic position of the region is anything but bright. In fact, it would be difficult for the Groningers not to feel exploited as a colony.

⁴ The Labor Market Groningen consists of all municipalities in the Province Groningen and the municipalities in Northern-Drenthe being Aa en Hunze, Assen, Noordenveld, and, Tynaarlo

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Theoretical framework

This thesis studies the narratives and policy change between 2009 and 2019 through the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). In order to engage and build upon earlier work the next sections discuss the academic value of NPF and other policy process theories with its origins in the 1980s and 1990s. These are Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's Advocacy Coalition Framework, Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework, and Baumgartner and Jones' Punctuated Equilibrium Theory.

3.1.1 NPF's position in academia

Politicians are reluctant to change policies. Baumgartner and Jones (2012) argue that the resistance in public administration to alter policies is based on two primary aspects. First, decision-makers do not want to change policies because of an internal resistance towards acknowledging faulty policies. Secondly, Baumgartner and Jones argue that institutions and legal systems are not designed to change policies. Besides the emotional commitment and attachment with individuals, Sabatier and Weibel (2014) have identified that policy processes are complex due to the involvement of multiple stakeholders, time, and the complexity of issues. The novelty of the Narrative Policy Framework is that it predominantly analyzes emotions and cognitive functioning rather than focusing on institutions, stakeholder interdependencies, or windows of opportunity in public administration.

Schneider and Ingram (1990; 1993; 2016; 2019) have addressed the importance of studying emotions and behavior in society as part of a collective response to governing authorities. Vice versa, Schneider and Ingram argue that governments use tools and instruments to influence target groups' behavior and, following, the acceptance of policies. For example, governments successfully use nudging strategies in public health administration to change smoking behavior (Vlaev et al., 2016). Hence, cognitive functions are important. NPF's strength is the ability to reconstruct how and why policy actors have reacted on an issue, and subsequently, created their policy reality and narrative. In that sense, NPF strongly draws on the cognitive function that emotions have on individuals, public administration, and society. In this thesis, the research establishes emotions in and with the actors' narratives and analyzes how these have resonated within society.

Emotional cues are the starting point of the analysis. Cues are signals that express how an individual feels, thinks, or reacts to a situation. The aim of the thesis is not to highlight the policy failure or reconstruct what happened in Groningen. The goal is to identify the

emotional storylines of the policy actors that have contributed to flipping the dominant societal narrative and led to the policy change in 2018. Therefore, NPF allows the study of the characters' emotional connection and feeling to the issue in Groningen, which goes beyond a factual reconstructive analysis of the political and societal context of the policy process. That explores the gap that other policy process theories such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Weible, 2014), the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 2012), and Multiple Streams Framework (Kingdon, 1984) leave. These theories primarily focus on institutional, political, and network functions in public administration. Although it is not uncommon for those theories to study individual contributions, NPF adds a second layer of analysis by studying the cognitive reasoning.

3.2 Narrative Policy Framework

The NPF is a relatively new policy analysis framework. The developers of NPF are Elizabeth Shanahan, Michael Jones, and Mark McBeth. They, Shanahan et al. (2018), committed a journal article on how to conduct an NPF study as the framework is new and other scholars found operational barriers in their analyses. The main question in NPF is how policy narratives shape or change the policy process. Weible and his colleagues (2017) identify policy narratives as stories that are being told to influence government (in)action (in)directly.

This section also identifies the most prominent contributions in social science literature about the policy issue. That includes, among others, analyses of the social impacts of the earthquakes, constructive conflict theory, and the importance of emotions among policy actors. This is important because it is the layer of academic discourse on which this thesis can build and respond. The multiple different findings contribute to a better understanding of what has happened and how it impacts people. Lastly, it shows why NPF is valid for this case study.

3.2.1 NPF as a different policy analysis method

NPF has been applied to different policies with unique variables and scopes. The book *The science of stories: Applications of narrative policy framework in public policy analysis* provides an important overview of the different topics that have been studied through NPF. Moreover, NPF is not limited to research in governance or public administration. As narratives and storytelling are a vital part of society, NPF can be employed in a wide range of research fields. For example, Jones and Song (2014) write about the impact of story frames on

cognition in the field of psychology. Similarly, scholars have written about narratives in environmental studies.

Jones and McBeth (2010) analyze how other disciplines than public policy have successfully incorporated narratives as an empirical concept. Then, Jones and McBeth introduce NPF as follows:

“as a quantitative, structuralist, and positivist approach to the study of policy narratives. We see our framework not as a threat to postpositivist approaches to narrative but rather as an acknowledgment that narratives matter and that by studying them in a systematic empirical manner, positivists and postpositivists can engage in more productive debates over how stories influence public policy” (p. 330).

In this introduction, the focus is specifically targeting the scientific debate about (post)positivism. The primary disagreement between the two sides is about the relationship between the researcher and the researched object and, following, the research paradigm. Panhwar et al. (2017) explain that positivism is solely focused on empiricism and that researchers' interpretations of facts, or in NPF's case narratives, are not scientifically supported. Therefore, post-positivistic scholars argue differently, “post-positivistic paradigm promotes the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods that explore the diversity of facts researchable through various kinds of investigations” (p. 254) whilst respecting the necessary scientific foundations. Concluding, Jones and McBeth argue that NPF adheres to both research paradigms and argue in favor of the scientific ability of researchers to interpret study materials appropriately by stating, “it is our contention that narrative scholarship can be clear enough to be wrong” (Jones and McBeth, 2010, p. 331).

3.2.2 NPF and other studies on Groningen

Metze and Verhoeven (2022) researched the relationship between policy conflicts and the emotional storylines of the policy actors in what they call the ‘gasquackes.’ Their main finding, based on newspaper articles and empirical data, is that the storylines developed a so-called discursive escalation. That means, that the intensity of the emotions grew over time and simultaneously that concepts such as anxiety, distrust, and anger became more apparent. This is a significant conclusion because emotions are part of the cognitive functioning of the policy actors. After all, those actors are people and the cognitive functioning influences the narrative of an individual or the group it represents.

Van der Voort and Vanclay (2014) touch upon fundamental concepts (in public administration) such as fairness, justice, legitimacy, and accountability. In essence, the research proves that a redeveloped Social Impact Management Plan and a renegotiated Impacts and Benefits Agreement – tools of social impact theory – are left as options to receive the ‘social license’ to mine gas. That was a valid argument in 2014 that aligns with multiple narratives that the policy actors forward in their hearings. Currently, the national government’s policy has changed with the decision to end gas mining, but the discussion about social impacts is ongoing. In fact, in April 2023, the national government drafted a list of fifty action points including allocating more budget for psychological recovery and social cohesion development (Rijksoverheid, 2023b). The fundamental concepts that Van der Voort and Vanclay identify are an important aspect of the narrative. The national government representatives used multiple strategies to address that legitimacy and accountability were important principles of governance in their decision-making. The application of NPF allows further analysis of the connection between the concepts and the story-telling by the policy actors.

The policy change of 2018 was not necessarily part of the policy process. Ligetvoet et al. (2016) applied the constructive conflict methodology to study the future perspectives of gas in the Netherlands. In 2016, the national government had not changed the policy nor were there reasons to assume a change coming soon. This aligns with the dominant narratives at the time that will be addressed in Chapter 5. In fact, Van der Voort and Vanclay (2014) point out the multiple mitigation attempts in the form of organizations and institutions to limit the negative consequences of gas extraction. Therefore, the study on future perspectives highlights a key underlying mindset in the Netherlands: Groningen’s gas was inevitable. GBB did not participate in the study whose methodology heavily focused on stakeholder involvement and dialogue. That can partly be explained because the research focus was on gas in general, meaning that future perspectives on renewable energies, hydrogen, geopolitics, and the liberal market were also part of the dialogue. Nevertheless, the outcome of the analysis concluded that gas has a future in the Netherlands regardless of the form or extent. This is a key finding in relation to NPF. In fact, this creates a hypothesis that the dominant narrative around the time of their study is about the future and the importance of gas. The application of NPF allows for the reconstruction of whether that is true and addresses if the stakeholder dialogue had bypassed essential policy actors.

Bakema et al. (2018) studied the ‘social creation’ of the earthquakes in Groningen which they identify as a human-induced disaster. The argument is that social factors such as

institutionalism and politics are the root of the disaster contrary to natural earthquake disasters in Indonesia or Haiti. The primary conclusion is that the divergence in interests among all state and non-state actors is the reason for the human-induced disaster. The article anticipated the conclusion of the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee that the provincial and local administrators were unable to change much. NPF includes the application of belief systems. Shanahan et al. (2017) define this as, “a set of values or beliefs that orients individuals, groups, coalitions, and societies” (p. 5). Therefore, the social creation of the earthquake is part of Dutch society as gas mining was an accepted part of the energy policy. The application of NPF recognizes that the different narratives have socially constructed belief systems and that these are the foundation of the diverting policy realities.

These scholars have contributed to new understandings of the effects of policies in multiple disciplines. For Groningen, it shows that the issue is not solved by ending gas mining, but that acknowledgment and compensation are as important for the general well-being. The different angles and frameworks establish the variety in which case studies can be done and, subsequently, how different scopes result in similar conclusions. Yet, what remains is the research gap to study the Groningen case through NPF. In fact, the reiteration of the distinct narratives by the different coalitions and the changing dominant narratives over time highlight that NPF is a useful policy process theory to analyze public administration.

3.2.3 Components in NPF

The NPF's core is about narratives. Narratives have components that together constitute the story. In the NPF, these are the setting or context, plot, characters, and moral of the story. In their explanatory article, Shanahan et al. (2018) discuss these components building on the works of many scholars that have applied NPF in various ways. In order to better engage with the framework, I will use three articles to draw resemblances and provide examples. These are O'Bryan et al. (2015) about the reaction in US and UK committee hearings to the Arab Spring, Merry (2016) on US gun policy organizations' narratives on Twitter, and Jones and Gray (2016) on US campaign finance regulatory reforms. Although these articles are limited to the (Anglo)American world, it allows for engagement with three different topics.

The setting or context component refers to a space and time period in which the narrative takes place. Shanahan et al. (2018) clarify that space can also refer to a larger geographic region such as the American West and is not limited to a study of a public policy in a city or state with a designated government. Meanwhile, the American West is more than a geographic region as it has specific cultural, social, and economic factors that other regions in

the United States do not possess. This means that the setting component of the NPF is broadly applicable as long as space and time operate simultaneously within the public policy. For instance, it can be the foreign policy reaction after the Arab Spring (O'Bryan et al. 2015), Twitter over a five-year period of a study (Merry, 2016), or it can be “the physical, ideational, and discursive space in which regulation takes place” (Jones & Gray, 2016, p. 203). The three examples illustrate how different the application of NPF is. In this thesis' case, the setting is Groningen and the Netherlands (The Hague) and therefore the political and societal spheres from 2009 to 2019.

Plot is the narrative component that serves as the connection between the characters (themselves) and the setting. Therefore, the plot is the component that for the researcher is the reason to conduct the analysis in the first place. For example, O'Bryan et al. (2015) studied the minutes of US and UK foreign policy committee hearings to analyze the narrative in the committees about the Arab Spring. In this case, the Arab Spring is the plot that ties the characters to the setting. Their study also shows that the plot can extend to definitions used in literary works or popular culture as their findings portray a doomsday scenario plot. In another example, Jones and Gray (2016) study the policy narratives of US campaign finance regulatory reforms. In this thesis' case, the plot is about the (social) impact of the earthquakes. Van der Voort and Vanclay (2014) conclude that the lack of belief in mitigation attempts reduced the effectiveness of the policies because the people in Groningen did not trust the national government and NAM. More specifically for this thesis, the plot is gas mining and the attitude of the policy-makers towards the victims. These are tied to the research and subquestions because the characters explain their relationship to the setting differently, which helps to answer the questions of this thesis on how the willingness to change the policy occurred.

Characters are the entities in the public policy analyses that either act or are acted upon. Those can be individuals, groups, or non-human characters that have the agency to be a hero or villain such as global warming within the climate change issue. Each narrative consists of at least three key characters: the hero(es), the villain(s), and the victim(s). In addition, other characters such as allies or opponents can perform a role as well. Merry (2016) identified six characters in the analysis: ally, hero, opponent, perpetrator, victim, and villain. In O'Bryan et al. (2015), the characters are less explicitly stated but the actors in the hearings frequently call the protestors in the Arab Spring the heroes. In this case, the hero character is thus a passive entity. In the Groningen case, the GBB is the hero that helps the victims by creating awareness through their narrative that the national government and NAM (villains)

fail with their policies. The inclusion of multiple character behavior analysis contributes to a better understanding of how the narratives are constructed and developed over time. Therefore, the character component assists in answering the subquestions that highlight the changes in the study period.

The moral of the story refers to the policy solution. In some cases, that means a call for action, and in others, it means that there already is a policy solution. According to Shanahan et al. (2017), in most policy narratives the hero character is responsible for changing the policy in order to guard the victim from (more) harm. In O'Bryan et al (2015), the study proves that the American-British relationship is not what it used to be and that its foreign policies are not aligned. Merry (2016) does not succeed to find a moral of the story (policy solution). Instead, its conclusion calls for action, "these narratives create a perception of threat and suggest that we all have a stake in protecting the Second Amendment" (p. 389). More clearly, Jones and Gray (2016) find that their two groups of analysis continue to oppose each other strongly but also find that the groups' policy solution, if need be, can be found on common ground. In this thesis' case, GBB and the province Groningen introduced multiple policy solutions to end the policy failure. The most important solution is about the production (level) of gas. The policy solutions that the characters communicate in their narratives do not align. Hence, the subquestions are suited to define the differences and disagreements following from the hearings. Then, the moral of the story component is the decisive concept of NPF as it is the component that instigated the policy change in Groningen.

Yet, political characters try to create and define their moral of the story. Hood (2011) builds on more than two decades of scholarship on blame avoidance strategies and lists three pillars: agency, presentational, and policy. Agency focuses on shifting blame to other institutions or officeholders. Presentational strategies attempt to frame, deny, or spin the accusations and highlight the positive aspects of a policy action. Lastly, policy strategies aim to limit any potential issues for the politician or administrator. In the case of Groningen, it was inevitable that the policy failure had to be addressed. Yet, the policy strategy can be used as a form of political steering to emphasize certain risk-free policies over others. Similarly, administrators use the other two strategies to narrate that their moral of the story was not the issue or that the administrator is not to blame. This relates to the subquestions because the policy-makers at first succeeded to avoid the spread of anger and distrust emotions from Groningen to the Dutch society in general.

Administrators use additional strategies to convince others of their moral of the story. In line with the other blame-avoidance strategies, Hansson (2015) developed five linguistic

discursive strategies that politicians and administrators use: arguing, framing, denying, legitimizing, and manipulation. Howlett and Leong (2017) argue that both blame avoidance and credit claiming must be categorized within the concept of legitimacy. That is, policy decisions are not necessarily right or wrong but are made with the best intentions and based on governance principles. Besides the legitimacy credit-claiming strategy, Howlett and Leong add another credit-claiming strategy that is about timing. In essence, the politician awaits for the perfect conditions to claim credit for the outcome of a policy regardless of its contribution to the policy. These concepts are an important tool to analyze how administrators functioned and behaved in the study period and how their explanations relate to the larger policy reality. Moreover, in the case of Groningen, blame avoidance and discursive strategies serve as an analytical tool to pinpoint how the administrators reflect on their acts.

3.2.4 Level of analyses

In NPF, there are three levels of analysis: micro, meso, and macro. Each level has its implications for the design of the research. The micro level is traditionally aimed at the individual. Meso and macro level of analyses have a broader scope and, respectively, focus on the “strategic use and/or outcomes of specific policy narratives” (Jones and McBeth, 2010, p. 345) and on “policy narratives that permeate institutions, society, and cultural norms” (Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 3). The meso level is the most commonly used. Jones and McBeth (2010) conclude that the micro-level analysis is less equipped to study public policy and public opinions as the range and scope of the study are too narrow. That argument applies to this thesis as well. Although it is valuable to know how individuals perceive and value public policies that affect their personal levels, that is not the intention of the study. The research questions focus on the narratives and how these have changed. Secondly, Verhoeven and Metze (2022) already studied the emotional storylines in the Groningen case which covered the perspective of the individuals. Simultaneously, the macro level applies a scope that focuses its analysis on explanations beyond case studies. Along that line, an application of the macro level results in a study more leaning toward a theoretic discussion of narratives and public policy. In between the micro and macro levels, the meso level is a more approachable level of analysis as it combines individuals, groups, and policy systems. Therefore, the research questions are designed to formulate an answer to the meso level of the policy issue in Groningen.

4. Methodology

4.1 Methods of data collection

This study primarily uses the qualitative approach to conduct a textual analysis. The main source of data is the Parliamentary Inquiry that conducted seventy public hearings and the Committee's report. The transcripts of the hearings are publicly available⁵ and offer a broad range of stakeholders in the anticipatory period to the Huizinge earthquake in 2012 and the subsequent build-up to the policy change in 2018. In addition, the thesis uses primary sources throughout the ten-year study period between 2009 and 2019 to support the data from the hearings. That is valuable because the hearings reflect on history whereas the original documents are written with the knowledge and perspective of that time. This is important for the study to analyze any disparities between the hearing and the primary source. In other words, the storytelling should be the same in both sources. The primary sources include newsletters and newspapers by the GBB citizen movement, provincial letters and advice to the national government, self-initiated investigations by the province Groningen, and ministerial letters to parliament.

The seventy hearings include citizens, politicians, academics, business representatives and provide the foundation of the Committee's concluding report. The average hearing lasted for two to three hours and each transcript exceeds seventy pages. For example, the hearing with a citizen that lived near the discovery site of 1959 extensively discusses the uproar in the neighborhood as soon as the flaring⁶ started. The hearings are categorized into seven categories: citizens, members of parliament, ministerial civil servants, scientists, provincial and local politicians or administrators, business representatives from Shell, NAM, and Esso, and lastly the ministers. From these categories, one to two interviewees are selected based on the organization and the role that person played whilst also considering the time period in which that interviewee was active (See Table 1). For example, the academic specializing in social psychology is more relevant to this study of public policy than the academic that is specialized in Geo-Engineering and rock mechanics. Additionally, there is an eighth category that includes a selection of the key people for this study (See Table 2). That category consists of the chair of the GBB, the secretary of the civil organization *Groninger Gasberaad*,

⁵ Available in Dutch via [Openbare verhoren | Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal](#).

⁶ In the gas industry, "flaring is the process by which [excess] natural gas is burned off in a controlled matter." Retrieved from [Energyeducation.ca/encyclopedia/flaring](#)

Groningen’s King’s Commissioner⁷ between 2007 and 2016, the Mayor of Loppersum between 2003 and 2018, Prime Minister Rutte, the two Ministers of Economic Affairs between 2012-2021, and the CEOs or presidents of NAM and Shell (NL).

Table 1: Categories of interviewees heard by the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee

Categories	Amount of interviewees	Sample in study
Citizens	6	2
Members of parliament	3	-
Ministerial civil servants	14	1
Scientists	7	1
Provincial and local politics	10	2
<i>Shell/NAM/Esso/GasTerra/EBN</i>	14	2
Other including key interviewees	16	9

Table 2: List of key interviewees heard by the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee

Name	Function	Years active
Mark Rutte	Prime Minister	2010-now
Henk Kamp	Minister of Economic Affairs	2012-2017
Eric Wiebes	Minister of Economic Affairs	2017-2021
Jelle van der Knoop	Chair Groninger Bodem Beweging	2009-2021
Susan Top	Secretary Groninger Gasberaad	2015-2021
Ben van Beurden	CEO Shell	2014-now
Dick Benschop	President Shell NL	2011-2015
Bart van de Leemput	CEO NAM	2009-2014
Max van den Berg	King’s Commissioner Groningen	2007-2016
Albert Rodenboog	Mayor Loppersum	2003-2018

In order to conduct an appropriate empirical analysis of the policy change based on a textual analysis through NPF, it is important to have an accurate observation of the sources. Every person that participated in the hearings of the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee had to pledge to solely speak the truth under oath. Therefore, although it is an assumption, the

⁷ In the Dutch political system, the King’s Commissioner serves as the ambassador for the province towards the national government in The Hague and vice versa. The Commissioner is also the chair of the provincial government and provincial parliament.

hearings are a valid and reliable source of information for the Committee to do its job: truth finding. Subsequently, the transcripts provide the best reconstruction available. Besides, if any documents appear to have false information it does not have to be an issue for this study. After all, the study focuses on the narratives and if that includes false information then that itself is not a disadvantage to the validity or reliability of the thesis. A side-effect of the hearings is that all Dutch citizens are legally obligated to participate. But, the CEO of ExxonMobil between 2000 and 2017 is a Belgian citizen and, therefore, was legally allowed to refuse his participation. Unfortunately, the CEO of ExxonMobil is not included in the study. However, the thesis includes interviews with representatives of the oil companies.

4.2 Methods of data analysis

The thesis uses a qualitative text analysis. As such, the method is an application of content analysis. Elo and Kyngäs (2007) explain the content analysis process. The basic principle is that the analysis is either inductive or deductive. An inductive approach is best suited to a topic in which there is a limited amount of knowledge whereas the deductive approach is suited to apply to topics in which there is an extensive amount of knowledge and the study aims to test theories. Elo and Kyngäs refer to earlier work by Burns and Grove (2005) and add that the deductive approach “is based on an earlier theory or model and therefore it moves from the general to the specific” (p. 109). The thesis therefore uses a deductive approach as the previous knowledge is the general narrative of, for example, the national government about the topic but the specific narratives of the Prime Minister and the Ministers of Economic Affairs require further analyses. That includes the aim to study how the policy process occurred and which minister acted how and when.

The thesis’ analysis follows the structure provided by content analysis scholars. The first step in the deductive analysis is to collect and understand the previous knowledge both on the topic and the NPF itself. That has been provided in the background and theoretical framework chapters. Forman and Damschroder (2008) identify the chronological steps: decide on the unit of analysis, establish a sample method, select information-rich cases, and work out the in-depth analysis. The last step is the stage in which all the ‘ingredients’ are combined and the author works towards answering the research question(s).

In order to analyze the narratives in the hearings, the thesis uses a codebook (see Appendix). The codebook lists multiple different concepts from the literature on public policies. An important strategy for politicians and public administrators in a policy failure situation is to avoid blame or shift blame (Weaver, 1986). Starting from the perception that

negativity bias leads to worse election outcomes, Weaver argues that avoiding blame is more important in politics than claiming credit. In other words, politicians want that their (bad) policy actions do not lead to a change in voter behavior and have made blame avoidance the principal task of their tenures. Weaver developed eight blame-avoiding strategies (see Table 3).

The key component of NPF is the character definition. Therefore, the codebook consists of four characters: hero, victim, villain, and ally. Throughout the hearings, the interviewees (unintentionally) identify which entity, institution, or actor fits one of the four characters. It is important to emphasize that identifications can shift within a hearing and that self-identification is not rare. That is also due to the setting of the hearings in which the Committee asks the interviewees to evaluate their role and what they, in hindsight, could have done differently.

Further, the codebook consists of four additional codes for the five linguistic discursive strategies specified by Hansson (2015). These strategies are valuable for the codebook as the hearings were orally conducted. Therefore, the interviewees can apply discursive strategies that would have been less effective in any other form of hearing. Secondly, the codebook uses credit-claiming strategies. Howlett and Leong (2017) engage in the discussion about blame avoidance and the desired strategies for officeholders. Thirdly, the codebook has seven policy solutions that the different actors discuss in their hearings. These range from lower the production of gas to safe levels to ending gas mining completely and from seeking attention through the media to the judicial path in court. The other three are to produce gas on a level that guarantees supply security, to strengthen the properties that have damages resulting from earthquakes, and to support the region in general as compensation for the little governmental investments.

Table 3: Eight blame avoiding Strategies (Weaver, 1986, p. 385)

Strategy	Approach to avoiding blame	Blame-generating situations where most likely to occur
1. Agenda limitation	Prevent blame-generating by keeping potentially costly choices from being considered	Policymaker-constituency conflict
2. Redefine the Issue	Prevent blame-generating by developing new policy options which diffuse or obfuscate losses	Any
3. Throw Good Money After Bad	Prevent or delay blame generating by providing resources to prevent constituencies from suffering losses	Zero-sum or negative-sum game
4. Pass the Buck	Deflect blame by forcing others to make politically costly choices	Zero- or negative-sum game
5. Find a Scapegoat	Deflect blame by blaming others	Zero- or negative-sum game
6. Jump on the Bandwagon	Deflect blame by supporting politically popular alternative	Policymaker-constituency conflict
7. Circle the Wagons	Diffuse blame by spreading it among as many policymakers as possible	Negative-sum game
8. ‘Stop Me Before I Kill Again’	Prevent blame generation by keeping credit-claiming opportunities that conflict with policy preferences from being considered	Policymaker-constituency conflict

Lastly, the codebook has five problem identification codes that the interviewees use to describe how and why their policy solution is not adopted, sustainable, or realistic. These are bureaucratic red tape, limited power to enact change, subjective institutions in the policy

process and executive phase, constraints on provincial and local governments, and political motivations and reasons.

5. Results

This chapter analyses the hearings and other documents through an application of the codebook. In order to formulate an answer to the three subquestions and the research question in Chapter six, this chapter is divided into four sections. The four sections discuss the dominant and responsive narratives of each period and answer the first two subquestions: pre-2012, 2012-2015, 2015-2017, and 2017-2019.

Subquestion 1: What were the main narratives (what were their structural elements) and who was promoting them (tying narratives to actors/interests)?

Subquestion 2: How have they changed, and how do those changes influence policy through their influence on cognitive function?

Subquestion 3: How do the narratives relate to one another and how do they align?

5.1 Gas mining as an essential part of the Dutch energy policy (1959-2012)

5.1.1 The national government and NAM's narrative

The national government and the oil companies Shell and ExxonMobil (earlier Esso) are involved in the policy since the discovery of the Groningen gas field in 1959. Therefore, their involvement in gas mining prior to 2012 is better documented than that of the GBB and the Province Groningen. There are two parallel identifiable timelines. The first covers the investigatory procedures into land subsidence and earthquakes. The second covers the political development of gas mining with increasing production levels and subsequent financial profits, the liberalization of the natural gas market, and the creation of a production ceiling. At the junction of the two timelines is the core of the policy issue: more and more intense earthquakes without the necessary attention for the victims in Groningen.

The narrative of the national government and the oil companies is straightforward. The national government and NAM acted in the public interest and contributed to the welfare of the Netherlands (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023). Therefore, assigning narrative elements, both actors did not act as a villain. Amidst the Cold War and the development of nuclear power, the Dutch government wanted to exploit the Groningen gas field as quickly as possible because the idea was that nuclear power would overtake natural gas, meaning that the Dutch treasury would miss out on major financial benefits (NOS, 2015a). Therefore, the national government and NAM were not the villains, but the heroes that had a convincing moral of the story. During the first thirty years of gas mining, the plot that connects characters with the setting was different as well. The setting of the Dutch energy policy had just shifted

from coal mines in Limburg to gas; both in the geographic location and the economic and political context of the 1960s onwards.

The manner of story-telling by the NAM and the national government changed throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. At first, there is denial based on the then-available scientific evidence. Then in 1985, the province Groningen ordered the newly created Committee Land Subsidence to perform a second opinion on NAM’s calculations about land subsidence. The Committee concluded that properties cannot be damaged because the fractures do not extend to the earth’s surface (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023m, p. 172). Seven years later, in 1992, the Minister of Economic Affairs informed parliament that gas mining had been the reason for five earthquakes in 1991 and 1992. Although the statements change, the narrative is consistent. The national government and NAM, as characters, still act in the interest of the Dutch people, the economic and political situation (setting) allowed the continuation of gas mining, and there was no necessity for a different moral of the story. Gas mining served its purpose.

Table 4: Timeline of NAM and national government’s statements on gas mining and damages

Year	Statement
1971-1972	The Ministry of Economic Affairs and NAM expect no damage as a result of gas mining
1973-1990	NAM’s predictions about land subsidence change upon new research (methods)
1986	Earthquake in Assen with a magnitude of 2.8
1990	Second opinion by MIT does not invalidate NAM’s predictions and methods
1991	NAM’s first acknowledgment that seismic activity above gas mining fields is possible
1992	Minister of Economic Affairs informs the Parliament that gas mining resulted in five earthquakes

The close cooperation between the NAM and the Dutch state continued in the twenty-first century. There are two key moments in the anticipation towards Huizinge that constitute the core of a changing policy on gas mining in Groningen. First, the liberalization of the energy market through EU legislation (Directive 98/30/EC) that started in the late 1990s and led to the creation of the Dutch Gas Law in 2000. The second key moment is the production ceiling that started in 2004 and set a limit to the amount of gas the oil companies could mine

in a ten-year period. For example, for the period 2006-2015, the Minister for Economic Affairs set the production level at 425 billion cubic meters. Despite the policy changes, it did not change the narrative. It merely altered the framework in which gas mining occurred. Therefore, from 1959 to the late 2010s, the dominant narrative about gas mining in Groningen was about facilitating the oil companies to serve the nation's interest.

5.1.2 The province in no man's land

The province Groningen has long been in the policy background. As part of the policy system and the different levels of government anchored in the Dutch constitution, the provinces have certain policy areas in which they are in full control and policy areas in which the provinces are solely responsible for implementing and executing national law (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). Gas mining, being part of energy policy, is a topic of national interest and the national government is therefore the main policymaker. Therefore, the province Groningen had and has no involvement in the policy design of the Dutch energy policy and, therefore, gas.

The Province Groningen has no role in the earthquake policy process before 2012. In the hearings, the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee interviewed three Queen and King's commissioners: Hans Alders (1996-2007), Max van den Berg (2007-2016), and René Paas (since 2016). Alders and Van den Berg reconstruct that the province, as a layer of government, did not have a role in the earthquake issues. In fact, the Commissioners both indicated that their position served an intermediary role between the national government, the citizens, and gas mining activities in the municipalities. Alders recalled that the mayor of Loppersum became more vocal towards him since 2004 about the increasing amount of earthquakes and its seismic intensities. However, since the Commissioner has no formal responsibility in the policy domain, the Commissioner and the mayor decided to forward the issue to the Ministry of Economic Affairs because "that was the [actor] who was fully responsible and had previously made it clear to us that we should stay out of the it" (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023b, p. 3). It would seem that the province did not want to interfere with the national government on the policy issue itself (legitimacy) whilst trying to construct an improved set of guidelines for citizens with infrastructural damages to properties. The province's narrative is virtually non-existent and its acts are solely focused on better compensation schemes.

5.1.3 GBB as sole opponent of gas mining

The narrative of the GBB follows an almost three-decade history of citizen participation in the agenda-setting of the earthquakes. After the first earthquake in 1986 and increasing seismic

activity in the 2000s, the citizens in rural Groningen call upon their mayor to take action which leads to the establishment of a focus group with citizen participation (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023c). The citizens are not satisfied with the focus group's investigation and the tone which leads to the foundation of the GBB.

The Huizinge earthquake in 2012 was an important inflection point for the GBB. Before that, the GBB is not a major actor. The GBB focuses initially on a fair compensation of infrastructural damages to properties as a result of the earthquakes (GBB, n.d.). Yet, the other stakeholders in the policy field do not consider the GBB to be a key actor. That is not surprising as the GBB's membership only grew substantially after the 2012 earthquake. Hence, the conclusion is that the GBB did not have a narrative.

The first newsletter of the GBB in 2010 indicated their narrative strongly. The newsletter of August 2010 used strong rhetoric. The board addressed the number of members (117) and urged the members to involve relatives as the movement is not "taken seriously by politics, governments, and NAM" as long as the movement is not large enough (GBB, 2010, p. 1). This phrase contains narrative elements. In terms of characters, the governments and NAM are portrayed as villains as they ignore to act in the interest of the citizens. That includes the provincial and municipal governments. Shanahan et al. (2018) noted that "*plot* is the narrative element that links characters to each other as well as to the setting" (p. 5). The setting is present in the form of the earthquakes and the geographic region. However, not all characters are linked together fully. For the GBB, the plot is different in these early stages of the policy process. The moral of the story (policy solution) remains a better compensation scheme for the citizens. The argument that GBB made was not against gas mining. Rather, it was against a governance structure that allowed NAM to mistreat the citizens. Between 2009 and 2012, GBB had not yet developed a narrative in opposition of gas mining.

5.1.4 A dominant narrative and the responses

In conclusion, the policy and the narratives were not an issue prior to Huizinge in 2012. Although the framework of the policy changed over the years and into the 21st century, the societal acceptance of gas mining did not lead to a necessity to alter the narrative as the statements about gas mining were sufficient to prove that the national government was in control of the issue. Moreover, the province had a neutral standpoint on gas mining. The GBB, and earlier individual citizens, had voiced their views on gas mining and its consequences. However, because the GBB was not a major movement nor a policy actor, their vocal reach was mainly limited to the borders of Loppersum and its neighboring rural municipalities.

Table 5: Standpoints and narratives 1959-2012

<i>Actor</i>	<i>Pro gas mining</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Anti gas mining</i>
GBB			Non-functioning compensation schemes Governance structure mistreats citizens
Nat. government	Gas supply Finances		
Oil Companies	Gas supply Finances		
Province		No official role; necessity for better compensation schemes	

5.2 Huizinge and the rise of the responsive narratives (2012-2015)

The earthquake near Huizinge in August 2012 with a magnitude of 3.6 changed the Dutch energy policy. The seismic intensity proved that earlier calculations about the maximum magnitudes were wrong. Despite the sudden realization that gas mining was more unsafe than expected, Kingdon’s Multiple Streams Framework and window of opportunity is not applicable because the policy did not change instantly. In fact, the appearing narratives show that a quick policy change was unrealistic. In order to answer subquestion one, this section lists the results of the appearing narratives post-Huizinge in which the GBB and province Groningen develop a narrative countering the status-quo of gas mining. The results are analyzed on the basis of the codebook. The section studies the period from August 2012 until December 2015.

5.2.1 The dominant narrative continues

The national government four-year coalition agreement in 2012 set out its policy goals. The new coalition and cabinet started in November 2012 three months after the Huizinge earthquake. The coalition agreement does not list anything about natural gas, Groningen, or the earthquakes. In his hearing, Rutte clarified that the earthquakes nor the compensation schemes were part of the discussions about the agreement (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee,

2023d). This is important because it shows that the salience of the issue had not arrived in The Hague.

The absence of a Groningen policy means that the Minister for Economic Affairs is not bounded by political constraints. Of course, arrangements from the coalition agreement may be bypassed, but it leaves room for the for ministers to shape their policies. Kamp declared that gas mining in Groningen was one out of seven major dossiers at his start, that he realized that unlimited gas mining could not be continued, and that the Dutch state acted in the interest of the public (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023e). That last phrase is a discursive strategy (Hansson, 2015) to legitimize the national government's involvement in gas mining. Further, Rutte and Kamp both state the three considerations that interplay in the topic: safety, the security of gas supply domestically and abroad, and the state treasury.

Several moments between 2012 and 2015 exemplify the national government and NAM's effort to continue their dominant narrative. In other words, the national government did not take action to change the policy and, factually, tried to prevent the responsive narratives of gaining momentum. The first moment is the January 2013 advise by the State Supervision on the Mines (SSoM). The advise was to, "lower the production as quickly as possible and as much as possible within the realistic framework" (SSoM, 2013, p. 9). However, Kamp did not act because he wanted more information from the other investigations he ordered. A second moment is the establishment (March 2014) and disbandment (December 2015) of the Dialogue Table, which according to Kamp was supposed to re-establish the support in the region for gas mining, but certainly not to discuss gas production levels even though that was the main input from the other participants (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023e). It is an example of what Dryzek (1996) noted about political inclusion, "if the interest of an oppositional group cannot be so related to an imperative, then inclusion means that the group will be co-opted or bought off cheaply" (p. 480). Although NAM is less visible in the formal policy process, the close connection between NAM and national government, and hence the narrative, did not change in this period. The moral of the story was still that gas mining was necessary despite the first indications from SSoM that the production levels should be lowered.

5.2.2 A pro-active province

The Province Groningen becomes more involved after the Huizinge earthquake. King's Commissioner Van den Berg reconstructed that the two debates after Huizinge focused on the compensation schemes and the strengthening of properties (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023f). The first moment in which the province and national government firmly disagree

about the policy actions is in January 2013 when Kamp decided not to follow SSoM's advise to lower the production levels. Van den Berg reconstructed his disagreement with Kamp's decision and characterized the people in Groningen as victims because they needed quicker decision-making from the national government due to the safety hazards (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023f). At this moment, the province changed its narrative as the distinction between the villains and the victims became evident. Moreover, the province shifted its moral of the story from better compensation schemes to the necessity for lower production levels to improve the safety of the people.

The province realized that the Ministry of Economic Affairs did not act in the interest of the people. Within ten days of the report by SSoM, the province addressed four policy solutions (Province Groningen, 2013). First, the production levels should be lowered to a safe level. Secondly, the NAM should take preventive measures to eliminate safety risks and prevent and limit infrastructural damages to properties. The province also addressed the necessity for a functioning compensation scheme. Lastly, the province wanted a long-term investment for the people and companies in the affected municipalities. These four policy solutions indicate the changing narrative within the executive government of the province. Therefore, all narrative elements had changed by the early months of 2013. The province had identified the national government and NAM as the villains, presented the morals of the story publicly, and the setting and plot of their policy reality changed from economic gains to an abusive state.

The province continued to position that narrative until 2015. An example of that is the implementation of the Committee Meijer. The Committee's task was to advise the province about the future of the gas mining region (Committee Duurzame Toekomst Noordoost Groningen, 2013). Importantly, the narratives about the creation of the Committee differ. The procedure and argumentation to give the Committee legitimacy shows the strong differences between the province and national government about the salience of the issue. The King's Commissioner declared that the ministry did not want the Committee because the minister had (already) ordered thirteen investigations about the consequences of the gas mining policies; the investigations had to be non-public and include NAM (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023f). In contrast, Kamp declared that he did not want to introduce the Committee as "there should be space for the administrators in Groningen. The administrators in Groningen were committed to the introduction of the committee" (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023e, p. 60). Therefore, there is a clear difference between the two statements. In fact, Kamp used the blame avoidance strategy called scapegoat (Kent Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2007) to shift the

competency to another government and used the discursive strategy ‘legitimizing’ (Hansson, 2015) to explain why the province was allowed to conduct the investigation. These findings highlight the different interests and the different policy realities between the two levels of government. The province’s position between 2012 and 2015 is that of a hero and/or ally as the province wanted to fix the national government’s ignorant attitude towards the victims in Groningen.

5.2.3 GBB’s emerging narrative against gas mining

GBB’s narrative appears in February 2013. The newsletter of November 2012 is the first regular communication of the movement toward its members after the earthquake. The tone of the letter is calm and the board reflects on previous meetings with the mayor of Loppersum and other societal organizations (in October) and with the NAM (in November). The non-emotional tone can also be explained because the seismologic institute (KNMI) had not answered all questions about the Huizinge earthquake.

GBB’s narrative becomes clearer through the years as the national government and the oil companies do not alter the production levels nor speed up the compensation settlement payments. It also proves that the narrative needed time to develop. The newsletter of June 2013 closed with two photos of the people in Groningen, “the victims behind the damages,” and directly addressed Minister Kamp of Economic Affairs (the villain). The largest change in narrative elements is the moral of the story. GBB’s chair indicated in the hearing that prior to Huizinge the focus was on damages whereas after the earthquake the attention shifted to safety (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023c). Building on the limited attention to the movement by NAM and the national government, GBB’s solution (moral of the story) to ignite change was through media as that would put the issue on the agenda in The Hague. This aligns with the study that Verhoeven and Metze (2022) conducted. In their article, they typify GBB as a moderate activist group that had started to connect anger storylines with distrust storylines in the media by January 2015. An important consideration is that GBB’s setting and plot was already different from that of the national government and NAM. For GBB, the victims and its connection to the policy issue had been evident since the movement’s foundation in 2009. However, for Dutch society, the national government and NAM’s narrative that gas mining was too important for the supply of gas and state treasury prevailed.

5.2.4 Creaks in the dominant narrative

The national government and NAM’s narrative was still dominant. Yet, the narrative of the province and GBB is not resonating enough with the majority of the society. In other words,

as long as the province and GBB do not succeed to present their policy reality convincingly, there is little reason for non-Groningen citizens to believe that the governance structure mistreats the people in Groningen. Nevertheless, GBB's membership grew and the province took initiative to address the policy failure setting the stage for the years to come. That is reflected by how their narratives change. The province set out policy solutions to contain the policy failure. GBB's narrative developed to include lower production levels as a key policy solution to the safety concerns.

Table 6: Standpoints and narratives 2012-2015

<i>Actor</i>	<i>Pro gas mining</i>	<i>Anti gas mining</i>
GBB		Non-functioning compensation schemes Safety Lower production levels Governance structure mistreats citizens
Nat. government	Gas supply Finances	
Oil Companies	Gas supply Finances	
Province		Non-functioning compensation schemes Safety Lower production levels

5.3 The successful flip of the dominant narrative (2015-2017)

In 2015, the province and GBB's narratives lay the foundation to flip the then-dominant narrative. National broadcaster NOS and provincial broadcaster RTV Noord addressed a key question in February 2015, in anticipation of the provincial elections in March, "how will Groningen succeed to get The Hague to further close the gas tap?" (NOS, 2015b). However, perhaps it was not The Hague that needed to be convinced.

5.3.1 The rule of law as policy solution for the province

The province Groningen used the rule of law to inflict a policy change. The Mining Law mandates that the Minister of Economic Affairs confirms the so-called consent decree. That decree primarily regulates how much billion cubic metres (bcm) can be mined in the upcoming three calendar years or gas years.⁸ In January 2015, Kamp published the definitive version of the consent decree which set the amount to 42.5 bcm in 2014 and 39.4 bcm in 2015

⁸ Gas years run from October to September

and 2016 (Province Groningen, 2015). In February 2015, the Dutch Safety Board⁹ concluded that safety concerns had not been part of the decision-making process prior to 2013 (OVV, 2015). Therefore, the province Groningen appealed against Kamp's consent decree because it was not made clear that the production level of 42.5 bcm was safe (Province Groningen, 2015a). The highest administrative court concluded in a preliminary ruling in April 2015 that the gas mining facility in Loppersum could only be used if it was necessary for the gas supply; in November 2015, it ruled that the production level could not exceed 27 bcm (Raad van State, 2015). These rulings were an important component of the province's narrative moving forward. Namely, if the national government does not perform its constitutional duty to care for its people, the province and rule of law will. Moreover, in 2017, the highest administrative court ruled that the consent decrees of 2016 (retrospectively) and 2017 were unlawful again because it did not address the safety concerns sufficiently.

The province is strongly involved in several aspects of the policy between 2015 and the end of Rutte's second cabinet in 2017. The national government initiated multiple programs in order to include more stakeholders and create a participatory governance structure. The province participated in multiple governance dialogues and (co)published several additional reports about gas mining and the future of the province. However, the provincial minister Eikenaar (2015-2019) concluded in his hearing, "if you do not actually want to fundamentally change anything and your starting point is to save money or to maintain the production levels, you can do whatever you want, but then the outcome will always be worthless" (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023k, p. 22). This statement lays out the province's narrative in that period and clearly identified the national government and the oil companies as the villains. In fact, Eikenaar's statement aligns with the blame avoidance strategy 'redefine the issue' because the villains attempted to obfuscate the losses by creating governance structures that should act as policy solutions (Kent Weaver, 1987; Hood, 2007).

5.3.2 GBB's narrative spreads across the nation

An important policy solution for GBB is to convince all Dutch citizens about the policy failure in Groningen. GBB used the judicial system and media to achieve that. The Dutch law allows anybody to go to court on the basis of "an unlawful act" article¹⁰. In these cases, starting in 2014, individual citizens (with the support of GBB) argued that the NAM did not

⁹ In Dutch: Onderzoeksraad voor Veiligheid (OVV)

¹⁰ Civil Code Book 6, article 162. Retrieved from www.wetten.overheid.nl/BW6A162

fulfil its legal duty to mine carefully as mandated by the Mining Law. The duty to mine carefully includes the responsibility to settle compensation claims justly. In the years between 2014 and 2016, the court cases were used as a tool to reach the GBB's policy goal: lower production levels and better compensation schemes. In addition, GBB sued NAM and its executives in September 2015 based on human rights violations, albeit with limited success¹¹ (GBB, 2015). Secondly, the number of damage claims grew significantly in 2015 in comparison to 2012 which meant that the goal to create more awareness had been achieved. In addition, GBB's narrative was frequently presented in the media. The board summarized in a June 2015 newsletter that local and national news bulletins paid attention to GBB's standpoints and that the movement was invited by "important national tv-talkshows" (GBB, 2015a). These media appearances spread the GBB narrative to a national public whilst simultaneously implicitly reiterating the David v. Goliath scenario.

Yet, the general narrative of the GBB does not change between 2015 and 2017. The annual gas production levels decrease by the year, but that is not the radical policy change that the movement had hoped for. Despite the different strategies that the movement employs, the movement itself is unable to significantly influence the policy. That can also be read in the hearings of Kamp and the representatives of the oil companies. For them, the reports by the State Supervision on Mines and the earthquakes are the incentives to act. However, Verhoeven and Metze (2022) found, based on a media analysis, that the emotions of the policy actors became more intense over the years. Therefore, GBB's narrative and strategies created uproar in the country. The GBB summarized it in September 2017, "A lot is happening. And yet it is not. Fundamental changes for the better are not happening" (GBB, September 2017).

5.3.3 Responses to the new dominant narrative

The national government, NAM, and the oil companies reorganized the gas mining structure as a result of the judicial cases against the NAM. The accusations had a big impact on the oil companies and NAM. Shell's CEO recalled that the criminal liability could not remain at NAM, but should be transferred to the Dutch state (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023j). As the CEO put it, "if we could not agree about it, then the government could have NAM. I did not want to have anything to do with [the criminal liability]" (Ibid, p. 57). The NAM director responded similarly and declared that NAM was simply conducting a task for the public interest (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023g), applying the credit-claiming

¹¹ The court ruled in 2022 that only one individual case could be admitted to further investigation by the public prosecution's office. Retrieved from <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/#!/details?id=ECLI:NL:GHARL:2022:3826>

strategy ‘legitimizing’ (Howett, 2017). The struggle of the oil companies and the national government became so fierce in July 2017 that Shell and ExxonMobil suggested to propose a production level of zero billion cubic meters to highlight their dissatisfaction with the government’s indecisiveness (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023j). In response, Rutte declared that he understood the wishes and acknowledged that the negotiations for his third cabinet delayed the negotiations with the oil companies about the structure (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023d). These statements prove that the pressure was high for both policy actors to create a better policy (solution). Simultaneously, it proves how the national government and NAM were no longer in control. The previously dominant narrative was no longer convincing and they themselves noted the momentum change in society.

Therefore, their narrative had to change. The setting could no longer be about the importance of gas mining to the treasury, the economy, or the gas supply. It had to be about the social-cultural impact of gas mining in Groningen. Kamp introduced the Dialogue Table to create a more inclusive governance structure and installed the Centrum Veilig Wonen (CVW) to settle the damages on behalf of NAM. The intention was to prove that the national government was aware of the policy failures and, through applying new moral of the stories (policy solutions), shy away from the characterization of a villain. Nevertheless, the Dialogue Table ended in late 2015 and the CVW was a subjective institution tied to NAM (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023l). Despite Kamp’s claims, the true policy solution was forced upon the national government (and NAM) by the advisory reports and the rule of law. Hence, their narrative had become untrustworthy and responsive.

5.3.4 A new dominant narrative

The GBB succeeded to flip the dominant narrative between 2015 and 2017. There are two key reasons for that change. First, GBB’s strategies to use the judicial system and media in their favor achieved their goal. The issue was that only the people in Groningen were involved in and attached to the gas policy issues. The generation of nationwide attention enabled GBB to spread its narrative about the policy failures. The problem shifted from bad compensation schemes to unaccountable governance structures with a national government that did not care for and protect its citizens. The second reason is that the national government’s effort to improve the situation in Groningen backfired. The creation of the Dialogue Table and CVW further highlighted the inability to solve the policy issues. Subsequently, the once-dominant narrative had lost its credibility within two years.

Table 7: Standpoints and Narratives 2015-2017

<i>Actor</i>	<i>Pro gas mining</i>	<i>Anti gas mining</i>
GBB		Non-functioning compensation schemes Safety Lower production levels Governance structure mistreats citizens
Nat. government	Gas supply Finances	
Oil Companies	Gas supply Finances	
Province		Non-functioning compensation schemes Safety Lower production levels Governance structure mistreats citizens

5.4 Aligning narratives towards policy change

The policy paradigm changed entirely in November 2017 with the installation of Rutte’s third cabinet. Table 8 shows the composition of the four successive cabinets from 2010 until now.¹² In Rutte III, gas mining and the earthquake policies were part of the coalition agreement in contrast to the earlier two coalition agreements. The agreement highlighted four points about gas mining in Groningen: safe and responsible mining, responsible treatment of Earth’s subsurface, investments for reparations and prevention, a fund for economic development and liveability. The goal for the production level was to lower it from 21.6 billion cubic metres (bcm) in 2017 to 20 bcm in 2021. However, the new minister of Economic Affairs Wiebes quickly abandoned the plans.

¹² Rutte’s fourth cabinet fell on July 7, 2023 and is in demissionary status since then.

Table 8: Composition of Rutte’s cabinets

Years	Parties	Cabinet representatives (party)
2010-2012	VVD, CDA, PVV	Prime Minister: Rutte (VVD) Economic Affairs: Verhagen (CDA)
2012-2017	VVD, PvdA	Prime Minister: Rutte (VVD) Economic Affairs: Kamp (VVD)
2017-2021	VVD, CDA, D66, ChristenUnie	Prime Minister: Rute (VVD) Economic Affairs: Wiebes (VVD)
2021-now	VVD, CDA, D66, ChristenUnie	Prime Minister Rutte (VVD) Economic Affairs: Adriaansens (VVD) Secretary of Mining: Vijlbrief (D66)

5.4.1 Enactment of policy change

Wiebes declared in his hearing that the coalition agreement did not align with the reality of the issue. Although the 1.5 bcm reduction was a clear policy task, Wiebes wanted “to be prepared for the worst [scenario]” because safety was the primary principle for his tenure (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023i, p. 8). Hence, Wiebes ordered civil servants to work out other scenarios with production levels significantly lower than 20 bcm. Simultaneously, during a visit to the earthquake region in November 2017, Wiebes judged the government’s response as “a government failure of un-Dutch proportions” (RTV Noord, 2017). That statement identifies multiple narrative components. The national government is characterized as a villain because it is not fixing the problem of the citizens and its policy failure caused more problems. Secondly, it reaffirmed that the people are the victims of the policy. Lastly, it opened the possibility for the national government to pursue a more radical policy solution.

The earthquake near Zeerijp (3,4m) on January 8, 2018, accelerated Wiebes’ agenda. The State Supervision on the Mines (SSoM) issued an advice on February 1st that the annual production level should be lowered to 12 bcm to reduce the chance of earthquakes (SSoM, 2018). Wiebes honored the advice on the same day and took an extra step in March 2018 with the decision to end gas mining from the Groningen field completely by 2030 (Tweede Kamer, 2018). This decision, and therefore the policy change, is what the people in Groningen and the GBB fought for. That also influenced the characterization of the national government by the GBB. Suddenly, the Minister of Economic Affairs became an ally towards the fulfillment of (one of) their preferred policy solutions. Moreover, Wiebes invited the societal organizations and citizen movements at ‘consultation tables’ to guarantee a broad sense of inclusion in the policy process. Therefore, the narrative elements completely changed with the appointment of Wiebes and the decision to end gas mining.

Shell welcomed the policy change. Shell's global CEO Ben van Beurden declared that the decision relieved Shell because it gave clarity. Shell's CEO used multiple discursive strategies to present Shell's position about the new policy paradigm. For example, the CEO denied the allegations that the oil companies were only interested in the financial benefits and argued the opposite, "we had lost our societal license to operate" (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023j). In other words, Shell declared that it was aware of the safety hazard and that maximizing production levels had long been disregarded as the company's priority. In that sense, Shell self-identified as an ally in their narrative about the topic.

Therefore, the two villains at the beginning of the story have switched their standpoint on the moral of the story (policy solution) by mid-2018. This is an important finding as it indicates that multiple prompts, tools, and narratives can convince powerful policy actors to fully change a policy within ten years. The opponents of gas mining have used multiple strategies to put pressure on the proponents of gas mining. In the years between 2014 and 2016, the GBB initiated, and won, multiple judicial cases against the NAM and its shareholders (Shell and ExxonMobil) as the causer of mental health issues and deprivation of people's 'residential pleasure' (Rechtbank Noord-Nederland, 2017). This is an example of how the GBB's policy solution to use the judicial system worked in their favor. Shell's CEO disagreed with the practical meaning of the ruling because it is the Dutch state that issued a permit for NAM to exploit the Groningen field (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023j). In other words, the Dutch state is the original causer of harm and Shell points towards the national government as the villain. These years not only marked a change in responsibility, but also in villainhood.

5.4.2 An unsatisfied province

The province emphasized that only one part of the policy failure was solved. In response to Wiebes' decision to end gas mining by 2030, the province, municipalities, and civil society organizations wrote that the story would not end with that decision (Province Groningen, 2018). The people still distrusted the national government and discussions about the compensation scheme were ongoing. Although Wiebes' decision was well-received, the national government and NAM were still the villains. That is supported by the disagreement about the operation to strengthen properties in May 2018. In short, Wiebes argued that if the seismic activity would be lower, fewer properties needed to be strengthened (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023i). The region responded that the national government once again acted against the interest of the people and, thereby, continued its non-cooperating attitude. In

the province's narrative characterization element, the national government had not proven to be an ally to fix the problem of the policy issue.

The province's narrative continued in 2018 and 2019. The province successfully appealed once more (December 2018) at the highest administrative court against the ministerial consent decree. This highlights that the province persisted in its goal to achieve the four policy solutions it proposed in February 2013. The setting and characters did not change since the inauguration of Wiebes as minister, but the narrative element plot indicates how "stories of power/control or stories of change" (Shanahan et al., 2017, p. 5) enabled the province to obtain a proactive command in which it became the leading governing body on the policy issue, despite it being lower in the hierarchy. That is a major change from the situation in 2007 when the conclusion was that solely the Ministry of Economic Affairs could act (legitimacy).

5.4.3 A victorious, but wary GBB

GBB is proud of what the movement achieved since 2009. The March 2018 newsletter opened, "The GBB and all Groningers have achieved an important victory" (GBB, 2018, p. 1). Wiebes' decision approved the policy solutions that GBB had proposed throughout the years. In the hearing, GBB's chair recalled that many of the movement's demands were granted by 2018 (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, 2023c). This is an important statement about the success of GBB's narrative. The continuous repetition that the national government and NAM mistreated the victims in Groningen had resonated with the majority of Dutch society. An important part of GBB's narrative is the characterization of Kamp's tenure, "almost all measures that Wiebes took, could have been taken by Kamp" (GBB, 2018, p. 1). Wiebes was identified as an ally to GBB's cause whereas Kamp's characterization of a villain was affirmed.

Nevertheless, GBB was also wary of the future. GBB perceived the one-sided ministerial decision to reverse policies to be another example of the non-cooperating attitude by the national government to disband the participatory governance structure. In fact, for GBB's narrative, the appreciation for the minister disappeared and Wiebes characterization returned to a villain. The narrative elements setting and plot remained similar though with more attention on the compensation schemes than on gas mining as the latter's policy solution had been achieved. These changes also prove how quickly narrative elements can shift.

5.4.4 One narrative?

There was a disparity between the national government (and NAM) and the other policy actors about the success of the policy change. All parties agreed that ending gas mining was the only policy solution to prevent earthquakes in the long-term. The disparity is about the implications of that decision. The province and GBB's narrative was dominant and the national government tried to attach itself to that narrative. Wiebes' statement about the policy failure was an acknowledgement but also a tool to show that the national government wanted to make amends. Yet, the execution of the other policy solutions had no support from the province and GBB. How the national government positioned itself away from the other policy actors was exemplifying for its unemphatic attitude.

Table 9: Standpoints and narratives 2017-2019

<i>Actor</i>	<i>Pro gas mining</i>	<i>Anti gas mining</i>
GBB		Non-functioning compensation schemes Safety Lower production levels Governance structure mistreats citizens
Nat. government	Gas supply Finances	Safety
Oil Companies	Gas supply Finances	Safety Social acceptance disappeared
Province		Non-functioning compensation schemes Safety Lower production levels Governance structure mistreats citizens

6. Discussion

The thesis answers the research question: **To what extent have the narratives of the Groninger Bodem Beweging and Province Groningen changed the national government's willingness to allow the policy change?** The results have shown the structural elements of the narratives by actor and how these changed during the ten years. The narratives have significantly changed the cognitive functioning of the decision-makers. After a qualitative content analysis, the answer is that the GBB and the province slowly succeeded to put more pressure on the national government. However, new reports and advices, and the ongoing earthquakes have arguably contributed more to create a sense of urgency for the ministers. An important aspect of the successful narratives is the achievement to show that Groningen's societal acceptance of gas mining had vanished. This happened primarily between 2012 and 2017. And although the decisive factors for the policy change have been the safety concerns, the GBB and the province initiated the policy change process.

The answer to the third subquestion about the relationship and alignment between the narratives is also important. The hearings indicate that the majority of the actors agree upon the mistakes in the policy process(es) and agree that the Groningers are the victims and the national government and NAM the villains. Although not all characters are directly tied to each other (plot), the results prove that the setting guaranteed the engagement between the narratives. Moreover, the results show that the narratives do not (necessarily) align. The policy characters had different moral of the stories and presented its narratives in the hearings. Simultaneously, due to the retrospective setting of the hearing, the reconstructions align in the majority of the time.

The findings of the study emphasize the policy failure. The policy failure started in the 20th century. Although there was less scientific expertise than today, the fact is that administrators were ignorant. That attitude did not change during Rutte's first three cabinets from 2010 until 2017. Despite the use of blame avoidance and discursive strategies in the hearings, it is evident that the national government and oil companies prioritized financial profits over safety and a trustworthy government. In fact, these actors applied credit-claiming strategies to try and convince the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee about the policy dilemmas and their intentions to act in the interest of the general public. A question that appears is whether the policy actions and the attitudes have not actually harmed the public interest and its faith in the government apparatus. Therefore, another finding of the thesis is that the implications go beyond the policy issue.

The thesis studied a part of the Dutch energy policy. The decision to end gas mining in Groningen does not mean that gas mining is no longer part of the Dutch energy policy. In contrast, state secretary Vijlbrief, together with his German counterpart, issued permits to oil companies to mine gas in the North Sea (RTL Nieuws, 2022). The pipelines from the offshore platforms cross the UNESCO World Heritage List's Wadden Sea. Yet, the state secretary explained that the co-decision with Germany (Lower Saxony) was part of the new geopolitical situation after Russia invaded Ukraine which showed the importance of gas as an energy source (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2022). The implication of the thesis' answers goes beyond Groningen. Energy policies are focused on the interest of the state and not on the interest of people or internationally protected nature.

The study does not account for the political sensitivity of the hearings. First, the hearings were conducted between July 2022 and October 2022 meaning that the Huizinge earthquake happened ten years ago. In between, the villains of the story (national government and NAM) have had periods of intensive professional cooperation which could mean that their reconstructions and views on the policy are (unintentionally) aligned. Moreover, as the three main protagonists (Rutte, Kamp, Wiebes) of the government are members of the same party, it is necessary to acknowledge that the statements about each other are less transparent and complete. Especially since Rutte is an active Prime Minister. That does not mean that the data is invalid or that it impacted the analysis of the study. At best, it indicates that political scientists should continue to apply different theories and methodologies to study the same topic.

There are two other limitations to the study. First, two categories of the NPF's characters partly overlap. The hero and victim are standard components of the narrative elements used in NPF. In this study, the people that represent GBB are also victims. After all, the reason that the movement was established in 2009 was because the citizens felt that they were not listened to. In short, the hero and the victim in the story are (partly) the same people. Nevertheless, GBB's motivation was to safeguard the interest of all people that were victims of gas mining damages. That includes non-members and, therefore, also separates the hero and victim group. Secondly, the codebook has been a useful tool to analyze and code the hearings but was less applicable to directly incorporate the strategies in the results. Therefore, it primarily served to highlight the general narratives from the hearings and pinpoint specific phrases that could be used as examples.

Future studies on the policy issue in Groningen will profit from using the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee's report as a starting point. The report is the most factual

reconstruction of sixty years of gas mining in the Netherlands and the connected policy paradigms, historical contexts, and personal relationships between actors. As the study period ends in 2019, part of Wiebes' tenure as Minister of Economic Affairs is not included in the analysis. Following, it is necessary to study how Wiebes and the state secretary of mining in Rutte's fourth cabinet continued the policy change decision by Wiebes. Secondly, the Advocacy Coalition Framework, Multiple Streams Framework, and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory are still well-suited policy process theories to analyze the policy failure in Groningen. This study has shown how the power of (collective) individuals can be victorious over the power of institutions. Nevertheless, the scope of this thesis also enables further studies with the beforementioned theories to study other perspectives and aspects of the policy issue.

The conclusion that the national government was ignorant to the citizens and their claims for help can be beneficial to other policy domains. The fact that the policy failure occurred (for such a long time) implies that the governance structure of the national government and the relationship with the provinces and municipalities is not functioning well. Future studies can answer the question of whether that is true by analyzing other complex policy failures in Dutch public administration. Moreover, the complexity of the issue to reach policy solutions reveals that policy designs to help citizens is too bureaucratic. Although 'red tape' has a long history in public administration, it indicates that other governance structures with more citizen participation or other strategies of bottom-up governance must be considered.

The thesis is valuable for science and society. The scientific importance lies in the application of the NPF. The theory has been used often in the energy policy domain, but this thesis introduces new tools to conduct the analysis. Although content analysis is not a new phenomenon, the use of blame avoidance and discursive strategies to analyze the narratives of policy actors in a longitudinal study of ten years proved to give insight into actors' perceptions of the policy reality. Besides, due to the ten-year period, the narratives changed with more interaction between the policy actors and three levels of analyses in NPF. The thesis is also the most recent study to conduct a policy analysis on the earthquakes in Groningen with a unique database following the parliamentary inquiry. The social importance of the study is the finding that citizen movements, with the support of allies, can put issues on the policy agenda that had been deemed inevitable for entire generations. It is important to note that this happened mostly outside of the political party sphere. The analysis highlighted multiple tools and strategies that movements can use in the public space such as media attention and the courts.

Therefore, the Groningen case demonstrates that united citizens are successful in their struggle to achieve policy change. The GBB's success emphasizes that citizens should use every tool and strategy, but especially emotions and its cognitive functions, to pressure governments to change policy failures that harm their livability. It further proves that the NPF continues to be valuable for public administration studies in the energy domain after recent NPF studies on nuclear energy in the US by Gupta et al. (2018) and on fracking discussions in New York state by Gottlieb et al. (2018). Further, for the public administration paradigm in the Netherlands, this thesis emphasizes that citizens can create a 'winning' narrative against the national government's policies. Further research on a minority, but winning narrative could be conducted on the agricultural nitrogen emissions and the farmers protests in the Netherlands which led to a landslide victory in the provincial elections of 2023 for the agricultural party BBB. The Groningen issue has indicated that emotions and story-telling have become inevitable in public administration.

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8. Appendix

Appendix 1: Codebook

Blame avoidance strategies (Kent Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2007)

Code	When to use
Strategy_Scapegoat	If P&A avoid or limit blame in their narrative by allocating responsibility, competency, or jurisdiction to another institution or person
Strategy_Spin the issue	If P&A avoid or limit blame by spin, timing, stage-management, and argument; turning blame into credit by accentuating the positives, or diverting public attention from the issue
Strategy_Limit the Agenda	If P&A prevent blame-generating by keeping potentially costly choices from being considered
Strategy_Redefine the issue	If P&A prevent blame-generating by developing new policy options which diffuse or obfuscate losses
Strategy_Throw Good Money After Bad	If P&A prevent or delay blame-generating by providing resources to prevent constituencies from suffering losses
Strategy_Pass the Buck	If P&A deflect blame by forcing others to make politically costly choices
Strategy_Jump on the Bandwagon	If P&A deflect blame by supporting politically popular alternative
Strategy_Circle the Wagons	If P&A by spreading it among as many policymakers as possible
Strategy_‘Stop me Before I Kill again’	If P&A prevent blame-generation by keeping credit-claiming opportunities that conflict with policy preferences from being considered

Discursive strategies (Hansson, 2015)

Code	When to use
DS_Arguing	If P&A use 1) argumentative moves to create a perception that there is no harm (loss) and, therefore, no blame or 2) use argumentative moves to create a perception that harm has been done unintentionally, unknowingly, involuntarily or by someone else
DS_Framing	If P&A uses framing to 1) describe oneself as the Hero, or the Helper of a Hero, or perhaps as a Victim to prevent being accused of being the Villain
DS_Denying	If P&A deny accusations to prevent the formulation of negative self- or ingroup impressions
DS_Network representation	If P&A focus the attention
DS_Legitimizing	If P&A legitimize their actors by communicating explanations and justifications as an answer to the “why” question of a certain policy
DS_Manipulating	If P&A use linguistic strategies of deflecting blame, which may amount to discursive power abuse: communicative manipulation

Credit-Claiming Strategies (Howett, 2017)

Code	When to use
CCS_Risk avoidance	If P&A seem to have chosen to limit risks rather than seek credit because of a policy action
CCS Legitimacy	If P&A show that they are responding to the public interest
CCS Timing strategy	If P&A act when the timing of an action favors their political position

Character assignment (Jones & McBeth, 2010)

Code	When to use
CA_Hero	If an actor praises the actions of another actor if that action has had a significant contribution to helping the citizens of Groningen; in other words, characters who are fixers of the problem
CA_Villain	If an actor condemns the actions of another actor meaning that it either caused the problem or the action was (intentionally) ill-designed; causers of the problem
CA_Victim	If an actor identifies who or what is harmed by the problem
CA Ally	If an actor identifies an entity that assists the Hero character with 'fixing' the problem

Policy solution

Code	When to use
PS_End gas mining	If an actor solely narrates that gas mining is the only solution for the policy problem
PS_Lower production to safe levels	If an actor narrates that gas mining is not an issue with the term that the production levels do not cause further earthquakes or subsequent damages
PS_Produce gas supply	If an actor narrates that the amount of gas that is necessary for guaranteeing gas supply must be adhered to
PS_Strengthen properties	If an actor narrates that gas mining is not an issue as long as properties are strengthened and, therefore, will not collapse
PS_Support region	If an actor narrates that the region deserves compensation for the harm
PS_Media attention	If an actor narrates the importance of the media in agenda-setting and beyond
PS_Court	If an actor narrates about using criminal law as a policy solution or involving the judicial branch in general

Problem identification Code	When to use
PI_Subjective institutions	If an actor claims that the institutions and/or organizations do not act independently due to strong ties with other entities in the issue
PI_Red Tape	If an actor identifies that the bureaucratic paper work is too large for effective and quick progress
PI_Limited power	If an actor narrates that its capabilities are limited because of its power in relation to the topic or entity
PI_Constrained local government	If an actor identifies that the local government is unable to act due to issues of capacity, jurisdiction, or time
PI_Political reasons	If an actor argues that politicians or politics in general did not act because it was not perceived to be a political gain